

Day of prayer for refugees

26 August 2018

What a week it's been, with turmoil in the parliament, and many many facing drought, and fire. Some even having to leave the land they love, homeless, seeking refuge and sanctuary.

I am currently reading a novel, 'Sanctuary' by Judy Nunn. In the book, 9 asylum seekers are washed up on an island off the coast of Western Australia. I am learning their stories, and the responses of Australian citizens to these asylum seekers. I am being drawn into the story. At this time of turmoil in Federal politics, these fictional lives seem more real than those which have been the focus of the media this week.

The General synod has set aside this Sunday to remember and pray for refugees.

Imagine that Australia has been taken over. And that we are in danger and fear for their lives. How will we find a place of safety? Where will we go? How will we get away? Who will take us? Imagine the sheer terror and fear that many many millions of people, experience in our world today.. It's hard to imagine, as we live our safe lives in this untouched part of our nation.

One in every 113 people on the planet is now a refugee. Around the world, someone is displaced every three seconds, forced from their homes by violence, war and persecution, according to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR.¹

An unprecedented 68.5 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 25.4 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18.

There are also an estimated 10 million stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement.²
Unbelievable!

¹<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/06/there-are-now-more-refugees-than-the-entire-population-of-the-uk/>

² <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance.html>

I hear the language of 'illegals' to denote those who come to this country seeking asylum. It is not illegal to come to this country seeking asylum. By boat or any other means. It is not illegal to ask for help. Where would we go?

Article 31 of the Refugee Convention, signed by Australia, clearly states that refugees should not be penalised for arriving without valid travel documents. What may be considered an illegal action under normal circumstances (e.g. entering a country without a visa) should not, according to the Convention, be considered illegal if a person is seeking asylum.

Who are asylum seekers?

Asylum seekers are people who are seeking international protection. An asylum-seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided by UNHCR or authorities of the country in which he or she has requested refugee status. Not every asylum-seeker will ultimately be recognised as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum-seeker. In Australia, in fact, 90% of those seeking asylum are granted refugee status.

Who is a refugee?

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.

A relatively small number of Asylum seekers are drawn to Australia because it has been seen as one of the few countries in the region which respects international law and human rights, treats people humanely and protects refugees and asylum seekers from being returned to situations of danger or persecution. These are not “soft” policies but responses built on basic standards of human decency. We should be proud that Australia has enjoyed an international reputation for respecting human rights. That is being questioned internationally recently.

Do we welcome? Do we receive? Do we know the facts? Some years ago I understand that this cathedral welcomed refugees here, and supported them, and some still visit.

In the 1980s I sponsored a number of Polish refugee families to Australia. I also sponsored some Vietnamese fishing families. I remember driving some Vietnamese and Polish people to Canberra for a weekend away and running out of petrol just before I arrived. I remember the Vietnamese grandmother couldn't speak English placing her hand on her own breast and on my mother's breast, showing clearly we are the same we are connected. I helped these families settle. I took them to appointments at Centrelink, the dental hospital, Social Security. I visited and helped with basic furniture to furnish a flat.

When I lived in Adelaide in the 1990s I sponsored an Ethiopian woman, Zeinab Ibrahim. She was a beautiful person. I remember her cooking food for for me and my mother and father during Ramadan. She hadn't eaten all day and yet she cooked for us and served us before she ate a sceric herself. She roasted coffee on a charoal burner, then placed incense on the coals.

All these people have horrific stories to tell.

I am convicted that we at St Paul's, and especially me, need to do something more to welcome and to receive refugees in Victoria. I'm not sure exactly how. Perhaps some of you are already involved. I value your ideas and suggestions.

My beloved Nikolai Blaskow, came to Australia as a displaced person, and has a displaced person's number.

By definition, refugees are survivors. They have survived because of their courage, ingenuity and creativity. These are qualities which we value in Australia. If we assist newly arrived refugees to recover from the experiences of their past and rebuild their lives in Australia, we will reap the benefits of the qualities and experiences they bring to our society.

Australia offers protection or resettlement to less than one per cent of the refugees protected or resettled in the world.

Australia does, however, make an essential contribution to addressing the global refugee situation. Due to the fact that Australia receives relatively few onshore asylum claims, Australia has been able to establish the third-largest resettlement program in the world behind the USA and Canada, and the most generous per capita. In 2015-2016, Australia accepted 6,730 refugees.³

In Matthew 25, the Son of Man says to the righteous, "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink" (25:35), and "truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (25:40). The ones who attend to the needs of the "littlest ones" are told: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (25:34).⁴

An inheritance is pure gift. Those who welcome and care for the needs of "little ones" welcome and care for Jesus himself. To receive Jesus is to receive the one who sent him, and to become heirs to all that the Father has to give.⁵

Your caring for people in need and not only those in the church community stands on the same level as your response to Christ.⁶

Being a cathedral is to be a sanctuary, a place of prayer, and safety, to hold out God's hands to those in need.

I heard a Senator once say something like: People say you are acting from your heart, you need to act from your head. I would rather act from my heart. People see those with compassion as weak, but I would rather be one who offers a glass of water, who cares for refugees and asylum seekers, than turn my back.⁷

³ <https://www.ssi.org.au/faqs/refugee-faqs/141-how-many-refugees-does-australia-settle-each-year>

⁴ Elisabeth Johnson

⁵ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=969

⁶ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtPentecost3.html>

⁷ Read Refugee Council of Australia on Myths about refugees:
<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/f/myth-short.php>

In today's gospel, many left Jesus because of what he said. It was so counter to what they believed. In Australia we can't countenance the enormity of the problem. The assumptions we make about our quality of life, our entitlement is similar..it's tough but we have always responded as a nation, as a people..and Jesus encourages that response.

Psalm 84 captures beautifully the human desire for peace and sanctuary, and the offering we at the cathedral might make, and what a cathedral is;

How lovely is your dwelling-place:
O Lord God of hosts!
My soul has a desire and longing
to enter the courts of the Lord:
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.
The sparrow has found her a home,
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young:
even your altar, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.
Blessed are those who dwell in your house:
.... For the Lord God is a light and a shield,
the Lord gives favour and honour:
and no good thing will he withhold
from those who walk in innocence.
O Lord God of hosts:
blessed are those who put their trust in you.

Loving God, we know that Jesus welcomed all into fellowship, he received them into community. We would do the same, but it often seems so difficult today. Open our hearts and minds to new possibilities for being welcoming communities. Amen.

Susanna Pain