

3_GOD THE VISITOR

Theology Class 01-22-23

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1. Genesis 18

¹The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ²Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

³He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, ^a do not pass your servant by. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

⁶So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs ^b of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."

⁷Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

⁹"Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

¹⁰Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

¹³Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

¹⁵Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Abraham Pleads for Sodom

¹⁶When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. ¹⁷Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? ¹⁸Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ^c ¹⁹For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

²⁰Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

²²The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ^d ²³Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare ^e the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

²⁶The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

²⁷Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?"

"If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it."

²⁹Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?"

He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it."

³⁰Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?”

He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.”

³¹Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?”

He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”

³²Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?”

He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

³³When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

2. Sum up of our previous talks

2.1. Nakedness in Genesis 3 stands for the shame caused by

- i. our human condition marked by pain, toil, death
- ii. and toxic relationships between human beings (urge, domination, withdrawal from solidarity)

2.2. The real “suitable helper” (ezer kenegdo) is only God – he alone helps us to deal with our nakedness, that is with our shame by reshaping our toxic relationships into a love that waits for authentic reciprocity of desire, without domination:

“Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (Song of Songs 2.7; 3.5; 8.4)

3. But the symbolism of “nakedness” expresses another downside of our human condition, namely our instinct to be afraid of God, to see a God who relate to us in the way in which we relate to each other:

3.1. The way we relate to each other is expressed in the curse of in Gen 3.16

“Your urge shall be for your husband,
And he shall rule over you.”

3.2. We do the same with God: our urge is to become like him, like gods, and he “rules over us” in the sense that

- i. He hides things from us (Gen 3.3-5)

God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’ ⁴“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

- ii. He keeps us in a condition of subordination: Gen 3.22f

And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” ²³So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.

3.3. God is perceived as a threat and this is the reason why we hide from him when he visits us.

⁸Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?” ^a¹⁰He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” (Gn 3.8-10)

3.4. This verse tells us who God is

- i. A God who delights in visiting us, and walking with us in the cool of the day
 - ii. A God who does not wait for us to go to him, but is constantly looking for us first.
- 4. This is a constant theme of the OT, and it can be seen at work in the cycle of Abraham, in Genesis 12-25.
 - 4.1. God visits Abraham by appearing to him, talking with him, stipulating a covenant – in ways similar to what happens with many other characters in Scripture.
 - 4.2. But in the life of Abraham, we have a curious episode in which Abraham receives an actual visit from God:
 - ¹Then the LORD appeared to Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre in the heat of the day, while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent. ²And Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.
 - 4.3. The three men have been interpreted as three angels, but in the passage they are interchangeable with God – during the conversation speech is attributed sometimes to the three together and other times to the Lord:
 - ⁹They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?”
 - ¹³The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh?”
 - 4.4. This is why many Fathers of the Church have interpreted this passage as a prefiguration of the Trinity.
- 5. There are many analogies between the story of God’s interactions with Adam and Eve in the garden and God’s visitation to Abraham.
- 6. Let us begin with the role played in both stories by a tree.
- 7. In the garden of Eden, there is the looming presence of the tree of knowledge of good and evil:
 - ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’
 - ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’
 - ⁶When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.
- 7.1. Human beings surrender to the temptation of thinking that a simple trick, like eating a fruit, is enough to acquire the most complex and elusive of life skills, that is the ability to distinguish good from evil, to choose what is right.
- 7.2. This persuasion is deeply ingrained in our instincts: knowledge can be possessed all at once just by learning a formula, finding a trick, devising a fix – and we want knowledge of course because with it comes power.
- 7.3. This is what we call magical thinking.

