

Welcome the Divine Guest

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 20, 2025

Readings: Genesis 18:1-10a; Psalm 15 ; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Sermon text: Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God...In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross. Colossians 1:15; 19-20

St Seraphim of Sarov—an eighteenth century Russian saint—lived as a hermit for many years living in a cabin in the Taiga forest, subsisting on bread and water, friends with the local bears and all life. A pilgrim came to see him and ask what must he do to be a Christian (he despaired as a rich nobleman and had contemplated suicide). The English writer Paul Kingsnorth describes their exchange as part of his series on the lives of the wild saints.

“You wonder how to be a Christian,” he said, before I had properly spoken. “You have asked this question all your life and nobody has answered it. People have told you to pray and fast and go to church services and do good works, and none of this has answered your question. This is because these answers are wrong. Sit down, my joy, and I will tell you more.”

Just then a bear ambled in. The pilgrim was terrified but the monk calmly invited the bear near, gave him a piece of stale bread and then told it it must go because it is scaring his guest. Off it went.

“The purpose of a Christian life,” said Father Seraphim as if nothing had happened, “is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. You are a vessel, my joy, and the Spirit wishes to fill you up. Your work in this life is to ensure your vessel is clean. It is as if you were a glass. Nobody would pour vodka into a dirty glass. So this is our work here - cleaning these vessels, to make them worthy of God. Everything we are told to do - the prayers, the fasting, the good works - all of this is the work of cleaning. It all serves to help us acquire the Spirit.”

He goes on to explain this involves the practice of being still, and inviting the Spirit. As he spoke his face began shining—so the pilgrim couldn’t bear to look—but when he did he realized he himself was feeling great peace, contentment, joy. As if the the Spirit could be poured from one vessel one person, to another. He went away with a changed heart, a changed life.

And how many more lives were changed as a result? One of Seraphim of Sarov's most popular quotes is this: "Acquire the Spirit of Peace, and thousands around you will be saved."

Think about that for a moment. What the world reckons as important and what God counts may be quite different. The impact of what might seem a quiet out of the way life may be incalculable—and this may be your life.

Now if I understand Seraphim of Sarov correctly, this also involves a preparation, a sort of spiritual housecleaning, in order to make room for the Spirit.

And the first step, it seems to me, is to prepare yourself. If Jesus comes knocking on your door—feel free to picture here the old painting of Christ, lantern in hand, knocking on the door of a modest hut in the woods—will you open the door?

Hospitality is one of the greatest biblical virtues, as we see in the story of Abraham and the three divine visitors. Likewise the story of Martha and Mary welcoming Jesus into their home.

Welcoming the guest— offering water to clean weary feet, baking bread, preparing and serving the meal—all that is important. But even more so is the next step. Hearing and heeding the message—the movement from Martha to Mary: by listening with your heart, like Mary at the feet of Jesus. like Abraham to the visitors. Welcome and gracious hospitality is good— -but attention to the word of God is is the even better way.

Open the door, welcome the guest, and then listen with the ears of your heart.

But what if the household is too busy—if there is no one to welcome, no time to listen. No room at the inn. The house is already full of noisy and demanding guests. We are distracted these days, as never before—a veritable flood of worldly visitors, coming through screens, news, entertainment, experience— more more more. Do we take time to listen to God, to pray, to walk in the woods with only the wind and birds in our ear?—putting aside the inescapable sounds of road and air traffic, lawnmowers and politics.

Create time and space for prayer—build a modest hut in your heart away from the busy traffic of our distracting culture. Spend some time there, Make friends

with the wild life—including the scary bears of the unconscious. They will not harm you if you treat them with respect.

I am preaching to myself—it seems I always have a book or screen to turn to if not engaged in work or social connections.

But I want to clean house, prepare for the divine guest, and I invite you to join me. Let's make a commitment to carving out time in the day for prayer and contemplation. Let's read, mark and inwardly digest holy scripture. And let's listen to the lives of the wild saints. They have something important to tell us.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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