

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Isn't it interesting, and perhaps a little ironic, that we can listen to writings nearly 4,000 years old and find them speaking directly to the issues we face today?

That first reading comes from Exodus. The Hebrew people have already endured the plagues, escaped 400 years of slavery in Egypt, and received the Law while journeying in the desert. And this section of the Law focuses on social responsibility toward the vulnerable.

The "aliens" mentioned are the foreigners living among the people. They had certain protections but lacked the full rights of native Israelites, and that made them vulnerable to mistreatment.

Can you think of anyone in our society who might fit that description today?

What about those seeking safety or a better life facing rejection or insecurity? What about families struggling against eviction with few options to defend themselves? How about those who are displaced, isolated, or forgotten - possibly a single parent working multiple jobs because employers won't offer full-time work or benefits.

An interesting feature of Hebrew law is that it often explains *why* a law exists. Here, the Israelites are told to remember their own experience of cruelty in Egypt. And because they've suffered as strangers - treat strangers with dignity and compassion.

The same applies to widows and orphans. In the ancient world, without a male head of household, women & children had little protection or economic security. God declares a special concern for them, promising to hear them and defend them against injustice.

Israel understood that a truly strong society is measured by how it treats its weakest members. The Gospel takes this even further by teaching us *why* we are called to care for others.

In the Gospel Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment. He quotes the *Shema*, the basic creed of Judaism: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*"

This means we first give our total commitment to God. But Jesus does not stop there. He immediately combines it with a second commandment: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

Notice the order. Love of God comes first. Why? Because only through loving God are we even able to be truly lovable.

You see, our faith teaches that human beings are not just collections of chemical elements driven by instinct. We're made in the image and likeness of God which gives every human being their dignity. That's what makes every life sacred.

Take away that truth of God, and it becomes much easier to lose patience with those who move slower than we do, dismiss those who struggle, ignore those who suffer, or become indifferent toward those who seem different from us.

It's easy to profess love for an invisible God through prayers and pious devotions. It's much harder to love the God who stands before us every day in the people we encounter, especially those that society neglects and/or rejects.

And the Church can't change this. Human dignity is not an opinion, a political position, or a cultural trend. It's revealed truth from God.

Every person is created in the image and likeness of God. Every person is a Child of God. Therefore, every person possesses an inherent self-worth, a fundamental right to life, and to those things necessary for human dignity.

And this is where it gets hard and tests us – as we see in the headlines:

- Palestinians & Jews have a right to co-exist in peace
- Ukrainians & Russians have a right to exist in peace
- Those escaping persecution have a right to live in security
- Those who are displaced, isolated, or forgotten have a right to be seen & treated with compassion

In each case, we're speaking about human beings – people whose dignity comes from God, not from status, nationality, fame, politics, age, religion, or money.

This is where Jesus' teaching becomes so demanding. Love of neighbor is not separate from love of God. It's the primary way we express our love for God.

Loving God and loving neighbor doesn't mean loving only those who agree with us, look like us, or make life easier for us. It means loving those whom the world overlooks, rejects, or neglects.

The gifts we receive are meant to be shared with those wounded by prejudice, burdened by greed, or trapped in cycles of violence & injustice.

So how do we make this Gospel come alive this week? Well maybe when we mix with people, engage in conversation, cast a vote, go to work, or come to church, let's ask ourselves:

- Do my words & actions reflect the dignity of every human person?
- Do I see people first as children of God?
- Am I building bridges or barriers?
- Am I revealing God's love or simply defending my own preferences?

Love of God is inseparable from love of people. To be holy is to love God and to love those made in his image. Not with vague sentiment or good intentions alone, but with a genuine commitment shown in the way we treat others everyday.

So, back to where we started: Isn't it remarkable that words written thousands of years ago remain so relevant today - reminding us that the path to loving God is found in how we treat one another.