**1 Peter 2.11-17**

What are we to be like as Christians? We probably feel that we know pretty well how we should be because we have been brought up in a country that has laws broadly based on Christian teaching and many of us have heard countless sermons encouraging us to be good!

2000 years ago it wouldn’t have been quite so obvious. And Peter is writing to Christians who are all over the Ancient Near East. These would have been a mixture of Jew and Gentile and they are living as aliens and strangers as he puts it quite often in his letters. They were aliens and strangers not just because some were in a country foreign to their birth but also because, as followers of Jesus they had begun to recognise that they were different. Their first allegiance was to Jesus. If they were asked to worship the Emperor, they would refuse, and they would be martyred. They are aliens and strangers even in their own community.

And I suspect that, for some of us, we also feel like foreigners and strangers in our places of work or even in our families because those around us don’t understand why we follow Jesus. Being a Christian doesn’t require us to be weird and religious, but it is likely that we will seem different to those around us and, if we’re not, we should perhaps wonder why not!! Loving God and our neighbour can bring us difficulty and discomfort when dealing with those who don’t follow Jesus, if we do it properly.

So Peter gives us a really handy short statement of how we are to be in this world.

We are to battle for personal holiness. Self-control in mind and body which will be noticed by those around us. They might not like what we say and they might not really even like us, but we make sure we are consistent and give no cause for comment or criticism. Christians who are well-known for their bad temper, their drunkenness, their sarcasm, their smutty talk are causing scandal. The people with whom we live and work should recognise our integrity and decency. And, if they don’t, we may need to have a long, hard look at our lives and tackle some things.

Along with personal integrity we should also be law-abiding citizens. There may come a time when we have to break a law but, as far as possible we keep speed limits, pay our taxes, pay for the music we download and generally use the freedom we have to choose to keep the rules. And Peter sees this as a witness in the world of the work of God in our lives. If you’re the one at work who fiddles your expenses, throws a sickie just when you feel like it and constantly pinches stationery then you can be certain the others will have noticed and they won’t be impressed with this so-called Christian.

In verse 16 Peter urges us to show a proper respect to everyone. Jehovah Witnesses at the door when you’ve just put tea on the table; the unsolicited phone calls from the double glazing people; the family on the bus who can’t control their children. I presume they are also included in those for whom we should show a proper respect? We need to challenge ourselves on our attitude and manner towards those we encounter day by day.

And then this marvellous summary: Love the brotherhood, fear God, honour the King. Have a right attitude to those three. Respect God: be aware of his power and his goodness. Don’t be flippant with his ways or come to worship in a careless or disrespectful manner. Recognise he is our judge as well as our loving Father. We have spoken about being law-abiding but I think that honouring the King is about finding our right place in our community. Praying for those who serve our parish on the council, voting in our forthcoming election and not just for policies that we hope will benefit us, taking the whole process seriously; praying for schools and surgeries, the people who clean the streets and who run shops and businesses. It is also about the care we show those around us.

And finally, we love the brotherhood; we hold the church and our fellow Christians in high esteem. We don’t gossip or run each other down. We make an effort with one another. We work out what we can give to our community not just what we can get. I have been known to moan that my children treat our home like a hotel: I wonder sometimes if that’s how we treat our church life. We hope it will all be laid on just for when we want it but don’t see why we should share in any of the day to day tasks and responsibilities.

For each of us our calling is to live our lives in the world, as aliens and strangers, with love, respect, and integrity. Loving God with all our heart and being full of respect and care for our neighbours is a work of God’s mission in our world. We are not all called to have a title and a badge or hold a particular responsibility within the church. But we are all called to live as witnesses to God’s love and holiness. And if we think we can leave it to the keen ones, or the clergy or the Bishops or whoever, the Kingdom won’t grow and the church won’t be built up.

This week every single one of us will have opportunities and the responsibility to witness through our lives, actions and words to the love of God. Whether at work or school, in your families or at the shops, on the phone or by letter we have a calling to make a difference in our world, in our local community as well as in our church. We all have that calling; there are no exceptions if we claim to follow Jesus. What will we do with the opportunities God gives us in this coming week?