

Sunday Homily

31 OCTOBER 2021

YEAR B

31st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Illustration

In Oxford, England, there is a Catholic Worker House, part of the international Catholic Worker movement. It is a Christian community in which love of God and love of neighbour are at the heart of everything.

Every morning, the three people who live at the Oxford house spend time in prayer and reflection. They do this to keep in close touch with the life and teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. They also believe that the Spirit of God is within every person, and so time is spent quietly discerning God's will in guiding their lives.

As for love of neighbour, the community offers hospitality to people in need. A couple of spare bedrooms are given over to destitute asylum seekers. The house is also an open-door home where people who are lonely, needy or just looking for some company can enjoy a cup of tea and a warm welcome. The community also believes that living an environmentally sustainable lifestyle and working for peace are an important service to neighbours in the wider community. Members grow their own vegetables on an allotment, borrow or buy things second-hand and travel without a car. The community also involves itself in peace activities, particularly vigils and protests against the expansion of nuclear weapons establishments in the Oxford area.

Gospel Teaching

In today's Gospel, Jesus is asked by a scribe to settle what was at that time a regular dispute among rabbis: which commandment is the greatest? Jewish law contained over six hundred different regulations, and it was common for scholars to try to distil them into fewer, more fundamental principles. How does Jesus respond? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength." He then says that the second great commandment is to "love your neighbour as yourself". He tells the scribe that he is close to the kingdom of God because he realises that love of God and of neighbour is more important than the religious observances at the Temple.

Yet how do we express our love for God and neighbour? Despite so many of our songs and hymns and sermons being devoted to the subject of loving God, how do we actually do it in practical terms? Jesus does the best job of explaining what loving God means in the second of his great commands: "love your neighbour as yourself". Loving our neighbours is something we can tangibly do on a daily basis. And it seems that by loving our neighbours as ourselves, we

are also loving God. The two commandments are linked. Jesus clearly had a broad understanding of who exactly the neighbour is; for him it included people in need, strangers and even enemies. It simply does not make sense to say you love God and are following Jesus, and not to love and live for others.

Application

There is a clear challenge here for the priorities in our individual lives, and indeed in our churches. Though false gods and idolatry may seem a thing of the past, let us reflect on how we spend our resources and our time. This will reveal where we place our faith. Perhaps we idolise things other than God – money, personal property, celebrities. It is easy for our faith to wither amidst selfishness and materialism. This is why the first reading too, from Deuteronomy, asks us to hold tight to loving God.

What do our bank balances and diaries reveal? Do we spend our time and money on life-giving things for ourselves, or for others? Do we worship the living God with living works – such as reaching out to the homeless, or lobbying for justice – or are our hearts set on things that are merely material or even destructive? These are just a few of the barometers by which our false gods are revealed, and clearly the temptation to idolatry is just as strong now as it was at the time of Jesus. We will only be able to love as Jesus loves if we are free from idols.

We are also called as a church community to reflect upon our priorities. How do we communicate our church's priorities to members and to the surrounding community? How far do we regard those suffering in other parts of the world as our neighbours – in need of more than occasional charity? If we feel we have a relationship with the whole of humanity, then work for global justice and peace may become a more significant part of church outreach.