

Sermon Notes

**St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville**

**Pentecost 14
2 September 2007**

**Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector**

Readings: Jeremiah 2:4-13; Ps 81; Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Refugees – Welcoming Strangers

Last Sunday was Refugee and Migrant Sunday

We live in a world of Uprooted People

The following statistics are from the National Council of Churches:

- *Uprooted Refugees and Asylum Seekers 11.5 Million*
- *Internally Displaced Persons 25 Million*
- *Refugees “Warehoused” for 10 years or more 7 Million*

Fr Andy Hamilton SJ says:

“The Scriptures begin with the story of creation. And by the end of that story, all that needs to be said about refugees has been said. We learn these things: the world is God’s gift, given to us all; God loves each human being who is ever to come into the world; therefore all human beings matter. And so refugees matter. We are all made in God’s image. So, when another human being is exiled or abused, God’s image is not treated with due respect.” Fr Andy continues ...

“Because God loves each of us personally, what we share as human beings is much more important than our differences. The communities to which we belong - our families, towns, states and nations - help shape who we are. But we also have responsibility to strangers who do not belong to those communities. When someone who is starving or at risk of their life knocks on the door of our family house or of our nation, we may not simply ignore their plight. They may not belong to our family or our nation, but they are our fellow human beings also loved by God.”¹

So our second reading contains the instruction to welcome strangers an instruction which is enshrined in the laws given to the people of Israel. For as both the OT reading and Psalm remind us God had been with and rescued the Hebrew people when they had been strangers in Egypt. Because God had chosen them as friends, they were to befriend other strangers who were also God’s friends. How far we as a Nation have come from the principal enshrined in the Law of Moses. In recent years Govt policy has been to dehumanise Asylum seekers, the strangers in our midst, categorising them as “illegals” and “queue jumpers” and instead of treating them as citizens (as International Conventions say we should) we have locked them away behind barbed wire – even unaccompanied children.

In his teaching, Jesus also insisted on hospitality to strangers. He shocked the Pharisees by welcoming people whom they excluded from their meals: Romans, tax collectors and prostitutes. One wonders what they made of that enigmatic Lucan passage we have just heard? Jesus having a go at them about their concern for status and being afforded their correct place. Don’t think for a moment that Jesus is seriously suggesting that we start using our approach to the marginalized as a way of getting heavenly brownie points. Such thinking is dangerous. Another subtle way in which the needy are used and abused. It is spiritual capitalism at its worst.

Rather, as the West Australian UCA theologian Bill Loader suggests Jesus’ words would have been heard as totally absurd and are meant to be heard that way. It was a crazy idea, designed to subvert the games being played. Try losing and see how much you win! If we hear these words like this and not as a

serious strategy, which would reduce them to just a more creative way of exploiting others for your own good, then Jesus is subverting the whole enterprise which was driving his culture and its values. Our focus like his needs not to be “what’s in it for me but rather constantly seeking to relate to others with openness and compassion and inclusion.

Jesus saw the heart of Israel to lie in the great exhortation to love God with our whole heart, whole mind and whole soul, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. But when Jesus was asked who is our neighbour, he told a story about a Samaritan, a member of a despised group.

At the heart of the Christian story is the crucifixion, which reminds us that Jesus died as a stranger to reconcile strangers. He was taken outside the city to be killed, and his brutal killing was designed to strip him of his humanity. His death shows what sin is like. In it we take our eyes off God and our common humanity, and concentrate on our own interests and those of our group. As Caiphas said of Jesus, it was convenient to kill one man for the sake of the nation. This self-centredness is the attitude that makes refugees and pushes them away from our homes and nation. Our Government says it is convenient to make examples of one or a few for the sake of the nation and “border protection” or “National Security”. No matter that many of the few are found to be bona fide refugees who therefore by definition have already suffered much. Even when we accept their claims and they are granted a residency it is done begrudgingly, with only a temporary visa and without recourse to family reunion and other supports once provided to those accepted as Refugees so condemning them to a kind of suspended animation – living in limbo with no certainty about the future once the visa expires. Torture has many forms.

When he rose from the dead, Jesus proved that God’s love is stronger than our self-centredness. He also gave us hope that our world could be different. Instead of pushing away and punishing the stranger, we can imagine a world in which the differences between people are a source of life and where we share our resources with those most in need. This is a world in which refugees are not made, and when they come they are made welcome. The church, where Paul says there is to be no difference made between Jew and Greek, between men and women where dividing walls are to be broken down not put up, is called to be the kind of community we would like to find made between nations. It is one where asylum seekers and refugees find a welcome.

Refugees and asylum seekers are important because in them we welcome Christ who comes to us in the stranger. We live out our faith in our welcome of those who come to us as strangers seeking refuge and welcome. We also live out our faith in making some of the energy and resources of our church communities available to refugees and asylum seekers. Such as happens at Villawood through the House of welcome a project of the NSW Ecumenical Council. The Director of The House of Welcome Fr Jim Carty is speaking at the local SIP at the Kings Head Tavern on 26 Sept. It would be good if you could come and here him and Catherine Loy speak about refugees.

We also live out our faith by working with others to make our nation more hospitable. In forming a refugee policy, government leaders have to take into account the needs of asylum seekers and the capacity of the nation to accept new arrivals. But it is the responsibility of citizens to see that our government policies are not brutally excluding. In times of insecurity and fear, it is too easy for refugees to act as scapegoats. It is our responsibility to press for a better and more welcoming policy to tell our politicians that the way we treat the stranger and the oppressed is a mark of a truly civilised society. During the forthcoming election campaign take a moment to write to your local/daily/community/national paper, and local candidates to urge a return to a compassionate, welcoming approach to Asylum seekers. Immigration detention centres are no place for children, families or any bona-fide, traumatised, asylum seekers. May we find ways to “do good and share what we have individually and collectively as a Nation, not least because such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

¹ *Theological Reflection on Refugees* by Fr Andrew Hamilton SJ. for the observance of Refugee and Migrant Sunday.