

Day of Prayer for Refugees

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Today is the Australian Anglican Church's Day of Prayer for Refugees, a day set by a 2001 resolution of General Synod. In this sermon I want to set the scene for our prayers for these people and our Christian response. It was heart wrenching to do the back ground reading for this day and I will shortly share one of the stories I came across. I also want to point us to some Christian ways of thinking about refugees but first some statistics.

According to the UNHCR—the United Nations High Commission for Refugees—there were 43.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2009, the highest number since the mid-1990s. Of these, 15.2 million were refugees. Afghanistan has been the leading country of origin of refugees for the past three decades with up to 6.4 million of its citizens having sought international protection during peak years. The total figure of forcibly displaced persons also includes nearly 1 million asylum-seekers and 27.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

A refugee is legally defined as: Any person who owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country. An asylum seeker is someone whose refugee status has not yet been determined.

This definition comes from the 1951 Refugee Convention and is used by the Australian Government to determine whether our country has protection obligations towards an individual. If a person is found to be a refugee, Australia is obliged under international law to offer support and to ensure that the person is not sent back unwillingly to his/her country of origin.

All these statistics and labels hide the fact that refugees are people like you and I—men, women and children who are trying to live their life the best way they can. Refugees are fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers, grandparents, aunts and uncles. They are labourers, doctors, teachers, farmers, students, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, pagans and anything else you can think of and they have suffered terribly.

I went to the diocesan ordinations yesterday at the cathedral in Goulburn. As I was sitting in that safe beautiful building I wondered how I would feel if my home had been bombed and my children killed. Or how I would feel if corrupt political authorities had arrested my husband and my own life was in danger. Or how I could possibly cope if my daughter had been raped and tortured by soldiers and my son dragged away to fight in their unjust war. Or how I would manage if I could not practice my faith in safety and if my life and the life of my loved ones were in jeopardy. Or how would I feel if I was homeless and stateless for any reason beyond my control. I couldn't imagine any of it of course and I didn't really want to. Even remotely putting oneself in the shoes of refugees is horror enough. But one thing we can do today is remember those millions of people and pray for them, to stand in solidarity with them and see that except for circumstances and chance they could well be you and me.

Here is just one story of a refugee. David was born in Wau, one of the largest cities in South Sudan. He was only three years old when he and his father fled the brutal killings of the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005), leaving his pregnant mother, who could not walk with them. Having his childhood disrupted at such a young age, David has few memories of what it was like living together as a family. He remembers happily waiting for his father to

come home from work, because he always brought him lollies. He distinctly remembers the day his father returned early and his demeanor was very different. That was the day he announced to his wife that he was on the “hit list” of the north-based Sudanese government, which at that time started killing educated men in the south. That was also the day that David last saw his mother.

The long journey to Australia started when David was three and ended when he was twenty-two. After they fled from Wau, David and his father walked for two months to a refugee camp in Ethiopia. David remembers the harsh journey with lack of food and water and bodies scattered alongside the road; his father told him they were “sleeping”. They spent four years in a refugee camp in Ethiopia until they were “kicked out” because of the Ethiopian Civil War. No option remained, but to walk back to Sudan. However, the situation there was still volatile and after a year of languishing in open armed conflict, David and his friends headed for Kenya.

By the time David reached Kakuma refugee camp, it was 1992, he was about ten years old and without any family. He spent 13 years in the Kenyan refugee camp with other South Sudanese boys orphaned or separated from their families by the war. In 2001, the US Government resettled many of the children but David missed out. His day finally came when a cousin who was already living in Australia offered to sponsor him. David arrived in August 2004; he was 22 years old.

David’s arrival in Australia was filled with anxiety and astonishment. Flying through Sydney to get to Melbourne, David could not believe that such a world existed. Everything felt like a dream and even today, after almost six years, David still sometimes cannot believe the reality that he lives in. Transitioning from the poverty of the refugee camp, where he did not know where his next meal was coming from, to the material wealth of Australian life is still perplexing.

One of the things that helped David move on was getting an education at the University of Melbourne, where he completed a Bachelor of Arts, with a major in Political Science and Criminology. But even while studying, David kept thinking: “what do I do now that I’m in school and doing well?” He thought about the assistance of strangers while he was a refugee and decided that he wanted to say thank you and dedicate his life to helping others in need. He now works with the Brotherhood of St Lawrence.

I wanted to tell David’s rather long story because otherwise praying for refugees is like praying for a problem. Refugees are not problems – they are human beings like us and we are called to not just pray for them but to welcome them as fellow travelers in God’s world. Every single human being is made in the image of God and is loved eternally and completely by God. We have heard this many times but what it means for us is that human life is personal and relational and is a mystery. It means we cannot understand others or ourselves apart from the mystery of God. This ought to put us in a place of humility in terms of all our fellow men and women, refugees and those who have lived solidly in their homes for 40 years.

But what is really useful to understand is that we are all migrants and refugees and God is a God who journeys to our world and leads us back to him. Through Jesus God enters into the broken territory of the human condition in order to help men and women, find their way back home to God. God’s movement in love to us makes possible our movement to God. In Jesus life this essential truth is immersed in political and religious controversies, just as is the journey of all refugees.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus enters the world amid a drama involving counting the population. In Matthew's account Jesus and his family must flee a threat that endangers their lives, making them political refugees. In John's gospel, many people have trouble believing in Jesus precisely because of the place from which he emigrates. In a fallen world, we find many compelling political, legal, social and religious reasons to exclude and reject the Son of God.

Yet in this fallen world we followers of Christ are called to imitate his self-sacrificing compassion and justice. The way of Christ is the way of radical love. This is seen in so many ways in Jesus' life but perhaps most simply in his table fellowship and his teachings on hospitality. In our Gospel reading Jesus says those confronting words, *"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid."*¹³ *But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."*¹⁴ *And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."* This is about welcoming the stranger, giving them nourishment and fellowship. It is about giving, not because the law tells you to or because they will give you something back one day, but because you love them with the same love that Jesus Christ loves you.

Jesus ate and shared table with all types of people and it reveals the heart of his mission. Across a table, sharing food and wine, he reached out to those who were marginalized because of their race, their economic status, their religion or their morality. If you think about it Jesus' table fellowship must have been most meaningful to his followers and most offensive to his critics. As Robert Harris puts it, "Jesus got himself crucified by the way he ate". In bringing scribe, tax collector, fisherman and zealot in one community Jesus challenged his followers to a new kind of relationship beyond our humanely constructed borders.

On this day of prayer for refugees we need to reach beyond the borders of our own minds and see those 15 million people as people like us, loved by God with the same passion as he loves all creation. We need to see them invited by Christ Jesus into a Kingdom fellowship where there is mercy, justice, peace and a safe home. May we pray and work to that end. Amen.