

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Year A

The Commandment Of Love.

Today, through the strength that Christ gives us, we can celebrate with the joy of the Holy Spirit that great commandment of love which once had to be imposed on men under threat of God's avenging anger.

(Readings: Exodus 22: 20-26. If you are harsh with the widow, or with the orphan, my anger will flare against you. 1 Thessalonians 1: 5-10. You broke with idolatry and became servants of God; you are now waiting for his Son. Matthew 22: 34-40. You must love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself.)

Being normal, ordinary, social human beings, we quite naturally like the comfort and the security that comes from belonging; the sense of being closely attached to particular people and to particular places. And the sense of belonging to such attachments gives shape to our identity, providing the essential environment and security in which to grow.

Being in the grip of Covid-19, with all the associated confines and imposed restrictions, one of the hardest things people are having to face is the entirely counter-intuitive obstruction of, and intrusion on, our essential need to be the dynamic, socially interactive creatures we naturally are.

Of course, it's not always Governments who impose restrictions on our interaction with others. Outside of our normally 'attached', intimately safe world, there exists other worlds; worlds full of strangers; people whom we can choose, either to notice or, just as easily, to ignore, depending on our own personal likes and dislikes, our fears, and even our prejudices. Ostensibly, these are people we do not know, outsiders defined and demarcated by their difference. – 'Not one of us!'

Almost instinctively, and I have to say, almost always irrationally, we fear what we do not understand; resolutely distrusting those whose background, or race, or belief differs from our own. Ultimately, this ends up being a basic question of association or segregation. One, obvious example of just how far such fear can go is found in South Africa's former policy of Apartheid, or in the language of Afrikaans, 'apartness'.

In our first reading we hear exactly how the people of Israel were expected to treat strangers. They were told, and without compromise,

“You must not molest the stranger or oppress him,
for you lived as strangers in the land of Egypt”.

The Israelites had, themselves, been poor strangers. And just as God had taken pity on them, so they were to take pity on outsiders.

“If a stranger lives with you in your land, do not molest him.
You must count him as one of your own countrymen and love him as yourself...
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh your God.” (Lev. 19: 33-34)

The Israelites were *commanded* to love the stranger as they loved themselves. The reasoning for this, the justification behind the command, was in the *fact* of their own experience. They were to look into their hearts, and remember the time when they, themselves, were, outsiders – when *they* were out of their element. Loving the stranger was something that simply had to be done, because that was what God did:

“It is [*God*] who sees justice done for the widow and the orphan,
who loves the stranger and gives him food and clothing.
Love the stranger then, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deut. 10: 18)

The stranger stopped feeling estranged when he was offered hospitality. Not surprisingly then, hospitality came to be regarded as one of the prime virtues. This was most especially true for nomadic people since hospitality could be as serious as a matter of life and death. Often travellers depended on the hospitality of people they had never met before for their very survival. The stranger, the wayfarer, the foreigner, the interloper, anyone outside his home territory, or outside his element, was regarded as someone deserving special care.

If the host was an enemy of the stranger the act of hospitality was seen as a sign of reconciliation. And when accepted the guest was ‘sanctioned’ or given the full protection of the host. In response the guest honoured the customs of the house, even if it was a tent in the middle of the desert.

In the tradition of Israel the simple, almost casual questions we ask to unmask a stranger, questions like, “Who are you? Where do you come from? Why are you here?” were questions reserved for *after* hospitality had been both offered, and accepted, and after the time when the guest had bathed and rested, and had been fed. Until then, the guest was allowed to wear the mask of the stranger, as it were, until he had experienced *all* the courtesies of hospitality. It was in such an atmosphere, that he revealed who he was. And it is a tradition that can still be seen in the ancient Welsh greeting:

Hail guest, we ask not what thou art:
If friend, we greet thee, hand on heart;
If stranger, such no longer be;
If foe, our love shall conquer thee.

In our Gospel, Jesus speaks of the ‘conquering power of love’ when he instructs his followers of their Christian responsibility towards all strangers, “You must love your neighbour as yourself.”

As the Israelites were to love the stranger, so Christians are asked to love their neighbour; to offer the ultimate expression of hospitality, which is, the offering of their love. It is all too often the case that the real stranger is not so much the person we don’t know, but the person we don’t *want* to know. The stranger, for we who are Christian, is the person we refuse to love. And that person could literally be a neighbour, living right next door. Or worse yet, it could be a member of our own family. – What a sad thing it would be if, when the current prohibitions are lifted, any of us should have a stranger in our own household, tragically, still waiting to be welcomed and loved.

It is a truly pitiful failing, that we are often too scared to take people into our hearts, refusing hospitality because we are afraid of being duped, or being taken for a ride, terrified to death of having our hearts broken, so much so, we end up refusing to love at all. Of course, and it’s an unavoidable fact of life, love has a price. But it also has wonderful rewards. Jesus knew that, when he opened his own heart to receive all the people. Yes, people will make demands on you. Yes, people will sometimes cause your heart to bleed. And yes, that can be very painful! But hiding away has its price too, that of loneliness. And people can even die from it, just as sometimes people die from a broken heart, however securely they hide themselves away, their hearts so safely hidden, that they are never used.

Christian hearts are most alive when they are open to the needs of both strangers and neighbours; those people who test the quality of our hospitality, and our mercy. Moreover, when we respond in love, we are assured that we are ministering to Christ himself, for as he says: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me”.

Christ comes to us, not only in the form of bread and wine – and truly, divinely wonderful that is – but also in the form of a stranger, seeking welcome. That is the Gospel of Christ!