

Refugee Week Address: R.J.Dalziell

St Phillip's O'Connor Sunday 14 June 2015 8am and 10am services

Gospel reading:

Mark 4: 26-34

Thank-you very much for the invitation to talk to you about refugees and asylum seekers on this special Sunday, the first day of Refugee Week. Whenever I come to St Phillip's for music or worship I feel that I'm among like-minded friends. So I wondered what I could possibly say to you today, knowing that many of you have been supporting and advocating for refugees for years, and that in recent times you have welcomed a Dinka congregation.

I shall begin by focussing on the theme for this year's [Refugee Week 2015](#) It is a line from a lesser known verse of the Australian National Anthem, 'With courage let us all combine'. The choice reminds us of the great courage it takes to be a refugee. I shall then reflect briefly on the encouragement offered in this morning's reading from Mark's Gospel for us to persevere in our continuing care, concern and advocacy for asylum seekers and refugees. The needs seem so overwhelming and international and Australian responses so inadequate that Christians and many other humanitarians find action hard to sustain.

Every day in the media we are confronted by accounts of asylum seekers who have taken to unseaworthy boats and drowned. It is happening in the Mediterranean every week, despite the valiant efforts of the Italian navy in particular, who have saved many. It is now happening in our region to Rohingya people fleeing persecution in Burma. It has happened to asylum seekers on the way to Australia in every decade since the 1970s, though in the 1980s a humane and effective asylum seeker policy led to its decline. But that policy didn't last. We remember in 2001 the tragic loss of the boat known as the SIEV X, when more than 350 asylum seekers from Sadam Hussein's Iraq, drowned. Evidence suggests that two military vessels in the area turned away, failing to search and rescue. In Canberra

a memorial to those lost on the SIEV X was raised in Weston Park in a deeply moving ceremony. Jeannette will be visiting the memorial this afternoon and invites you to join her if you can. Many Rohingya people have also been left stranded at sea, and the numbers who have drowned or died of starvation after being abandoned by people smugglers is not known. Governments in the region failed to give assistance until Indonesian fishermen in Aceh responded and shamed their Government into giving asylum for a year.

People who seek refuge, by boat or in other ways, are not 'illegals' under international law, but on a courageous quest for an alternative to lives that have become impossible. Many would rather risk death than remain to endure appalling persecution and deprivation not only for themselves but also for their children.

In a dangerous and often unjust world, people of influence and people of good will must work harder and smarter to address the conflicts and hardship that lead people to seek refuge. It is extraordinarily difficult and complex to attempt, but vilifying asylum seekers, cutting international aid, scapegoating people-smugglers (while possibly, allegedly, secretly employing them) and militarising solutions is not the way to go. In the teachings of Jesus we find a call to generosity, hospitality, respect, non-violence, love for neighbour and a constant expansion of who constitutes that neighbour.

Can I invite you to cast your minds back to the refugees who have crossed your paths in life – Eastern Europeans perhaps, arriving in Australia after WW2, or the so-called Indo-Chinese refugees after the Vietnam War. As a child growing up in Perth, I loved to go to my father's university office, where his most friendly colleagues were the two Hungarian Kovesi brothers, Paul, tall and stately, who taught literature, and Julius, rotund and merry, who taught philosophy. Dad explained that when they came to Australia as refugees, Paul and Julius had to study again for Australian qualifications, and in the evenings had worked in bars washing bottles and glasses to pay their way. Later on, my mother knew an Austrian lady, Mrs Landsman, who told Mum how she had been in a camp in Europe after the war, where she fell into such despair that she walked into the river with her baby daughter in her arms, intending to drown

them both, but God had spoken to her, and she had left the water with hope. The experiences of the Kovesis and of Mrs Landsman made a deep impression on me growing up. Since then, refugees from Laos, Vietnam, South Africa, Uganda and Sudan have been part of our family life at different times.