8. At Mamre, the Lord visits Abraham, and once Abraham has set up a meal for the three characters who are God, we are told that

While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. (18.8)

- 8.1. This time the tree plays the role of a meeting place. It provides a space where knowledge can be acquired in the right way, namely through time.
- 8.2. Not only Abraham does not hide from God, but welcomes him, or rather “them”. Crucially, he also stays, waits, takes time with God.
- 8.3. Knowledge of good and evil is not acquired by snatching it, but patiently, through attending to God, spending time with him.
- 8.4. Which is exactly how God hoped Adam and Eve would behave in the garden: that they should walk with him in the cool of the evening as with a parent who progressively instructs his children.

9. The problem of good and evil and the best way of dealing with them is at the center of the conversation which ensues between God and Abraham, as they walk from the tree towards the place of Sodom:

¹⁶Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way.

¹⁷The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, [...]”

¹⁹No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice.

10. In the book of Genesis, a distorted perception of God leads the narrator to imply that God wants to hide knowledge of good and evil from us: this is implied

- 10.1. by the serpent (“You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”) and
- 10.2. by the suggestion that God bans Adam and Eve from the garden to prevent them from eating the tree of life, which would make them as powerful as he is.

11. In God’s dealings with Abraham there is a significant reversal of this perception

- 11.1. Abraham will have to do what Adam and Eve failed to accomplish: instructing others about “what is right and just”, what is good and evil.
- 11.2. And this is a skill which requires welcoming God. the familiarity of nourishing/eating.
- 11.3. in a word it requires the relation.

12. The object of the conversation between Abraham and God is indeed good and evil: how to deal with the great evil perpetrated in Sodom?

12.1. God is presented as looking for a solution, and opting for justice understood as retribution, which in this case is punishment and annihilation.

12.2. Abraham is presented as advocating another form of justice, based on solidarity, restraint, and forgiveness.

22 So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

23 Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" 26 And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."

13. In the garden of Eden, the wrong approach to the knowledge of good and evil results in withdrawal from solidarity: God blames Adam, Adam blames the woman and implicitly God for having given her as his helper, Eve blames the serpent.

14. Abraham does not deny that evil has been perpetrated, but knows from his own behaviour, that good and evil cannot be easily disentangled, and that punishment is not an effective way of exercising justice. Unlike Adam and Eve, he does not blame, but intercedes.

15. In the garden of Eden, there is a binary approach to good and evil: when evil has been perpetrated, it is punished. Abraham advocates for a form of justice which coincides with forgiveness:

24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?

[...] Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"

26 And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."

16. What is just here is to forgive. This is a knowledge that no trick can impart. It has to be learnt through self-knowledge and experience. Abraham is no angel

16.1. Twice he lies presenting his wife as a his sister with Pharaoh and Abimelech in the fear of being killed.

16.2. Twice he lets his wife Sarah take vengeance on Agar who had given him a son, Ishmael, and risk their death.

16.3. He knows that good and evil always are deeply intertwined, and that nobody can survive if justice does not include mercy, and the possibility of emendation.

Incidentally is quite interesting that the story of Sodom should remain to this day one of the most flagrantly misread and misinterpreted in the whole Bible. People usually see here a condemnation of same-sex relationships when in fact the scene portrayed here is rape.

Moreover, rabbinic commentators argue that the sin of Sodom was the profanation of hospitality and the refusal to come to the help of the need and the poor.

17. The story of God's visit to Abraham teaches us another aspect of the way in which God plays the role of the "suitable helper" (ezer kenegdo): taking time with us, building a relationship with us (called "covenant" in the OT). Knowledge can be acquired only through relation.

Food for thought

18. There are ways in which we approach faith and religion with the mindset of "magical thinking".
19. The most important request Jesus made to his disciples throughout all generations was: "Do this in memory of me", and the 'this' is a meal.
20. Christian faith is based on the weekly practice of gathering on Sundays to listen to Scripture, reflect on it, give thanks to God, take part to the Eucharistic table. These are the way in which
 - 20.1. God visits us
 - 20.2. We spend time with God
 - 20.3. Acquire 'knowledge' over time, patiently
 - 20.4. Experience God's justice under the form of mercy.