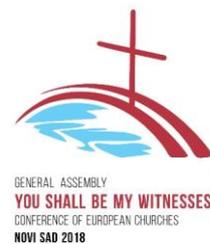


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## Bible study – CEC Assembly, Novi Sad, June 1st, 2018

Genesis 18,1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>1</sup>The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup>He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup>He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup>Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup>Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on— since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” <sup>6</sup>And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures<sup>[c]</sup> of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” <sup>7</sup>Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup>Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

Dear brothers and sisters,

a well-known reference to this episode is to be found in the New Testament, in the letter to the Hebrews (13:2): “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels”. By chance, this verse is this month’s watchword in the Moravian daily texts (the famous “Losungen”, as they are called in Germany). This verse could also be the answer to the question: why this passage about the Lord appearing to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre was chosen for today’s Bible study, at the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Conference of European Churches?

The answer could be: precisely because Europe today tends to forget, to “neglect to show hospitality to strangers”! The Greek verb *epilanthànomai*, used here, means to forget, to neglect, to overlook. And this is precisely what happens in today’s Europe: we forget, we neglect and overlook to show hospitality to strangers.

It is important to underline that what is at stake here is not just hospitality to friends or relatives or fellow Christians – this would be much less problematic: it is hospitality *to strangers*. *Filoxenia* is the Greek word used here, that is “friendship for the stranger”. *Filoxenia* is the opposite of *xenophobia*, which means fear of – and even hatred – for strangers.

Although it’s not directly to be found in Genesis 18, *filoxenia* is a keyword for the understanding of the Oaks of Mamre episode. You all know that in the Orthodox tradition this passage is the subject of a famous icon: the icon of the Trinity, by the famous Russian painter Saint Andrey Rubliov (15<sup>th</sup> century). This icon depicts the three guests of Abraham as three angels representing the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: therefore it’s known as the Trinity Icon. But it has also another name: “The *Filoxenia* of Abraham”, the hospitality that Abraham offered to the three angels of our story. A story, therefore, which can be read both as a theophany – the appearance of God, for us Christians the *Triune* God – and an example of the virtue of hospitality.

Is there a connection between the two sides of the story, and therefore between the two names of the icon, between Trinity and hospitality of strangers? According to my view there is, but let's first examine our passage more closely.

The first thing we have to note is the close relation between chapter 18 and the following chapter of Genesis. The two chapters form one narrative, even if at a first glance they seem quite distant – the first part of chapter 18 has to do with God's visit to Abraham and Sarah, and the promise that Sarah shall have a son, while the rest of chapter 18 and chapter 19 deal with the judgement and eventually the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But the chief characters are the same: on one hand God and his angels, on the other Abraham (and his nephew Lot). There is a clear parallelism between the two stories, an antithetic parallelism:

- The hospitality of Abraham (18:1-16) is opposed to the lack of hospitality shown by the inhabitants of Sodom (19:1-11), while
- the prayer of intercession of Abraham to save Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction, in the second part of chapter 18, is antithetic to the actual destruction of the two cities in the second part of chapter 19.

In other words, we could say that hospitality is at the centre of the whole narrative: being hospitable – practising *filoxenia*, as Abraham, Sarah and also Lot do – brings God's blessing, while breaking the sacred duty of hospitality brings destruction.

Going back to the oaks of Mamre, the arrival of the three men happens at an unusual time: "in the heat of the day", at the time of *siesta*. It's interesting to note that Abraham does not see them from distance, but only when they are already "standing near him". "The divine always arrives as a surprise", is the comment of Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932), the well known Old Testament scholar.

But if Abraham seems to be slow in realizing God's presence, when he finally sees the men his reaction is prompt: the text underlines that "he *ran* from the tent entrance to meet them", and mentions Abraham's *haste* three more times: in v. 6 he with the verb *mahar* (to hurry, to hasten): he hastened (*vaymaher*) into the tent to Sarah, and told her: hurry up (*mahar*), make ready three measures of choice flour...". In the following verse the text underlines that "Abraham *ran* to the herd" in order to find a tender calf.

So Abraham was slow in recognizing God's presence, but quick in responding according to the best tradition of hospitality, so typical of the ancient Middle East in general and particularly of nomadic populations (maybe it's not a case that Abraham is a nomad, living under a tent, while those who break the law of hospitality are townsmen, namely the inhabitants of Sodom!)

It is also interesting to note that at the end of our text the situation is reversed: in v. 2 we had three men, silent and standing, waiting to be invited by Abraham; in v. 8 Abraham is silently standing and waiting while the three men eat under the tree. The men did not ask anything but stood in the heat of the day in the hope of being offered refreshments; at the end Abraham too is silently and unconsciously waiting for something, which will come in the second part of the text: the announcement that Sarah will have a child, although she and Abraham are old.

Actually, there is a couple of things which remain quite unclear in this story. The first is a certain ambiguity about Abraham's counterpart: one man or three? In v. 1 we learn that "The Lord appeared to Abraham", and in v. 3 Abraham calls him "My Lord" and defines himself as "your servant". But then the text turns to the plural: "So they said: Do as you have said" (v. 5). The ancient Church saw in the three visitors an allusion, an anticipation of the idea of Trinity. As Saint Jerome (347-420) put it: "Tres vidit et unum adoravit", Abraham saw three and adored one.

