

Thirty First Sunday in Ordinary Time

I have been moved this week by those people who have rung or sent messages to me to offer their sympathy to me at the tragic death of my brother priest Vimal Raj. Your concern for us priests is an expression of your love for God and of your love for your neighbour. In many ways the parish community is another family for us. Most of our international priests do not have any other family in Australia with them. But even with the best of family support it seems that mental illness and depression can still overwhelm us.

We don't know much about the scribe who asked Jesus which of the commandments was the greatest. But it seems that he was a good man searching for the best way of doing God's will. He could appreciate that Jesus had touched into the heart of the law when he placed side by side the two commandments: to love God with all of our being, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

The first of those commandments was found in the Book of Deuteronomy. We read it today as part of our first reading. It was so central to the life of the devout Jew that many Jews wore it either on their forehead or on their arm in a little scroll. It was called the Shema, from the first Hebrew word of the commandment, Shema Israel, Listen Israel. That preface to the commandment to love God with all our soul, with all our mind and with all

our strength is worth noticing. It is because there is only one God that we devote all of our energy towards loving that God. We cannot love the one God with a divided heart. The second commandment was from the Book of Leviticus. Jesus places the two commands together because he wanted us to understand that loving God commands us to love our neighbour.

In St. John's first letter, he puts it very plainly. "Anyone who says "I love God" and hates his brother, is a liar, since one who does not love his brother whom he can see cannot love God whom he has never seen."

Even if we can yes to all that, we know that it is not easy to do it. We can tolerate other people, avoid causing them harm, even respond to some of their needs. But to love them as we love ourselves is something quite demanding, and it may seem to be too difficult most of the time. Something deeper happens when we try and do that. We begin to understand that we need our neighbor as much as they need us. We recognize this more deeply when we are grieving. We sense that when we forgive other people then it is our own sins that we forgive. When we pity them, it is because we ourselves need pity. When we love others as we love ourselves, we are trying to love them with a deep respect for the people that they are. We love them not from a position of superiority, but we make ourselves vulnerable so that God's love for the

other person may flow through us to the other in the way that God wants that to happen. Loving another as we love ourselves is opening the door to allow us to love the other person as God loves them.

When a person is suffering from mental illness, they are often robbed of their ability to love themselves. At times we all find it difficult to see beyond our own faults. When we do feel like this, then maybe we could ask for the grace to see ourselves more and more as Jesus sees us. We could ask for the grace to imagine ourselves as the person that Jesus loves. Time and time again in the gospels we see how Jesus never dwells upon the faults of those he meets but sees what those people can be as loved by him. He imagines their potential, what they can become. Think of Matthew. Did Jesus see him as an unjust tax collector or a disciple and the author of the first gospel? Did Jesus see Mary Magdalene as a prostitute or the one who would stand by him at the cross and be the first witness to the Resurrection? Did Jesus see Peter as the one who denied him or as the one sent to feed his sheep? Jesus sees us in the same way. And it is when we see ourselves as loved by Jesus that we can begin to understand how lovable we are.

Loving God and loving our neighbour are so intertwined because they are part of the same mystery. It is because we are loved by God that we can love God in return. It is

because we are loved by God that we can love another person.

One thing we learn through life is that we need others to help us to be the people that God calls us to be. Young people need people who model for them what it means to love and to be loved. As we grow older, we need people to walk with us and support us as we try to make sense of our lives and discover how we can love God and love our neighbour in the best possible way. We are fortunate when some of those who walk with us are people of faith who can listen with us to the Word of love that God whispers in our ear. When we hear that word we know that we are loved and have found the source and fountain of the love that we need for others.