

## **Refugee Sunday 2020**

Today is Refugee Sunday. Around the world, 79.5 million people have been forcibly displaced. That's the most since World War II, according to the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Most people remain displaced within their home country, however about 26 million people worldwide have fled to other countries as refugees. Another 4.2 million people have applied for refugee status, but not received it yet. More than half of refugees are children.

The Covid pandemic has taken it off our screens, but the crisis does not go away. It has got a lot worse.

Thousands of desperate families pay racketeers for space in overcrowded and unseaworthy little boats to flee the chaos in Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Somalia. With receiving countries in Europe running for cover, the casualty rate keeps rising. Closer to home is the same desperate refugee flow from persecution and poverty across South East Asia, notably in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka.

Safe havens are just as scarce in our part of the world as they are in the north. Indonesia and its neighbours offer no welcome, Australia neatly deflects the survivors of ocean ordeals to Nauru, willing to pay that island's government for keeping them away from the Lucky Country.

What we once saw as a humanitarian crisis is now portrayed as a security threat. Caring for refugees used to be a noble enterprise. New Zealand wore the refugees it received from Europe after 1945 as a badge of honour and welcomed later migrants as much needed labour. But immigration has become a toxic issue, politically divisive in Western Europe and America, and the flow on effect is felt here, exacerbated by Covid

Unlike the old slogan for American Express credit cards, "Don't leave home without it", refugees carry no security when they leave. They begin a journey knowing it may never end, but such is the measure of their despair, they are willing to risk drowning with their children rather go on enduring the conditions at home.

Their only security is people like us. The ones who watch their plight on television news each night and wonder what we can do to help. There is no legal requirement to host refugees. But there is a powerful moral imperative, rooted in the Gospel tradition of justice and mercy and a God whose hospitality is unconditional and generous beyond imagining, who calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Translating that imperative into government action is a challenge that overshadows most others right now, as new millions join the exodus from poverty, persecution and war.

Welcoming the stranger has never been more urgent. For the sake of their humanity and for our own. And so I turn to the readings for today.

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’

Come to me, take my yoke, learn from me; I am gentle, humble in heart; you will find rest for your souls.

Hearing these readings on Refugee Sunday challenges us to question where our loyalties lie, but more importantly, we are challenged to understand that sin sometimes comes from inaction as surely as it comes from action. On this day we might even say that we are being challenged to free ourselves from the sinfulness of the world and to declare our lives in dependence to our God.

How often have we felt like Paul did in his letter to the Romans? No matter how hard we try to live according to the great commandments, to love God and love our neighbour, it doesn't always turn out that way. It is so easy and understandable to cross over on to the other side

This is not because we are horrid, wretched creatures, but because there is sin in the world. And sin is powerful. It is so powerful that sometimes we just withdraw from action and words, and we allow whatever is happening to happen. Our inaction becomes the sin, especially when we know that an injustice is causing suffering and causing separation between people and God.

Paul sounds like he is exhausted and in his desperation is unable to do any more to free himself from sin. His words suggest that maybe sin is lurking like a monster under the bed, just waiting to take us over.

Even in the gospel reading, Jesus reminds the crowd that some thought John was possessed with a demon, yet he lived a life of denial and simplicity. Jesus lived overturning injustices and unveiling the many ways that society's attitudes and laws actually reflected sinfulness rather than loving God and loving neighbours. He pointed out that sin could come from twisting the law to cause loss of humanity and life.

Jesus does not tell us that it is an easy task to be free of sin and follow him. In fact, there is a cost. The cost is when we recognise how complicit the structures and prejudices which shape our lives, which we take for granted or have never really analysed, are sinful. That is they miss the mark [that's what sin means – missing the target]. And that target is to live our lives and shape our response to everything through love of God and love of neighbour, made known to us in Jesus. Because we are so shaped by the social norms, it is so hard to understand what sin is, and often just as hard to know what love is as well.

So, even when our motives are on target, sin seems strong enough to destroy. And yet, sin cannot exist when we abide in Christ and Christ in us. When we transfer our loyalty from the material powers of the world to the infinite love of God we find ourselves experiencing the passionate expressions of love that we read about in today's Old Testament reading and psalm. We are filled with a sense of blessing and abundance.

Paul's cry of desperation is quickly calmed with his acknowledgement that sin is defeated by God through our life in and with Jesus as our companion.

These readings both challenge and assure us. They hint at the profound simplicity of a life in Christ, and they serve as a mirror for us to examine our understanding of who we are along with how we are living. Our desire is to love God and to love our neighbour. When we do not love God and our neighbour, we are in sin. When our community, our society, our nation, our world does not love God and neighbour, we are in held in the grasp of sin.

When I consider the plight of the millions who are suffering through the gross inhumanity, cruelty and greed of human beings. When I consider the plight of millions of refugees I feel the burden of my responsibility to do something. I feel helpless. I feel like Paul.

Jesus gave us these most reassuring words: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in

heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Bishop Peter offered these words from the **Eugene Peterson**'s vibrant translation ***The Message***:

'Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest.

Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.'

And then you and I through grace may well have the will not to cross over the the other side when we're faced by the sin which denies human dignity and rights, but rather do what we can, do something out of love...

As we come to receive this sacrament today, let us come to God through Jesus. Let us take on the yoke of discipleship. Let us learn from Jesus. Be gentle, with love in your heart for all creatures, and a graceful passion for justice and dignity for all.