

## 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A – 29<sup>th</sup> October 2023

Outside our small, familiar world there are worlds of strangers - people whom we notice or ignore, depending on our likes, fears and prejudices. Strangers are people we don't know, outsiders defined by their difference and by the fact that they are 'not one of us'. Often we fear what we don't understand and distrust those whose background or race or belief is different from our own.

In today's first reading we hear how the people of Israel were expected to treat the stranger. The Israelites themselves had been poor and strangers, and just as God had taken pity on them so they were to take pity on outsiders. They were commanded to love the strangers as they loved themselves. The reason for this was no further than their own experience: they were to look into their own heart and remember the time when they were the outsiders, when they were out of their element.

The stranger ceased to feel estranged when she or he was offered hospitality. Not surprisingly, hospitality came to be regarded as one of the primary virtues. Hospitality is a central virtue in the Benedictine tradition - "All guests who present themselves at a monastery are to be welcomed as Christ himself...all humility should be shown in addressing a guest... by a bow of the head or by a complete prostration of the body, Christ is to be adored because he is indeed welcomed in them."

In our Gospel today Jesus reminds us that the ultimate offer of hospitality is the offer of love when he tells us "You must love your neighbour as yourself." 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 neighbour or a member of our own family. We can all have strangers in our house, still waiting to be welcomed and loved.

We are often scared to welcome people in because we are afraid of being taken in ourselves, afraid of being conned, taken for a ride. Hospitality, like

everything else, has a price. Jesus knew that when he opened up his heart to receive people; we know this when we allow ourselves to become vulnerable in welcoming others.

After a while the reception room begins to look like an emergency ward. People make demands on you, they bleed you. But remaining secure behind our locked doors has its own penalty. People die from being unvisited, people die behind locked doors and locked hearts, from caring only for themselves. We all need strangers and neighbours to test the quality of our mercy. When we respond to them, we have the assurance that we are ministering to Christ himself: "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... If we are aware of this, how can we in all conscience refuse to offer hospitality to anyone?