

## Love each other as fellow Christians

Our Second Reading from today comes from the Book of Hebrews, and forms part of the writer's concluding remarks. Earlier, he had spoken about Christ and covenant, faith and fear, but now follows a concluding section full of practical applications about faith in action and love at work. "*Keep on loving each other as fellow-Christians!*" (13:1) he begins, highlighting the section. The flame of brotherly love had been showing in their midst; it was surely not to go out now. Where persecution strikes, brotherly love has a hard time staying lit as people pull back, cautious about identity and concerned about safety. So the author urged his hearers to practise the kind of love and concern you would expect toward those born from the same womb.

Much more is kindness and helpfulness to show among those born of the same Spirit. Jesus Himself said so. In John 13:34, He told His disciples on Maundy Thursday, "*I am giving you a new Commandment, that you love one another. You also love one another, as I have loved you!*" The apostles repeated it. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:9 reminds his readers, "*Moreover, concerning brotherly love you do not need anyone to write to you. For you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.*" In 1 Peter 1:22 that apostle urges, "*love one another eagerly with pure hearts!*" And that great apostle of love, who repeated it again and again, summarises in 1 John 3:11, "*For this is the message that you have been hearing from the beginning: that we should love one another.*"

Do we need the reminder? What do we see as we look around at fellow believers? What do we see when we look at ourselves and our attitudes and actions toward fellow believers? Is it love for him as a brother and desire to help him succeed or self-centred thoughts that cause heated competition with him? Is it a brotherly concern for his needs or calloused seeking of our own good? Is it an acceptance of his talents and assistance in developing them or is it a caustic criticism of what he says and does, especially complaining to people behind his back? Brotherly love such as our Lord asks of us requires constant practice and concentrated power that can come only from the cross of our Elder Brother.

Such love shows not only toward those known and near but also to strangers. The writer reminds us to "*not forget to welcome strangers!*" (13:2). In the ancient world where inns weren't that plentiful nor their reputations that pure, hospitality was a prized virtue. Christians who were forced to flee from their towns because of persecution or who went travelling on a preaching mission were particularly in need of hospitality. They would benefit greatly, as would also those extending the hospitality. Great was Abraham's benefit in Genesis 18:3 and Lot's in Genesis 19:2 when the strangers they invited into their homes turned out to be angels.

The writer goes on to mention that in welcoming strangers, "*... some have welcomed angels without knowing it*" (13:2). We shall probably never entertain angels when we help strangers. Although it is becoming increasingly difficult to help strangers, perhaps more so from a safety issue, let us not forget the value our Lord Himself places on such Christian hospitality. What a surprise it will be to hear from Him on the Last Day, "*Truly, I tell you, anything you have done for one of My brothers here, even the least important of them, you have done for Me*" (Matthew 25:40). Also, as fellow believers move and travel more, let us make sure our churches are warm with hospitality. Let us welcome strangers to our services and new members to our midst warmly instead of watching them warily from a distance. Let us do all we can to serve them.

Not only were strangers to receive brotherly love, but also sufferers. "*Remember the prisoners as if you were in prison with them! Remember those who are being mistreated, since you yourselves are in the body also!*" (13:3). The prisoner and the persecuted need more than pity; they need love that can feel with them and then act for them. First Corinthians 12:26 describes Christians as forming a body where "*If one member suffers, all the other members suffer with it.*" The Hebrew Christians had responded in just that way in earlier days of persecution, as 10:32-34 pointed out, "*Remember the earlier days, when, after you had been enlightened, you patiently endured a hard struggle with suffering!*"<sup>33</sup> *Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insults and tribulations; and at other times you became companions with those who were being treated in this way.*<sup>34</sup> *For you showed sympathy for the prisoners, and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves have a better and lasting possession.*" They were not to stop now in showing sympathy to suffering saints.

Certainly, it is easier to shut our eyes and ears to the needs of our brethren. It may even appear safer to join the priest and the Levite in the good Samaritan parable and pass by on the other side, but that's not brotherly love! Believers ridiculed in university lecture rooms, ostracised by unbelieving families, and brave enough to stand up for Christian principles on the job needs more than our silent applause. They need our strengthening love.