

Refugee Sunday is the day on which many Christian churches and organizations recognise the importance of speaking about the painful reality of refugees.

There are currently more people displaced by war, violence, and persecution than at any other time in recorded history. But that doesn't mean the trauma experienced by refugees is a new, modern crisis.

The second reason to talk about refugees in church today, is because this week's first reading, is in fact, the story of two refugees: Hagar and Ishmael

This is a hard story. It presents several kinds of dehumanizing exploitation, without much redeeming comment:

- Human slavery;
- doubts about whether Hagar had any choice in bearing Abraham's child;
- the injustice of Sarah essentially condemning Hagar and Ishmael to death, for the crime of their mere existence.
- And, to add insult to injury, the other players in this drama refuse to call Hagar by her name, calling her instead "the slave woman," essentially denying her individual humanity.

In this story, the father and mother of God's chosen people, who had previously forced their slave woman to mother a child, decide this didn't work for them, so they classify her as a non-person to whom they have no obligations, and drive her away, sending her and her son into the desert with completely inadequate resources to survive.

Hagar and Ishmael are helpless refugees, forced to leave their home, livelihood, and every source of security, and treated with utter contempt. It is an ugly story.

But it is also a story that shows us God's heart for refugees: a heart both to save and to affirm.

The saving is very practical – and that is important to recognize. Hagar and Ishmael are dying of thirst and God shows them a replenishing source of water. They have a desperate, physical need, and God meets that need.

God also affirms Hagar. The woman who had been dehumanized as "the slave woman," God calls by name. (name important – not a statistic, a number, a description, non human, with no relationships)

The tiny family who had been cast out to die, God promises to grow into a great nation. Even the name Ishmael affirms the value of this rejected, exiled child; Ishmael means "God heard."

God heard, protected, and affirmed those whom the “chosen people of God” had treated with disdain and callous cruelty. God cared for the refugees, even though they were outside the chosen people.

Remember the words from Micha 6 Do justice, love mercy and walk humble with your God

And Jesus would say, in the Gospel reading today:

“Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matt. 10:38-39)

God’s ultimate realm of peace will not come without pain **or persecution or personal cost** without rejecting the voices that deny Christ’s radical command to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to recognize that there are no limits on whom we must embrace as neighbor.

This talk about losing our life, and practicing love with no practical limits, is scary. I know. It scares me to think of losing any of the things I love about my life, much less the whole thing. This is not an easy teaching. But what about those who have lost everything to flee death and persecution?

But there is also gospel here: in Matthew when Jesus talks about *dying to yourself, and losing your life. it takes us beyond the anxieties of the moment to rest safely in God. What dies are the habits of individualism, greed, and self-interest....What is born is compassion and freedom.*

What would I like to see die in myself, to see die in our society? it is my silence and inaction in the face of social justice and compassion.

I am challenged by my silence and inaction when I don’t join the BLM rally or don’t sign petitions or emails, when I give lipservice to reconciliation issues, and when I am ignorant to the issues of people seeking asylum and refuge.

Yet I am encouraged when Jesus says that the small things matter, like sparrows, the one offs, the tiny efforts to make change. But how do we make change, contribute to the healing of hurts and rejections?

We look. We look and see faces of real people. Not numbers, not statistics.

We listen. We listen to peoples stories, we engage in their lives, we hear and begin to share something of their experience.

And when we look and when we listen – we learn! We learn something new, some experience, some knowledge, which leads us to act differently, the next step to action.

For each of us as individual Christ-followers, and for our communities, this week is one of great encouragement. It is easy to become disheartened in our attempts to love others when we so often fall into destructive and hurtful patterns, and when our efforts to love so often feel inadequate.

It can be frustrating when we seek to make a contribution, both locally and globally, and we feel that our gifts or opportunities are insufficient or that the resources we bring are too meagre.

However, this week's Bible theme calls us to value the small, the insignificant, the hidden.

Every act of service, every gesture of love, every gift we give has value and makes a difference in the work of God's Reign in our communities and in our own hearts.

Every bit of learning, every bit of revelation, every face of a refugee we see on TV, on the news – stirs us to respond.

We may not be talented or well-known or wealthy or well-connected, but we all have fruit that we can produce that God can use – often in ways we that we won't even know.

With our focus today on Refugee Sunday we might take away one thought from today, or one face or name, and if we let God take that seed and plant it in God's love and care, God's passion for justice , then our small tree of insignificance might just blossom into something that grows and matures and effects something much bigger.

This is my commandment that you love one another, as I have loved you!

Prayer

How do we do what's right, Jesus,
when it costs us so much to follow you?
when the good and the true and the beautiful
cannot be purchased
in a 'buy-now-pay-later' scheme
as a quick-fix solution to our longing for life?
How do we do what's right when it takes so much time,
and when the life it brings comes

according to the timetable of eternity,
not the stopwatch of our up-to-the-minute world?

How do our leaders do what's right, Jesus,
for the weak and marginalised,
for people beyond our borders,
when the cost could be to forfeit their opportunity to lead?

How do our corporations do what's right, Jesus,
for our suffering planet,
for the rights and needs of the poor,
when the cost could be to lose investors,
and sacrifice the lives of their own workers?

How do our protectors do what's right, Jesus,
for the broken and desperate,
for our allies and enemies,
when the cost could be to face the attacks
of those they seek to defend?

We need to learn how to do what's right, Jesus,
our world needs us to learn it;

we need to count the cost of your call,
and measure it against the abundant life you promise.
Help us, in our own small way, to be those who do the right
thing,
and in so doing, demonstrate the goodness
that following you brings to all.

Amen.