

Pentecost 12. 27 August 2017. Refugees

When I first met him I was coming out of a church service. It was a warm evening in Khartoum, Sudan, and I had just been at a delightful Sunday evening service sharing in worship with several hundred people. He was a young man, in his early 20s, brown skin and Arabic appearance, and we got chatting. As we chatted I noticed that his arms were marked with a lot of cuts, some healed and scarred and some very fresh. I asked what had happened. He told me that he had been raised in a Muslim family but had become a Christian. Every time he came to church his father cut him as punishment. He told me that he believed that some day his father would kill him because he had become a Christian, but even that threat would not prevent him from believing in Jesus Christ and coming to worship.

That was ten years ago. I don't know where he is now. I don't know if he is still alive. I hope he did manage to become a refugee from his home and find a place of welcome and safety somewhere.

I don't know how old you were when you left home, or the circumstances. I didn't leave home, my parents did, but that is another story. Several friends of mine in their 30s were very young boys when they left home. They have a common story. Their mothers or fathers or other friends told them to run, to get away as far as possible. They were not even able to go home to say goodbye or get any food or clothes or anything. They were told to run, and they did. They joined groups of other young boys and walked for several weeks. Some heard the sound of machine gun fire behind them, saw the smoke from burning buildings, saw helicopter gunships 'raining fire from the sky'. Some simply knew those things were happening and they believed and they ran. Some of the other boys dropped dead as they walked, from exhaustion or lack of food. Some were taken by lions. Some drowned when they crossed rivers. But tens of thousands survived, moving from place to place in refugee camps and eventually many were welcomed as refugees into Australia and other countries. These boys are known as the lost boys of Sudan.

In 2009 I was there in Juba, Southern Sudan, when a close friend of mine, who is now a priest in Adelaide, met his mother again for the first time in 20 years. He had last seen her when he was 9 years old.

Another young man and his wife fled their country under gunfire. They were poor and had never been in a boat before. It was 1977. Their choice was to face the dangers at sea or to risk being killed. So, along with a group of others they fled. They were pushed away from several countries and nearly died on the journey. Eventually, to avoid their boat being just pushed out to sea again, they abandoned the boat and swam ashore, despite the guns pointed at them. Stuck in an overcrowded refugee camp they decided not to wait and to be ignored and to waste their lives. They set out again by boat and after a journey of over a month arrived in Darwin in November 1977. That Vietnamese man worked, studied and threw himself into the life of the local community.

I heard some of that man's story a few years ago at a lunch where he was being honoured. Hieu Van Le, a committed Christian, that man, has been Governor of South Australia since 2014.

Overcrowded boats filled with frightened people crossed the Mediterranean Sea. They were trying to find a place of safety fleeing a terrible war. In recent years that has happened from south and east to north. Syrians and north Africans have been crossing, looking for refuge in Europe. In 1939 and the early 1940s people from Europe were going in the opposite direction, trying to find refuge away from the conflicts engulfing their countries.

In the late 1930s many Jewish people from Poland and Germany could see what was coming. They appealed to many countries for the opportunity to flee, to find a home away from persecution. According to the records on display in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, some countries did say yes. Australia said no.

What makes people into refugees? People like you and me. What makes them have to leave homes, jobs, extended family, everything that is familiar? Things like the horrors woven into those stories make them flee. Persecution. Threat of death. Extreme circumstances.

In our first reading the people of God in Egypt were being subjected to those pressures (Exodus 1:8-2:10). They were called out by God, but what was happening to them was what has been happening since and is happening still. Genocide. Infanticide. Persecution. Intolerable situations.

I shared some of the stories behind the refugees who look to us and others for welcome. I could continue with stories from Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and many other places. Estimates of the number of refugees in the world today varies, depending on how they are counted. The LOW estimates are about 27 million people. More than the total population of Australia. The HIGH estimates are more than double that figure.

How do we as a nation respond? There have been times when we have been moderately welcoming and compassionate. There have been times when we have been generous and open hearted. Sadly, at the moment, we are as a nation cruel and heartless in the face of most of the sea of need around us. Our national response has been very poor and compromised by prejudice.

I wonder why we fear difference, why we fear those who are different from ourselves? What is it that brings us to know the needs and recognise the call to compassion with part of ourselves and yet then to side with those who would close down our borders and shut out people in desperate need? Is it a battle between our hearts and heads? Is it a struggle between our compassion and faith on one side and political pressures on another? Is it fear? It is a mystery.

One of the first things I noticed the first time I walked into St Luke's was the sign on the notice board at the side door. It says 'Let's fully welcome refugees'. Amen! Do we mean that?

Welcoming is an act of the heart and it does not mean 'come here and be like us'. It is an embrace into the family. Welcoming people who are different from ourselves will change us. Welcoming people who have different perspectives on life and culture will alter who we are as community, in Australian society and in the church. Within the church community it will be our shared relationship and shared openness to the love and forgiveness and embrace and graciousness of God which we will hold in common, and which will hold us together. Forms and patterns and words and languages for worship will differ. Thank God. It is an opportunity to learn.

Are we open to fully welcome refugees? Do we take the compassion of God and the modern echoes of that Exodus reading to heart? If we do, what do we do? We have, and have had, families who have come to Australia seeking refuge who we have welcomed into this congregation, into this church community. Take time to get to know them and their story and listen with ears and minds and hearts. In the community around us there are many more people, people who may or may not come to join us here, but deep listening, engaged presence, will open the compassion in our hearts and build bridges which will reflect God's love.

Are we prepared to speak out against the cruelty and lack of compassion into which we have sunk as a nation? Caring about the journey of refugees, really caring, means caring what is happening at both ends of the journey, which is why I have been involved in education and health care in South Sudan. If we want people to be able to live lives which are rich and fulfilling and to be blessed as God blesses us then we will care about helping to stabilise the places from which people come. Yet slashing foreign aid is another cruel act of our politicians, supported from both sides of the political fence, and that decrease in aid increases the likelihood of suffering and the circumstances which make more refugees.

On this day we pray for refugees. Let us all let the prayer soak into our hearts and change how we respond, here, around us, and as far as we can influence, in our community and in our nation.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell