

Refugee Sunday, 25t June 23, 9.30am Eucharist
Jeremiah 20:7-13, Romans6:1-11 and Matthew 10:24-39
Mother Alice

The word Refugee is one which holds with it an enormous amount of emotion, of imagery, of stories; of anger, of pain, of suffering – and of welcome, of hope, of friendship. A refugee is one who has, by definition ‘been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, [persecution](#), or natural disaster’. Someone who has experienced such suffering as to acknowledge that their lives are at risk and to leave everything behind in order to save their lives. But how horrific it is that too many refugees in our time find that they are less safe once they have left everything behind, that they are extremely vulnerable as they travel, that they are not assured welcome and hospitality and dignity and care. I find it devastating that it is now seen as the norm to hear, especially through the summer months, of daily deaths of people seeking refuge and sanctuary. It is not ok that we have come to be numb to this, to accept it as a reality, to feel like it is inevitable. I can’t pretend to have the answer to the challenge posed by huge human migration, but I do believe in a God, who in Jesus Christ made himself vulnerable as a refugee child fleeing persecution and certain death, and so I know that God stands especially close to those in need, those with no home, those who travel, those who fear, and those who hope.

We often think of the suffering of Christ on the cross, but forget the suffering of his formative years as a baby and young child. What must it have been like for Mary and Joseph to leave everything behind, fleeing suddenly after the angel’s warning. To travel to a land where they did not know the language, where they did not know if they would be welcomed, where they did not know how long they would be staying? And so I wonder how we as followers of Jesus, the refugee, can work to make the love of God known to refugees in our own time?

Well my story is that I think I have been blessed far more by refugees in our community than they have been blessed by me. During my time here I have got to know people from Iran and Ukraine in particular. And their generosity to me, their kindness, their hospitality, their courage in sharing their stories and being people of hope – well that has been truly inspiring, and deeply humbling. I remember shortly after 2 Ukrainian children arrived in my son’s class, I hosted a coffee morning in my home to say welcome. And one of the new mums brought such an array of food from her country it was honestly embarrassing: and as she told me of her life and of her desire to study for a masters in international law so that she could one day bring the perpetrators of warcrimes to justice, I was so moved by her strength and beauty and overflowing sense of hope, which if I’m honest I couldn’t imagine having had if I were in her situation. We realised that as sisters in Christ we had so much to share with one another, but it was completely different to how I thought the dynamic would have been. I was the one with resource to host, and yet it was her faith and her generosity out of a situation of deep trauma and disconnection, that offered to me the greater blessing.

Our gospel reading today is not easy. But it makes sense when we remember that to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be someone on the move. Someone literally following Jesus wherever he takes us, someone who responds to the great commission to ‘go...and make disciples of all nations’. We do not see in the pages of Scripture much stability – there is so much movement, disconnection, and reconnection. There is political unrest and division. Jesus names this reality. It’s such a challenging verse when Jesus says he’s not come to bring peace but to bring a sword – this Jesus who is also the Prince of Peace. But his words are deeply prophetic. Yes he is the Prince of Peace, and Lord of Lords

over the Kingdom of justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit - but the impact of the incarnation is to bring division before unity isn't it? To follow Christ means to be transformed and renewed by the power of God's grace – that word repentance means in Greek to literally change direction in our lives. Those who have left their lives behind to follow Christ know the pain of disconnection with those who haven't had the ears to hear the gospel and who haven't responded in their hearts. History shows us that Jesus has divided, that wars have been fought in his name and still are to this day. And although we pray as Jesus did 'that we might be one', we are not there yet. And so His words are preparing his disciples for the difficulties they will encounter – but also the blessings too. We are reminded that even the tiniest of sparrows are precious to God – and if so then our lives even more so. God knows, God cares, God loves each and every one of us. He doesn't shy away from this preparation – they need to have the confidence and the tools to navigate life on the road of discipleship, the road of mission. He tells us not to fear – which sounds impossible doesn't it? How can we not fear? But he opens the span of history from the earthly present to the heavenly eternity, where the big picture of our identity and reality as people rooted in Christ makes sense. He lifts our eyes once again, and I do that that brings great comfort.

And actually what I think Jesus is saying is that spiritually as well as geographically ALL of us who say 'Yes' to following Jesus are all refugees, because that is what the gospel commands us to be. To be a disciple is to be a missionary – someone who leaves things behind to go and make disciples. And Matthew names this reality as true. Our human desire is to be rooted in place, in community, to experience comfort and certainty and control. But this is not what God invites us to. The road of discipleship makes space for God to lay the foundations of our lives, foundations not of bricks and mortar, but of faith, of love, of community for the journey wherever it takes us.

And we have got it utterly wrong if we believe in some social status structure where refugees are at the bottom, as helpless, and vulnerable. These people may have material needs which we can be abundantly generous in offering to meet, but what matters more is the love that we can receive as well as give, the faith that can blow our minds and lift us to a place of rejoicing in this gift of life and the shared humanity that we live out together. When we welcome the stranger we welcome Christ himself, and I know I have seen the face of Christ in the refugees I have had the honour of sharing something of my life here in Kensington with.

So in humility can we thank Jesus for those refugees in our community, can we pray that their material needs be met, can we be challenged to open ourselves and our homes and our resources to bless them - but can we pray that also their stories, their gifts, their faith and their hope may be given space to be that blessing to us, that encouragement to seek the greater gifts, to be bold in stepping out in faith, knowing that wherever we go, out of choice or out of need, God is with us, God is the God of those on the move.

Amen