



On your marks

To offer food and a generous welcome to anyone is a strong Middle Eastern tradition. There are many examples of this in the Bible, where hostility and suspicion are transformed thereby into understanding and trust. True hospitality makes no distinction between rich or poor, friend or foe, relative or stranger. At its best, it is a reflection and sign of the heart of God's gracious love and mercy towards each one of us.

When giving advice about offering hospitality to strangers, the New Testament writer of the letter to the Hebrews suggests that when we do this we may well be welcoming angels as guests (Hebrews 13:2). This is exactly what happened for Abraham when he entertained three travellers one day. It was a visit he would never forget.

Get set

You will need:

- items for laying a festival table - tablecloth, serviettes, cutlery
- ingredients for making chapattis - flour, water, salt.

You can find the story in Genesis 18:1-15.

Go!

Background to the story

I wonder how long you would be prepared to wait for a promise to be kept - especially if that promise involved something that seemed impossible to get!

In this story, the memories of Abraham's long journey of faith from Ur to the promised land were now fading. He and Sarah had been living in Canaan for a long time and there was still no sign of the child that God had promised him. He and Sarah were both old and it seemed that there would be no family to leave things to - God's promise had not been kept. God and Abraham were still on speaking terms but Abraham was finding it more and more difficult to believe that he and Sarah would ever hold a baby of their own. It's worth noting here that Abraham had laughed at the thought of becoming a father when God renewed his 'impossible promise' prior to the visit of the three strangers in the story here.

Opening up the story

The context for the renewal of this special promise that the three strangers bring is that of a meal offered with generous hospitality.

Ask your group to prepare a table for some guests with as much care and attention as possible. Provide a tablecloth, serviettes, cutlery and crockery – or you may prefer to use paper/plastic versions of these. Encourage everyone to make the table as inviting as possible – by adding some extra special touches like decorations or even place names and little gifts or favours. It might help to imagine that you are laying the table for a special festival meal.

As you prepare the table, talk together about special meals that you have all enjoyed at some stage.

- What made the meal special?
- What can you remember about how the table was laid?
- What are the characteristics of a generous host?
- What are the marks of great hospitality?

Telling the story

Abraham is a model host in this story, making sure that everything is just right for his three unexpected guests. Tell the story from Abraham's perspective, inviting the group to act out and experience all that he goes through from start to finish. For example:

- Snoozing in the hot sun outside his tent not far from the shade of the oak trees
- Running to meet the three strangers and bowing to the ground
- Leading them in for refreshment and food
- Rushing to give instructions to Sarah about making bread
- Rushing off to the cowherd to arrange for his very best calf to be turned into sirloin steak!
- Carrying a tray with yoghurt and milk to the three visitors
- Standing and watching, like an alert waiter, ready to respond to them as they eat
- Becoming more and more amazed as he hears what his guests are saying and realising that he is hearing God speaking through them
- Being embarrassed when he hears Sarah laughing behind him
- Listening intently to the promise that in nine months they will have a child because 'nothing is too difficult for the Lord'

In addition, you might like to add some key sound effects to the story to help you retell it, including the following:

- snoring
- the sound of running
- water pouring
- dough being pounded
- a young calf lowing
- a drink being poured
- the sound of eating
- stifled laughter
- finally, verse 13 read with authority and hope.

Talking about the story

It is interesting to note that even though Abraham is elderly, as well as a man of wealth and status by this stage of the story, he is nevertheless honoured to serve these unknown strangers. The writer of the story makes it clear from the start that these visitors appeared the way in which God appears to him. However, it only seems to dawn on Abraham slowly just who the three really are.

- Why do you think Abraham took so long to realise that these three guests were God meeting with him?
- How might you expect God to come and speak to you? Might you be surprised if he chose to do this through people you don't even know?
- Do you think it was easy for Abraham to show such respect and attention to strangers? Why do we perhaps find it even more difficult nowadays? What holds us back from this sort of hospitality?
- Abraham gave the very best he could to the strangers - a huge amount of bread and the very best of his calves. What might we learn from this about how we treat other people who happen to cross our paths each day?
- Although Sarah laughs at the idea that she is going to have a child at her age, Abraham too had laughed for the same reason in Genesis 17. Are there some things that you have come across either in the Bible or about God that you think can't possibly be true? And if so, what does this story have to say to us about that?
- How does this story encourage you to believe in God's promises for you?

Playing with the story

Clearly, the three guests had to wait for some time while the bread was made and the meat was prepared. Plan to make some bread in your session, mixing together flour, water and salt and then kneading this ready to cook. It's possible that the bread in the story would have been 'unleavened' - no yeast was added to make it rise. Similarly, you could bake your flat bread as chapattis, which cook quite quickly, and then eat them with some yoghurt and/or milk in the same way as Abraham's guests.

If possible, make this an opportunity for your group to show hospitality to other members of the congregation or the group's parents by offering them some food and drink at the table you have prepared.

Reflecting on the story

This Bible story has become the subject of some very famous pieces of art. There is a famous icon from the Orthodox tradition, called 'The hospitality of Abraham', which many people find an inspiration when they pray.

Find an image of this picture on the Internet (for example [here](#)). It depicts three identical looking angels sitting around a table. In the background, you can see the trees mentioned in the story and



the house (rather than tent) where Abraham and Sarah live. Many people identify 'the angels' as the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - and so the picture welcomes us, as onlookers, to be part of the hospitality of God.

Spend some time with this picture and wonder together which part you like the best and what the picture is saying to you about your life at the moment.

Use this picture as a focus for your final reflection bringing your group into the open space on your side of the table, or anybody you know who needs to know God's loving welcome and hospitality at this particular time.