

You shall not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt

This month's word of life is taken from the Book of Exodus, which describes the increasingly desperate plight of the Israelites in Egypt. They are oppressed and enslaved and cry out to heaven for help. This cry reaches the heart of God, who decides to intervene and chooses Moses as his messenger. After their liberation, a ceremony takes place to seal the covenant between God and Israel. The document reflecting this relationship is the so-called 'Code of the Covenant',¹ and is accepted by the entire people of Israel.² The passage outlining the Ten Commandments is the best-known part of this document but, in addition, it contains other prescriptions and laws of various kinds that are all linked to this extraordinary event of liberation. This month's phrase comes from this body of rules governing life and behaviour.

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The stranger or foreigner is favoured and protected by God because, like the poor, the orphaned and the widowed, they are among the most vulnerable in society. The rationale behind this law appeals, first and foremost, to the memory of what was experienced during slavery in Egypt. In the Old Testament, there are constant references to God's mighty intervention during the Exodus. It is an event that the people must always keep in mind as something that continues to recur, in different ways, in every generation. Origen's remark, in his commentary on the Book of Exodus, is significant: 'Whoever oppresses the stranger shows that they have not yet left Egypt'.³

This commandment calls for empathy. Putting ourselves in another person's shoes helps us to understand them and to grasp what they need. Those who have lived through difficult experiences may find it easier to empathise with the suffering of others but in the Old Testament, this is not merely a human experience. The first to set an example of what it means to put oneself in another's shoes is God himself.

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How can we put this word of life into practice? It might be helpful to ask ourselves a few questions. Have I ever experienced what it is like to be a stranger? Have I ever felt unaccepted, unwelcome, misunderstood or out of place? What have I learnt from these experiences? Who is a stranger to me? Who is a stranger to God? How can I welcome them unreservedly, just as the Lord does with us? What practical steps can I take?

Chiara Lubich writes: *With a God who does not distinguish between people, how can we not take universal brotherhood to heart? As children of the same Father, we can discover that we are brothers and sisters to every man and woman we encounter. If, therefore, we are all brothers and sisters, we must love everyone, starting with those closest to us but never stopping there. Our love will then not be a platonic, abstract love, but a concrete one, made up of service. It will be a love capable of reaching out to others, of initiating dialogue, of empathising with their experiences of hardship and of taking on their burdens and concerns, to the point where the other person feels understood and accepted in their diversity and free to express all the richness they carry within themselves.*⁴

This is Maryam's experience; she is a young Pakistani woman: *In a café, I saw the owner refuse to serve a cup of tea to an elderly lady. I only had a few rupees in my pocket, but I felt I had to help her, so I approached the owner and offered to pay for her. At first, he looked at me hesitantly. Then, after a pause, he smiled and said: 'No, that's not right. If you, a customer, are willing to use what little you have to look after her, how much more generous should I, the owner, be? It's easier for me to give her a cup of tea for free than to charge you.' It was a powerful experience. By trying to love the lady first and then the owner, I saw how a simple gesture of kindness can open up another person's heart.*

*Edited by Augusto Parody Reyes
and the Word of Life Team*

¹ Ex. 20-23.

² Cf. Ex. 24.

³ Origen, *Homiliae in Exodum* V,5.

⁴ C. Lubich, *Word of Life*, May 2006.