

Refugee Sunday
St. Paul's, Milford, 5 July 2015: 8:00 and 9.:30
The Revd Dr Noel Derbyshire

What is your reaction when I mention that today is Refugee Sunday? Are you tempted to yawn; do you say it's too political? After all, whenever we look at the news there's always something about refugees. There's often something about the Australian Government and its policy of turning back the boats, of shipping the people to Nauru or Manus Island.

Why do we have a Refugee Sunday? I'd like to suggest that there are 51 million reasons why we should have one. 51 million reasons because that's how many refugees there were, at last count. In fact, that's on the low side. I say that because the definition of a refugee is a 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 nationality and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of, the protection of that country.”

Note the words 'outside the country of his nationality'. You see that doesn't include what are termed **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)**, people who

“have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes ... in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.”

They are still living in their homelands, but have had to escape from their homes. There are millions of them too. And they're not included in my figure of 51 million. In Syria alone 6.5 million people are displaced within

the country. In Iraq 5.6 million people have fled. The tiny country of Lebanon has received 1.2 million refugees from Syria. There are others too in South Sudan or Burundi. These people can only be refugees if a country lets them cross the border.

Our screens show us the desperate people who pay money to unscrupulous racketeers for over-crowded and unseaworthy little boats to take them across the Mediterranean or out of parts of Asia. Hundreds have drowned. Some have been rescued: the Italian coastguard alone has rescued 170,000 people so far this year.

Some say it serves them right. Others say they should stand in line like anyone else. If only it were that simple. But if you lived in a country faced with Isis or the Taliban or the Syrian government or Boko Haram wouldn't you want to escape too? Why on earth would you want to stay? People don't choose to be refugees; circumstances have forced them to become refugees.

Sadly, what was once a humanitarian crisis is seen as a security threat. After the Second World War the UN was formed and before long it set up a Refugee Programme. Caring for refugees was seen as a noble enterprise. The words on the Statue of Liberty were given fresh meaning: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." NZ opened its doors to refugees from Europe from countries like Poland. 734 orphaned children took refuge in New Zealand. They had made a harrowing journey from Poland through Russia and Iran. Our response continued to be a particularly generous one. In later years every country was asked to set a quota. Many years ago NZ said it would take in 750 refugees a year. Then the number of refugees was much lower. But now that it's much higher our figure of 750 has remained the same. Per head of population we now rank 87th on

the list. Our monthly magazine for July contains a fuller article written by Bishop John Bluck that gives more information.

However, let me take you from the present awful situation to a case study of one Middle Eastern refugee family. It's a family you will know about. You will recognise their names. This family escaped from what is now Palestine or Israel. They found themselves in Egypt. They were escaping from the cruelty of a Middle Eastern king who was into infanticide, a form of ethnic cleansing. You've heard of him too. Herod was his name. The names of this family, of course, were Mary and Joseph and Jesus. We can read about them in Matthew, ch. 2.

Others escaped too and one result was an expansion of the Gospel into little known corners of the world. The apostle John, for example, was exiled to the island of Patmos where he wrote the book of Revelation. These people all fled their homelands because they were singled out by leaders in their own country as targets for persecution. Today we would call them refugees.

If you get hold of a Bible and grab a commentary and look up the word 'refugee' you will discover a great number of references. The Bible is full of teachings. The basic teaching is this: God loves, protects and provides for refugees.

Psalm 146: The Lord cares for the stranger in the land. He defends the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.

Isaiah 4: God provides refuge for them, a shelter from the storm and shade from the heat.

Deuteronomy 10: God gives justice to the orphan and the widow and loves the stranger, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt.

Luke 4: He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives ... to let the oppressed go free.

God expects us to love refugees and to give freely of our resources to help them. We are to love refugees as we love ourselves. Treat refugees fairly and stand up for them when others mistreat them. Share your food and clothing with them. Invite them into your homes. Set aside part of your income to help them. And remember Jesus' command to "go out into the roads and lanes and compel people to come in so that my house may be filled".

Deuteronomy 23:15: Slaves who have escaped from their owners shall not be given back to them. They shall reside with you ... you shall not oppress them.

Which by extension is a command never to return refugees to their oppressors.

I ask that you think about that. Put that teaching alongside the actions of some political leaders.

But there are some who are true to this teaching. Take the Joel Nafuma Refugee Centre (JNRC). It is the primary outreach ministry of [St. Paul's Within the Walls Episcopal Church](#) in Rome. Each weekday they welcome 200-250 refugee guests into their centre. The JNRC is a safe place where guests relax, recharge and recuperate from the daily struggles they face. They are offered many services thanks to the generosity of their diverse partners and supporters. This ministry is dependent on the hard work of volunteers who come from backgrounds as varied as the guests they serve. Among the services they offer are a daily breakfast, access to clothing and toiletries, language classes, art and psychotherapy programs, a refugee artisan service, interfaith prayer space, legal assistance, recreational activities and medical services.

Now it so happened that when I researched this centre I found that our former archbishop, David Moxon, is to preach there on July 22 when they observe Refugee Sunday! Very helpfully he posted his sermon on

the web. Very helpfully, he concluded with that wonderful prayer from St. Teresa of Avila, written in the 16th century:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.