

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

We all like the comfort that comes from belonging, the sense of being attached to particular people and particular places. That sense of belonging gives shape to our identity and provides security in which to grow. Outside our small familiar world there is a world full of strangers, people whom we either notice or ignore, depending on our likes and fears and prejudices. Often we fear what we don't understand and we distrust those whose background or race or belief is different from our own. How we deal with those who are "different" is perhaps the greatest challenge our country faces at this time. How **do** we treat Muslims.... or those released from prison....or an asylum seeker or refugee.... or any of those who are outside of the mainstream of society ? So let's see what our Scripture – which we believe to be the revealed Word of God – says to us.

In today's first reading we hear how the people of Israel were expected to treat the stranger: "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 and strangers, and just as God had taken pity on them so now they were to take pity on outsiders. They were commanded: "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 the Lord your God." (Lev.19:33-34)

The Israelites were commanded to *love the strangers as they loved themselves*. The reason for this was simply to be found in their own experience: they were to look into their own heart and remember the time when they were outsiders, when they were out of their element. Loving the stranger was something that had to be done because that was what God did. In the book of Deuteronomy we read "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 ceased feeling estranged when he was offered hospitality. Not surprisingly, for the people of Israel hospitality came to be regarded as one of the primary virtues. Especially for a nomadic people, hospitality could be a matter of life and death: travellers depended for their survival on the hospitality of others. In response, the guest honoured the customs of the

house. In the tradition of Israel the simple questions which we ask to unmask the stranger – *Who are you? Where do you come from? Why are you here?* – were reserved for the time *after* hospitality had been offered and accepted, and the guest bathed and rested and been fed..

In the Gospel Jesus speaks of the conquering power of love when he tells his followers, “You must love your neighbour as yourself.” As the Israelites were asked to love the stranger as themselves, so Christians are asked to love their neighbours. The ultimate offer of hospitality is the offer of love. Often the real stranger is not the person we don’t know, but the person we don’t want to know, the person we refuse to love. That person could be a Muslim or a young man just released from prison or a refugee or asylum seeker. But that person could just as easily be a neighbour or a member of our own family. We can all have strangers in our own house, still waiting to be welcomed and loved.

We are often scared to take people in because we are afraid of being taken in ourselves. We don’t want to be duped, taken for a ride. Hospitality, like everything else, has a price. Jesus knew that, when he opened up his heart to receive people. People make demands on you; they bleed you. But remaining secure behind our locked doors has its own penalty: if people die from being unvisited, people also die behind locked doors and locked hearts, they die on the inside from caring only for themselves. We all need strangers and neighbours to test the quality of our mercy. When we respond, we have the assurance that we minister to Christ: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Christ still comes to us not only in the forms of bread and wine but in the form of the stranger seeking welcome. That is Gospel.