

29 June 2014  
Matthew 10:40-42

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.

I think I have told you about her before, a number of years ago, I went to a convent in Lyneham for a quiet day of discernment. When I arrived, I spent time with my then Spiritual Director, Kath O' Shea. As sometimes happens with me, I was exhausted. She picked that up, and invited me to rest. She took me to a room on the first floor and invited me to lie down on the bed. She asked if I would like a glass of water, then she went away and came back with a glass of cool water for me to drink. A place to rest and a glass of cool water, were lifesavers for me at that time! I will never forget her simple kindness.

I remember when I was working as a social worker at the Department of Immigration in Sydney the 1980s. I was invited to preach at a service at Abbotsleigh my former school. I spoke about refugees and invited the congregation to imagine that Australia had been taken over. And that they were in danger and feared for their lives. How would they find a place of safety? Where would they go? How would they get away? Who would take them? I invoked the sheer terror and fear that many many millions of people, over 50 million, in fact, experience in our world today. When I read today's gospel and alongside it Jesus parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:35-46, I thought of the refugees and asylum seekers of our world.

We read: Matthew 10:40ff "Anyone who receives or welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who receives/welcomes me receives/welcomes the one who sent me... And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

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.

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.

The number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people worldwide has exceeded 50 million for the first time since World War II, according to a recent United Nations report.

Worsening conflicts in Syria, the Central African Republic and South Sudan caused major new numbers of refugees.

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? Many years ago Holy Covenant sponsored some refugees from Sierra Leone, the Mansarrays. Marg Christensen has been asking us recently if we can help with items for babies for them.

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 near Dickson. I remember the Vietnamese grandmother couldn't speak English. She placed 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 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 charcoal burner, then placed incense on the coals.

All these people have horrific stories to tell.

I am convicted that we at Holy Covenant, and especially me, need to do something to welcome, to receive, refugees in Canberra, and we need to act now. Whether it is being involved with Companion House here in Cook, or the Migrant Resource Centre, or the Refugee Action Group I am not sure yet. Perhaps some of you are already involved. I value your ideas and suggestions. I would like to form a small committee to explore the possibilities.

(Research has shown that refugees, once they have the opportunity to establish themselves, make important economic, civil and social contributions to Australian society. Former refugees are very entrepreneurial, being more likely to set up their own businesses than other migrant groups. They play an important role in facilitating the development of trade and other links with their countries of origin. Former refugees value the education of their children very highly, with the proportion of young refugees attending an educational institution being higher than other migrants and even higher than people born in Australia.

They make substantial social contributions to Australia through volunteering, promoting community development and engaging in neighbourhood activities and events.)

(Just some of the many Australian high achievers who once were refugees include scientists Sir Gustav Nossal and Dr Karl Kruszelnicki, 2009 Victorian

of the Year Dr Berhan Ahmed, painter Judy Cassab, comedian Anh Do, filmmaker Khoa Do, author Nam Le, academic Associate Professor My-Van Tran, Dr Anita Donaldson, poet Juan Garrido-Salgado, painter and restaurateur Mirka Mora, actor Henri Szeps, broadcasters Les Murray and Caroline Tran, Australian Rules footballer Alex Jesaulenko, footballer Atti Abonyi, swimmers John and Ilsa Konrads, newspaper editor Michael Gawenda, architect Harry Seidler, business people Sir Peter Abeles, Larry Adler, Ouma Sananikone and Judit Korner, public servant Tuong Quang Luu and politicians Jennie George and Nick Greiner.

Our own 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.

The overwhelming majority of the world's refugees are residing in the developing world in countries neighbouring their own. At the end of 2012, over 80 per cent of the refugees under the mandate of UNHCR were hosted by developing countries.

In 2012, Australia offered protection or resettlement to less than one per cent of the refugees protected or resettled in that year .

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 2012, only 5,937 refugees and humanitarian entrants were resettled to Australia.

So, back to our gospel.

Our Gospel is a very short gospel passage but plays a key role in relation to the chapter. In fact 10:40 is a major theological statement. 'The person receiving (or welcoming) you receives me and the person receiving me receives the one who sent me.' It recalls the instructions at the beginning of the chapter which sent the disciples out. 'Sent ones', envoys: 'apostles' (which means: 'sent ones') were of enormous importance in the ancient world in all cultures..

Jesus speaks of himself and his followers as envoys of God's wisdom (sophia) (Luke 11:49; Matt 11:16-19, as we shall see next week). The envoy represents the sender, so that to respond to Jesus is to respond to God.

Matthew is also saying: welcoming and supporting people who are sent warrants the same reward as being the sent one.

Ordinary people get the same reward as the high flyers or the necessarily public functionaries, the envoys. Matthew wants us to believe that it is just as rewarding to be on the supporting side of these ministries as to be exercising them. We don't have to feel we have to do everything ourselves!

10:42 speaks of 'little ones'. This appears to be a term with which members of the community described themselves. Caring is ministry. This trio of verses sets side by side: welcoming Christ, supporting ministry, and caring for one another. In the final speech of Jesus' ministry in Matthew, Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats, which takes this to its widest conclusion (25:31-46). Loader

Elisabeth Johnson:

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).

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.

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=969](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=969)

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

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

God is revealed to us through everyone we meet, through every moment of insight, through every blade of grass. Nothing is without spiritual purpose in life. It is only a matter of learning to ask ourselves what it teaches us about God's desire for us.

Senator Sarah Hanson Young said 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. Where is strength? Where is cowardice?

Read Refugee Council of Australia on Myths about refugees:

<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/f/myth-short.php>

Susanna Pain  
29 June 2014