This is of course a Christian reading of the text, but in any case this lack of preciseness is probably wanted, in the sense that it could be seen as a form of respect for God's "mystery". There is no need of arguing that the text is ambiguous because it's the result of the merger of different traditions. "Even recognizing the presence of previous traditions, the present canonical text is coherent and has a deep unity. The different ways

of presenting the Lord seem to be a requirement of the narrative itself: the reader knows that it has to do with the Lord, but is invited by the experience of Abraham and of the inhabitants of Sodom to move from knowing something about God to experiencing His presence through hospitality, namely through a relationship of reciprocal communion and deep friendship that impresses on the relations with fellow humans” (Gianni Cappelletto, *Genesi 12-50*, Edizioni Messaggero Padova 2002, p. 62)..

But when does Abraham finally recognize God’s presence? The exact moment is not specified. We already mentioned the New Testament quotation of this story in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some [namely Abraham and Sarah] have entertained angels without knowing it”. *Without knowing it*: this reminds us of the story of the final judgement in Matthew 25, when the righteous will say to the Lord: “when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?” (v. 38).

If we knew from the beginning that the Lord was knocking at our door of course we would have immediately opened. But the Lord wants us to make the experience of his presence as a *surprise*, without knowing it, by practising the *filoxenia*. To quote once more Hermann Gunkel, “hospitality is the field in which the religious sentiment of oriental people is exercised not only as love for the member of their tribe or family, but for the neighbour in general. Therefore hospitality is the realization of and the testimony to the fear of God, simply of the fear of God” (quoted in Gerhard von Rad, *Genesi 12-25*, ed. Paideia, Brescia 1971, p. 277).

As you can see, welcoming the stranger and welcoming God in our life are strictly connected. We wondered earlier whether there is a connection between the two sides of the story, the *filoxenia* and the Trinity, and indeed there is!

Let me show this connection through a story. A pious man who always went to church one day asked the Lord: please come and visit me. God answered: OK, I’ll come tomorrow. The pious man was really excited, he cleaned the whole house, bought flowers, lighted candles, baked biscuits for God. In the morning a boy saw the biscuits from the open window, and asked for one. No way, said the pious man: these biscuits are only for God. Later on a beggar knocked at the door, asking for some money. Get away, said the pious man, you are dirty, don’t you see I cleaned the whole apartment? I’m waiting for God. In the evening a pilgrim came, asking for hospitality, and again the pious man turned him out of the house. But God did not show up. The man was really disappointed, nevertheless the following day he went to church as usual and asked God, in tears: My Lord, why did you not come to my place yesterday, as you had promised? But God answered: Why do you say I did not come? Actually I came three times, and each time you chased me away.

It is time to come to a conclusion. What is the relevance of the “Hospitality of Abraham” for our Christian witness in today’s Europe, in a continent where migration has become a difficult and divisive issue, where many people think that all refugees and asylum seekers who try to come to Europe (whether they are fleeing from war or from hunger) should be rejected? On which side are we? On the side of *filoxenia* or *xenophobia*? On the side of Abraham and Sarah, who offer hospitality to the three strangers, or on the side of today’s Sodomites, who are not – at least in my view – gay and lesbian people, but those who preach hatred against all strangers?

In Italy, as Churches, we are trying to stand on the side of Abraham and Sarah. As Federation of Protestant Churches since decades we have always been active in the field of migration, but the recent developments, with thousands of victims in our Mediterranean Sea, just in front of our shores, have brought us to create a new programme which has become our top priority: it’s called *Mediterranean Hope* and consists of several interconnected projects: an observation post on migrations on the island of Lampedusa, a reception centre for migrants – particularly unaccompanied children – in Scicli (Sicily), and above all the ecumenical project of the Humanitarian Corridors which, in cooperation with the Community of St Egidio and with the financial support of the Waldensian and Methodist Churches. Starting in 2016, through this project we have been able to bring to Italy, safely and legally, 1,200 refugees in “vulnerable

conditions”, mostly Syrians. Churches in France and Belgium have also followed this example. Nils Muižnieks, the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, said the Humanitarian Corridors are “a good example of what Europe can do to help migrants and to address the current flows of refugees” (2 March 2016). Pope Francis welcomed the project as “a concrete sign of commitment to peace and life” and also because it is an ecumenical initiative (Angelus of 6 March 2016). A recent development of Mediterranean Hope is the signing, just last week, of an agreement of cooperation between the Federation of Protestant Churches and the Spanish NGO “Proactiva Open Arms” that, through its boats in the Mediterranean, has rescued 59,000 migrants.

We want to stand on the side of Abraham and Sarah, to learn from their example of *filoxenia*; and we want to do this together with all European Christians, fulfilling the promise we made in 2001 with the “Charta Oecumenica”: “Together we will do our part towards giving migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers a humane reception in Europe” (§ 8).