

2Kgs 4:8-11,14-16 Ps 88: 2-3, 16-19 Rm 6:3-4 Mt 10: 37-42. 8-11

The picture presented in the First Reading where the shunemite women provides room, bed, table, chair and a lamp for Elisha is a very positive expression of genuine hospitality. She literally ‘makes space’ for him physically in her home but also in her life. She shows warmth, kindness and generosity and for that she is rewarded. In welcoming the Prophet, she welcomed God himself, without seeking reward or recognition. She reflects the openness to the stranger that all of us are invited to show. She enabled him to fulfil his responsibility as Gods’ messenger. The reading suggests we can set no limits to those who are entitled to the warmth and friendliness that is at the core of hospitality. It presents a serious challenge to the complacency, comfortable lifestyle and routines that we can easily create around us (and doubtless justify, on the basis of our busy, rewarding and essential serious responsibilities).

The elderly couple who welcomed Elisha had the openness to God to recognise that in welcoming him, they were welcoming the God who sent him. Perhaps this suggests an important question for us. How many of us can see within those currently fleeing war, hunger and persecution, those seeking refugee status or asylum, those migrating for an improved quality of life or any of the other marginalized ‘strangers’ in our communities, an opportunity for encountering Christ?

The Gospel develops the theme of hospitality by locating it within our overall commitment to Christ. We are challenged to accept that no other ‘love’ even that within our family can be preferred to the love of God, expected from each of us. Most of us would hope to avoid those situations where we had to make a conscious choice for God which separated us from family members. Would we be willing to create that space in order to show our deeper commitment to God? Or would we be more likely to compromise ourselves (and keep the peace) by ‘creating’ exceptional circumstances, mitigating factors, ‘subjective lack of freedom or some other moral ‘loophole’, to excuse ourselves’?

Within the call to be people of welcome, kindness and generosity we find an expectation of even greater commitment. “Anyone who does not take his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it”.

The level of self-sacrifice that Jesus expects is now raised to a willingness to ‘lose’ our life in order to gain it. This can suggest the religious rationale for Christian martyrdom. We can only wonder how many of us could ever aspire to that level of self-detachment. This very question was forced upon me recently when reading Martin Mossbach’s *“The 21: A journey into the land of Coptic Martyrs”*. The book is his investigation of the faith, lives and motivations of the twenty one Coptic Christians beheaded by ISIS on a Libyan beach in 2015. Many readers will recall the image of them lined up along the shoreline in their orange jumpsuits with their hooded executioners standing behind each of them. Mosebach discovered that their choice to die, rather than say the simple two clause Islamic affirmation of faith (“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet”) was based on their historical sense of having always being “other” and of being a religious minority in a hostile environment. Their faith’s theological and historical proximity to the early church gave them a clear sense of their

religious identity and purpose. They exemplified “dying to self” in its fullest possible expression. Indeed, in the very manner of their deaths, they were fully ‘hospitable’ to their killers, revealing neither resistance nor hatred – “like lambs to the slaughter”. In their courageous acceptance of their deaths, they revealed that inner strength that comes from deep faith, trust and humility.

Their example reminds us that even in our times “dying to self” can mean much more than some pious aspiration and that ‘losing one’s life’ can be required, if we are to fully live the gospel. They showed us that genuine followers of Christ are those who put total commitment to him above even our human instinctive preference to protect our lives. Total self-giving thus becomes the way to self-fulfillment.