

## Week 16 – Ordinary Time – July 18, 2010

When I arrived at this remote lodge two weeks ago, priests of the local diocese were just gathering for the evening meal. I shook hands with a few of them, went to the table, and a friendly, older man in casual dress walked up to me. “Welcome to New Zealand,” he said. “I’m Tom Williams.” I said, “Tom, nice to meet you.” He said, “I’m not from here. I’m from two dioceses over.” I tried to imagine the map, and guessed, “So, you’re from Palmerston North?” “No,” he said, “Wellington.” “Ah. Oh,” I said. “You’re *that* Tom Williams.” Cardinal Thomas Williams is retired now, but a few years ago he was sitting in the Sistine Chapel when the cardinals of the Catholic Church elected Joseph Ratzinger to become Pope Benedict XVI.

New Zealand is a beautiful country of shoreline, mountains, lakes and rivers, but over the past 3 weeks I mostly saw airports, cathedrals, conference rooms – and some surprising people. I traveled to all 6 dioceses to talk about the forthcoming revised translation of the mass to bishops, priests and many lay Catholics. They all received the talks very well, and now they all know about St. Munchin and St. Aloysius.

The priest who coordinated all of this, Father Trevor Murray, gave me tremendous hospitality. He arranged nine different places for these gatherings, accompanied me through airports, chauffeured me to many of the sites, provided meals and lodging, and even hauled my luggage. Going to the southern hemisphere, I went from the longest day of the year here to the shortest day of the year there, and the farther south we went, the colder it got. Last week I spent two nights in a diocese not far from the South Pole; they even have a colony of penguins. We stayed in a former seminary building that used to close for three weeks in the winter because it was too cold for the students to stay there. Conditions have not greatly improved, but Father Trevor came to the rescue again by coming to my room the second day and gently showing me how to turn on the heater. I thought it was an air conditioner.

The hospitality I offer never seems as good as the hospitality I receive. When I was a kid, our family had a saying about traveling to visit relatives or having relatives visit us: “After 3 days, fish and guests smell funny.” I guess that’s why a few years ago when we had to replace a bed in the rectory here, I told the salesperson it was for the guest room, so I wanted it to be comfortable, but not so comfortable that guests would want to stay a long time.

Today’s first reading is a classic biblical story about hospitality. Abraham was sitting inside his tent by the oak trees of Mamre to cool himself from the heat of the day. Three men appeared to him, and he realized that they were a manifestation of God. He gave them water for their feet, a tree for their rest, and food for their stomachs: bread, curds, milk and beef. Because of Abraham’s hospitality, they promised that his wife Sarah would finally conceive the child that God had promised him decades ago. Having a child may not be on your wish list right now, but

those who give hospitality receive more in return. They become better human beings even after the guests are gone.