



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

Seen and unseen

Readings: Genesis 18: 1-10, Ps 14, Colossians 1: 24-28, Luke 10: 38-42

In her final years my mother-in-law and great friend, would sit in the front room of the Vicarage where I was writing and look out of the garden window. Her dementia was, by now, quite advanced. Periodically she would announce that the train had just come into the station. As the nearest station was two miles away and our window looked out on uninterrupted vegetation, at first I tried to correct her. 'There is no train Iris', I would say as gently as I could. My intervention was unwelcome and, clearly to Iris, plain wrong. She could see the 4.30 on the platform. I soon learnt to modify my responses. 'Yep.' I would venture, 'it's on time today.' Or 'running late then.'

These memories came back to me recently when I had to fill in a lengthy questionnaire on the effect of my Parkinson's medication. I had got used to the seemingly endless sheets of paper listing the side effects of the very dope that kept me up and running. This was a new question.

It said simply: 'Do you see things that are not really there?'

I want you to think about that for a moment.

My gut response was to put down, 'How the blazes do I know? I can see them. They look real to me.' Cue the men in white coats.

We tend to define our reality by what we can see and judge other people's sanity and rationality by the factor of common experience and perception. After all only the mad sees things differently, don't they?

So what do we make of religious experience? What about the man who sees angels or hears voices? What about Abram in today's Old Testament reading? What about our own transcendent moments – drugs, brain degeneration or divine encounter?

One of the gifts you pray for and value in the priesthood is the gift of spiritual discernment. It is a strong aid in the confessional but it is also of much wider use in ministering to the People of God and pastoring the flock. It is to ask God to help us see the wider picture, what is illusion and what is reality. What is the result of damage and what is the revelation of a much needed and deeper truth?

Today's Old Testament reading – beautifully realised artistically in the great Rublev ikon of the Trinity – makes us witnesses of Abraham's encounter with the incarnate reality of the threefold Presence in the angelic manifestation by the Oaks of Mamre. It is a strange story and we do well to remember that we read it with the benefit of the hindsight of history. At this point Abraham and Sara are not the stuff of legend, the fountainhead of the great faiths, the progenitors of the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world. They are two old people, nomads, childless,

no abiding city, following the call of God and to wander, dependent upon Him.

We are told simply that The Lord appeared to Abraham. Three men are welcomed and dined. In the midst of conversation the threefold presence tells Abraham that his elderly barren wife will, this time next year, be holding their baby son. Hearing this, Sara laughs. This is ridiculous. But the Lord hears her and calls her out. She is so embarrassed that she denies laughing. And the Lord insists: 'No. But you did laugh.'

It is entirely appropriate then that when this child of this incredible promise comes to be born, he should be named Isaac – laughter. We know now that this was a true and profound encounter with God, a determinative spiritual experience. What would we have made of it if Abraham had shared this story with us immediately after it happened – laughter? A knowing tap on the forehead? Old chap's lost his marbles? Too long out in the noonday sun?

The truth is, as you discover in priestly ministry, religious experience is not uncommon. People don't talk about it because they don't want people to think them loony. The key question is – how do we discern the real from the emotionally manufactured or the disturbed?

First of all there is the simple test of time. Is it true? Is it fulfilled? God's Word does not return empty. This requires patience and is why the Church is slow to rule on the validity of miracles, apparitions or the encounters of mystics. The second test, and much more immediately applicable, is simply whether it is consonant with the Word of God and the teaching of

Christ's Church. God does not contradict Himself and false prophets, lying spirits and delusions usually manifest error pretty rapidly. (A crude but not unfamiliar pastoral example: God is love. I've fallen in love with someone who is not my wife. It's the real thing. Therefore it is of God. The priest has the salutary duty of rehearsing the familiar commandment. Emotional flannel cannot disguise adultery.)

On mystical encounter – seeing things, hearing the voice, being supernaturally aware – similar caution applies. Is it fulfilled? Is it consonant with the Word of God? We can also test these experiences by persistent prayer, praying a Novena for example. God reveals Himself in our faithfulness. We should also invite those we trust spiritually to pray with us for discernment. If God appears to be saying something to me I have no hesitation in gathering the praying circle around me and ask them to report back weeks or even months on. I will share anything with my spiritual director for his prayer and discernment. I will ask my Cell Group to pray for clarity for me. I will invite my praying family to surround me and grant discernment. Talk to your priest. A good priest will understand the nature of encounter and help you. There are lots of safeguards we can employ. The important thing is to recognise that these things happen – not all the time but every so often in a praying lifetime – and we need to be able to discern and share these realities of the Christian life for our mutual strengthening and the building up of the Kingdom.

This is best done in the company of those who understand.

We want to get it right both for our sake and for the mission of the Church.