

DEACON GEORGE'S HOMILY FOR THE THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

"Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad" - "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God. The Lord is One. You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength". Deuteronomy (6:4-5)"

In accordance with Jewish tradition, the "**Shema**" is a twice a daily **Mitzvah** ... a commandment of God to recite the **Shema** ... and the Jews continue this tradition to this day.

From the Old Testament reading, we hear that the Israelites were reminded that they were once poor and strangers in the land of Egypt, and that God took pity on them. Therefore, in return, they were commanded to take pity on the stranger, and count him as one of their own, and to love the stranger as themselves (Lev. 19:33-34.). They were required to do this because that was what God did.

In Jewish tradition, the stranger was made a guest in their home. He was allowed to remain a stranger, until he had experienced the courtesies of hospitality. The stranger was first bathed, rested and fed, and if necessary clothed. It was **after** this hospitality, that the stranger revealed himself, in response to questions, such as: Who are you? Where do you come from? Why are you here?

If the stranger was your enemy, then hospitality was considered as an act of reconciliation. The guest was made special, and given the full protection of the house, and in return the guest honoured the customs of that house.

The Jews had many traditions and rules. Some rules were from God, others were man-made, some were written, some were oral. The written law of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, were complemented by the oral commentary. The Pharisees believed that the oral, man-made, law deserved the same respect as the written law. At the time of Jesus, it is said there were 613 rules which had to be followed.

I believe that Jesus must have been very surprised by their question, "**Which is the greatest commandment of the Law**". Because if they were good Jews, they would have said the "**Shema**" twice a day.

However, Jesus was well qualified to answer their question, for he too is Jewish. and he is God. I believe he would have answered them, firstly and strongly, with the words of the "**Shema**". Then, secondly, also strongly, he combined this with the commandment from Leviticus (19:18-19) "**You must love your neighbour as yourself**".

The Pharisees were strong on ethics and codes of practice, hence the 613 rules. However, they were weak on relationships. Jesus remedied this by giving them two primary, **relational** commandments: **One** - To love God. **Two** - To love our neighbour. This second commandment is not an add-on to the first, it is a very necessary commandment, **because**, it is through loving our neighbour, that we fulfil the first commandment, to love our God.

St. Paul re-iterates the second commandment in his letters to the Romans (13:10) and Galatians (5:14). Whereas St. Luke goes further and explains the second commandment through the parable of the "Good Samaritan".

We love God, by loving our neighbour. Our faith is a relational faith, not simply a following of a series of rules. Our faith is a relationship with Jesus Christ.

When we meet the needs of a stranger, we meet the needs of Christ, "**I was stranger and you welcomed me**". We need strangers to test our love and compassion, and sometimes our forgiveness. We need strangers to test our relationship with Jesus.

Often, the **real** stranger, is not the person we **do not know**, but the person we **do not want** to know, the person we refuse to love.

Sometimes, the stranger is not always our neighbour, but often the stranger is a member of our own family at home, or here in our Church, or someone at work, a stranger waiting to be welcomed.

Elizabeth's story ... Helensburgh neighbours.

When we welcome the stranger, we do it in the conquering power of love, Christ's love. We meet Jesus, not just in the bread and wine, but in hospitality to the stranger. The offer of hospitality is the offer of love to our neighbour and to Christ.