Some of you here today may have been refugees yourselves. And the Dinka congregation are part of the St Phillip's community, sharing some of their stories. Ian and I attended a Dinka wedding in Perth 18 months ago. It was an amazing cultural experience, with hundreds of female guests in colourful traditional costume, and all the men in suits, sweltering in St George's Anglican Cathedral on a December morning. As we looked around at the several hundred guests at the celebrations afterwards, and thought of the huge organisation that had gone into the wedding, we reminded ourselves that almost every adult guest had been a refugee. What courage to escape, endure temporary camps, come to Australia penniless, settle, study, find jobs, marry, start a family.

So where does faith come into this? The Kovesi brothers were sustained by a deep Catholic faith. Mrs Landsman, who was probably Jewish, felt called to a new hope by God. Our Sudanese friends, like yours at St Phillip's, take their Anglican faith seriously. Karen refugees from Myanmar are Anglican or Baptist. This helps long settled Australian Christians to make connections. Many refugees however, have other faiths, Buddhist, Moslem or Hindu. This makes interfaith dialogue and activity increasingly important in secular Australia, Christians are sometimes surprised to find more in common with people of other faiths than people of no faith. Prayer, liturgy, faith-based ethical teaching, sacred scriptures, pastoral care, religious festivals, are things we broadly understand, however different our theology and community may be. Some refugees have fled persecution on the grounds of their faith.

Most of us here today appreciate that the refugees we have met and continue to get to know have broadened our cultural understanding and enriched our lives. Some of us may have taken part in the Community Resettlement Scheme of the late 1970s and early 80s, when the Dept of Immigration administered a system of matching refugee families seeking

support with church and other community groups who were keen to help. Things are different now sadly, although the Canberra Refugee Support group and larger groups in bigger cities continue this work. What Christians like to do, and where our experience lies, is in this kind of pastoral and practical support. And it is extremely valuable.

But we must also consider the bigger picture. There is little or no pastoral or practical care that we can provide to asylum seekers who are enduring appalling conditions in Australian offshore detention centres. Despite the restricted information about the operations of these centres, and ambiguity at Government level about who is responsible, there is a lot of information available, and much of it is shocking. Three major reports have come out in recent months - The Human Rights Commission report on children in immigration detention '[The Forgotten Children](#)', the [Moss review](#) detailing evidence of rape, sexual assault of minors and guards trading marijuana for sexual favours from female detainees (SMH 20 March 2015). The UN Committee against Torture has criticised Australia's system of turning back boats without adequate assessment of asylum seeker claims, and also mandatory offshore detention. [UN Committee Against Torture](#)

We know that two young asylum seeker men have died on Manus, one from injuries received during a disturbance, the other from septicemia resulting from an untreated cut. A little boy with a broken arm was not brought to Australia for medical treatment after failed surgery on Nauru. A five-month old baby born in Australia was sent to Nauru detention centre a few days ago with her parents - to a place where there isn't even enough water available to wash babies' bottoms. Children are deprived of schooling, mental illness among adults and even very young children is prevalent. Despair and hopelessness increase as 'processing' doesn't happen.

Offshore detention centres are always going to be bad, due to isolation, struggling host countries, administrative delays or incapacity, poor health facilities, the list goes on. Even Baxter, on Australian soil, was bad, as were others. We used to have reception centres, not detention centres, what happened to those?

Christians as a rule still prefer pastoral caring and are wary about weighing in on Government policy. But as things currently stand, it is not question of being party political. Federal Government and opposition policy are much the same. If we want Australia to return to a more humane policies, as we had until the mid 1990s, we must advocate for change. This is a major challenge to people of faith. The Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office has just issued a [press release](#) calling for care and compassion for Rohingyas seeking asylum. But it is very hard to get wider media coverage. I would also like to acknowledge the courage of the group of Labor Party members who have put their political careers at risk in founding Labor for Refugees, to advocate for their party to adopt a more humane asylum seeker policy.

