

Sunday 30A 2023 SFX

In the novel *Quo Vadis*, a pagan asks the St Peter who had just arrived in Rome: Athens has given us wisdom, Rome power, and what does your religion offer us? Peter responds: Love! Jesus started a revolution by calling us to love differently from the Romans and the Greeks.

"All you need is love." There is so much talk of love that we think we know all about it. We all understand romantic love. That excited feeling in the presence of someone who might take our breath away. We can all love what is beautiful and graceful, we can love someone who is accomplished and talented. But in the Gospels Jesus offers us another vision of love, not the appreciation of some strength, grace or virtue in a person, but quite the opposite, a tolerance of and a kindness towards those whom we do not immediately appreciate, those who outwardly we might find strange and difficult.

Jesus sets out this vision of love. We see in action his love: love of the prostitute and the sinner, love of the leper and the petty criminal, and he challenges us to love to those whom we might find wretched and difficult, even those who we label 'enemies'.

The first reading speaks of 'strangers.' Strangers are those we don't know, defined by their difference: the fact that they are not one of us. They are people we notice or ignore, like or fear, depending on our own prejudices or situation. Often, we fear what we don't understand, and we can distrust those whose race, belief or worldview is different from our own. Yet Israel, as it was born as a nation, was invited to embrace the stranger.

The people of Israel are told: "You must not to molest the stranger or oppress him." They are called to place themselves in the shoes of the stranger, to imagine how the world is for them. They are invited to draw from their own hearts that feeling of what it means to be an outsider, a stranger in the land and remember how hospitality is when far from home. "Love the stranger then, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." *Deuteronomy 10:19*. You remember what it was like to be that stranger.

As the Israelites were asked to love the stranger, so in the Gospel Jesus asks us to love our neighbour. So much so that he elevates it in that 'great commandment' alongside and parallel to of love of God. Love of God and love of neighbour are two sides of the same coin.

"But who is my neighbour?" That was the provocative question put to Jesus by the lawyer in response to this question of the great commandment in St Luke's Gospel, and the answer was given in the parable of the Good Samaritan where our Lord makes clear that 'neighbour' does not merely mean friend, nor someone of the same race, religion, or nationality. It is the stranger at the side of the road, person in front of you in need. 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 know and love.

And yet this is the power of Christian love. To love not what delights us, but what can sometimes abhor us. To show a tolerance and compassion to those who we consider difficult, who do not share our values and our beliefs, who might be morally questionable. Nothing is more important than this sort of love. A love that rescues nations from intolerance, halts wars, stops recrimination, calms furies and allows civilisation to continue. Love when it would be so easy to hate or look away.

Do you know the story of St Francis and the Leper? He couldn't stand the sight of them, in fact seeing them in the valley two miles away from his house he would hold his nose with his hands. He said: 'it felt extremely bitter to me to even look at lepers.' But then Francis fell in love with the Lord, and he met a leper and kissed him. Imagine the last time this leper had been embraced? The last time he had human contact?

We all have people in our lives who are alien to us, disgust us, make us afraid. In his Testament Francis says: "the Lord himself led me among them and I practiced mercy with them." How do we practice mercy? How do we go beyond our usual orbits to embrace the alien, the stranger, the neighbour who we may not even choose to know.

Even in this parish don't we often live parallel lives? Those who go to the 6pm never meet those at the 10am. You may not know the person in front of you or behind you, apart from the quick and awkward handshake at the sign of peace. Mass is about Communion. Communion with Jesus first of all. But communion with each other. Brothers, sisters, friends in Christ. There is a task for us in this Church that we do not remain strangers and aliens to each other. Because alongside the love of God which we dutifully observe by coming to Mass, there is the love of those around us.

It may not be something solved this evening but how do we extend the hand of genuine friendship across this very diverse community. How do we, like Francis, practice mercy?

His biographer said of Francis that "He therefore resolved in his heart never in the future to refuse anyone, if at all possible, who asked for the love of God." May we grow in that love, may we give that love.

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