

Refugee Sunday: 'Whoever welcomes you'

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James July 2017

Bible passages: 1 Peter 4.7 – 11, Matthew 10.40 – 42

1) The history of Planet Earth is one of great changes over many years. They have been termed 'eras', as in Jurassic, that which marked the end of the dinosaurs. There's debate about what is most appropriate for the present era, one being 'Holocene', meaning 'recent.' Alternatively there's now wider acknowledgement of 'Anthropocene', of the human impact on this planet. The beginning of this era is traced back to the advent of humans engaging in agriculture and taming animals some 12 – 15, 000 years ago, when they transitioned from being a hunter-gatherer culture. Scientists in different fields are noting changes in this time of eco-systems, including the effects of erosion from farming, deforestation from intentional burning, and extinctions of animals and plants from human exploitation. More recent is the effect of the 'Industrial Revolution' with a direct outcome from the burning of fossil fuels leading to what is being recognised in climate change. All these have had a greater or lesser effect on the earth. Other effects with humans living closer together has been plague, as in the Black death and other pandemics over the centuries. Other impacts in our day have been the experience and outcomes of two world wars. All these are in the 'anthropocene', surely the impact of humanity on planet Earth.

2) There's one more I'd suggest being a real issue - the *migration or movement* of people as an outcome of human relationships or lack of relationship. This is not new, but the extent of it has led to this being a huge issue in the present time. It is estimated from 2015 figures there are 65 million refugees worldwide – that's equivalent to the total population of the United Kingdom. It is mind-boggling when one thinks of our own somewhat paltry 4.7 million. As mentioned the issue is not new, and indeed one of the most epic events of the Old Testament was of the *Hebrew* people who became refugees, it being made clear they were unwanted in Egypt, and the departure known as the Exodus. The issue became more complicated when as for many refugees today, they discovered they were not wanted either in the 'Promised Land'. Read all about that in stories of the Hebrew people as David and Goliath and the Philistines. I'm mindful also the *Holy Family* were refugees fleeing Palestine and travelling down to Egypt to get away from King Herod's vengeance.

3) This brings us to who are refugees in *today's context*. Basically we know, but let me share the current definition highlighting the breadth of those in this situation. 'A *refugee is a person* who 'owing to a fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country.'

Furthermore there's another category not included in this definition with millions more who are '*Internally Displaced persons*', fleeing from armed conflict in their country. The hundreds of thousands from Syria come to mind, not including those who want to get out but can't. A particular sadness being those in such situations are lands Jesus walked such as Jordan and Lebanon.

4) *What if any is the solution* or solutions and how might we – humanity respond to this need? There's both obvious and underlying causal issues. Millions of people, and countries have opened their hearts and homes to help but the dislocation continues. The underlying challenge is to create new global ways to build peace and bring more equality and security of dwelling so people are no longer forced to flee. This I believe is especially where prayer can help – as I consider it did with coming to an awareness of climate change and the need to care for and sustain the resources of the planet. We need to be praying for a combined divine and human initiative to change the hearts and minds of countries and governments to open their boundaries to refugees and relieve suffering.

Our country and locally, including parishioners are helping. This includes working with the likes of Red Cross, being willing to be trained, to be sensitive to the issues of people coming to live in a very different culture, where the sound of guns are no longer present. The preparation involved assembling household items in good condition to furnish a government provided home. There was the enrolling of family with medical and like facilities, sorting out benefits and bank accounts, and helping with language and culture issues we take for granted. Then there's been money needed for educational enrolments. At the conclusion of what was shared this person commented, 'We have all become very good friends'.

One can easily see where money is needed, and hence donations are so welcome. The training suggests that while there are not many numerically, some 750 (and increasing to 1000), our government is taking inculturation very seriously. And if I may suggest, seeking to avoid social problems down the track. Perhaps we could however, with Bishop Justin lobby the government to allow more to come, given the willingness to help them integrate.

5) There's a *Christian imperative* also. This morning's gospel reading 'whoever welcomes'welcomes Jesus. Our responding is action done in his name. If ever we needed inspiration to welcome refugees this is it. Generous hospitality is one of the hallmarks of the Christian faith. In St Matthew's time and our own the challenge is to reach across our fears and uncertainty to people who are unfamiliar. The TV news constantly brings to our attention the suffering in war-scarred Mosul, those affected by drought and civil strife in South Sudan, or rickety boats in the Mediterranean or South East Asia. How can we sit by and not act? We can be sure also that in every conflict zone there are people of faith who are trying hard to broker peace and understanding. Just the other day I heard of a person presently visiting Palestine shared of this coming together. It won't be public when between Jews and Palestinians but it is going on behind the scenes.

The gospel promises reward for those who show hospitality towards the very ordinary person or a prophet or a righteous person but we shouldn't really expect this. It is surely sufficient and indeed a reward to say 'We have all become very good friends.'

Summing up then, it's my belief that we are seeing a most significant movement of peoples taking place currently on our planet. And just like climate change and caring for creation, we can play our part and as the prayer to be 'filled with love so we can welcome...'