Advocates feel the sadness of asylum seekers, especially perhaps for the children. We think of our own children, maybe one who had a broken arm or an infected cut, and we were grateful for good medical care. Our children receive education. We have access to clean water in our homes. We plan for our own futures, for our children's futures and our grandchildren's. We live as free people but grieve for those who do not. I often meet concerned Christians and other people at refugee protests and vigils who say - I don't expect my being here will make any difference- but I must do something. Some discouraged Christian activists feel that they can't face God if they don't act, even in the face of apparent hopelessness. People of no faith feel that they can't face themselves in the mirror.

So where do we find hope and what can we do? Let me offer a number of suggestions. First, meeting and getting to know refugees is something that St Phillip's congregation certainly does. Some of you will know about Canberra Refugee Support <http://www.actrefugee.org.au/>, who held a fundraising dinner last Thursday attended by 250 people, receiving generous donations to help refugees and asylum seekers in our city with accommodation, scholarships and family reunion. To find out more, just check their website. Secondly, the number of people who attend rallies in support of refugees testifies publically to community concern. The Palm Sunday Rally for Refugees in Canberra this year was attended by 3000 people. The

Melbourne Rally drew 15000. Donating to aid organisations assisting refugees overseas is another way to assist. And there is even the opportunity for non-violent protest leading to getting arrested! In the past 18 months some 200 Christian leaders, priests, pastors, nuns and lay people from various denominations, and a couple of rabbis have held non-violent prayer vigils for the release of children from immigration detention – these actions are held in the waiting rooms of Federal MPs and Ministers. These activists from [Love Makes A Way](#), stay put until the MP meets with them to discuss their concerns about the children. This hardly ever happens, so they remain until arrested for trespass.

Another option is to get involved in the Faith Based Working Group of Canberra Refugee Action Committee, launched last October [Canberra refugee action committee](#)/Christians for Refugees. This group (of which I'm currently the convenor) encourages churches and other religious groups to advocate for refugees and asylum seekers, and to call for a more humane asylum seeker policy. You can see the kind of policy that RAC and our group stands for on the Canberra RAC website <http://refugeeaction.org/an-alternative-to-cruelty/>. This policy was highly commended by Jon Stanhope speaking at the CRS dinner this week. The Faith Based group cooperates with RAC in organising public meetings on asylum seeker issues, and encouraging Christians and people of other faiths to take part in rallies and other public vigils and protests where dissent is expressed within a continuum of respect. The Faith Based group is holding the Service of Prayer and Reflection for Refugee Week at the Centre for Christianity and Culture in Barton tomorrow evening (advertised in your pew sheet).

Two Faith Based Group representatives met with MP Gai Brodtmann last week to discuss concerns about current Labor policy on asylum seekers. We encourage writing to federal politicians, letters to the editor, as well as letters of thanks to politicians and church leaders who have spoken out, and journalists who have provided helpful news coverage. The FBWG includes Anglicans, UC, Catholics, Baptists, Quakers, home church members, with some participation and strong support from leaders from the Jewish and Islamic communities.

So let us find hope in today's Gospel reading. Mark gives us two of Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of God. The first is about the mystery of the seed that is scattered on the ground, and grows in secret while we are going about our daily life. We then see it gradually emerge, the stalk, the head and the grain, until it is ripe and ready for harvest. At the beginning, it seems as though nothing is happening, but the invisible underground development is vital if the ripe harvest is to come. So just because we make our small contribution but see no obvious immediate results, this does not mean that our work for justice is ineffective. Patience is needed, and attention to the small signs of growth.

The second parable is of the mustard seed. If we cook with spices we know that the mustard seed is small, while other spices are much smaller. But that is not the point! In this parable, full of Jewish humour and exaggeration, the minute seed grows so rampantly that it becomes as big as, say, a massive Morton Bay fig tree. Who would have thought it! And then, importantly, it becomes a place of habitation and hospitality and new life - 'all the birds of the air can make their nests there'. On our block in Ainslie there is an enormous eucalypt, where clans of magpies, currawongs, parrots, wattle birds, noisy miners, possums, all coexist. If we persevere in our concern and care for homeless asylum seekers and refugees, maybe Australia will again become a country that offers home, hospitality, nurture, and a new start. We may even see signs of the growth of the Kingdom of God.