

A call to solidarity with refugees

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Lent 2 C – Gen 15 Ps 27 Phil 3 Lk 13

As we focus on the fate of a boat-person's family today, it's instructive to reflect that today's readings present us with a world where everybody's in the same boat. In church-language, it's called a state of sin. But that doesn't mean everyone's some sort of spiritual criminal. What it means is that humanity is in more or less of a state of alienation or separation from God. We're not necessarily in that state by choice; but we're all in it, and it's painful for everyone.

Everyone? It's not just people who want nothing to do with God that suffer from this. It also afflicts people who love God, who seek God with every fibre of their being. Today's readings show this. Look at Abram, the model of faith for Jews, Christians and Muslims. He's a person who's left everything behind to follow God's leading. Yet today we see him as a man who has clearly lain awake worrying about what it was all for. Can that be true? Abraham, the model of faith, tormented by doubt?

And the Psalmist; someone who writes poetry that sings of God's care, nevertheless cries v.10 "My heart has said of you, 'Seek God's face': your face, God, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me". Do not hide your face from me?! Even in our spiritual teachers, we find anxiety where we want solid faith; uncertainty where we expect confidence. My heart has said... That's the telling phrase. Every spiritual seeker of every tradition talks of something deep within us that cries out to connect with the divine who is both the source of our being, and the end of our journey – our goal. But here is the

Psalmist, a giant of faith, praying that God will not hide; praying to find God's face.

Abram and the Psalmist, faithful people, experience the pain of separation from God. So it's no shame on us that we do too. We try to find out why. Is it something I did; is there something wrong with me. Other people have strong faith; they seem blessed. Why not me?

If we react badly to the question of our own suffering, we're worse when we see other people suffering. Sometimes when people have something terrible happen to them, others can try to rationalize their misfortune by wondering what they must have done to 'deserve' it. We know that's rubbish; we know, or maybe we don't know, that we say things like that because we're afraid of the cost that being really compassionate might exact from us.

A sign of how badly we react to other people's pain is that suffering people are often left alone. Few people can cope sitting with anyone who is in agony. It's that cost of compassion thing again; we can't bear to sit with it. And the sufferers know it; they send people away; they say they'd rather be alone. They don't want to be a burden to anyone. They become the carers of people who can't cope with their pain.

Our alienation from God – our sense of isolation from others, our physical or emotional suffering; they're all part and parcel of the one experience; they're simply part of being mortal. And there is no way out of that, regardless of our faith. But the coming of Jesus challenges the inevitability of that separation. We couldn't be 'one with God', so coming in Jesus, God dealt with it by becoming 'one of us'. God goes the whole way; birth, suffering and death. Suffering? In the coming weeks, we will hear again of the agonized breakdown in Gethsemane; the cries of anguish from the cross, and we'll know they were real experiences of separation from God; the

alienation which is the cost of sin.

But that sin doesn't mean criminality. Jesus was sometimes asked to judge between people; to apportion blame. Instead, he names the basic malaise; alienation from God. He aches for us. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! As followers of Jesus, our purpose is mapped out. We are to be there for people who suffer. We are to be Jesus for each other. The alienation people experience should never be compounded with cruel, needless loneliness born of judgement and exclusion.

The way that works out as a call to us, particularly today, is a call to solidarity with refugees – aliens here and in foreign lands. It's foundational to our faith. Last week, we heard Moses giving his final instructions to his people about thanking God for what they'd been given. Dt 26 What's really striking about these instructions is that they applied equally to the citizens of the Land, and the aliens who resided among them! Refugees had the same rights, the same responsibilities, and were explicitly entitled to the same inclusion – as full citizens. Jesus gave us this same principle again in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

That used to be our way in Australia up until the mid-90's. We were compassionate, inclusive and supportive. Refugees received humane, just treatment. Today, as we proclaim our support for Farshad, we invoke again the ancient Biblical principle that underpinned – and should again underpin – our treatment of those who seek shelter among us. Amen.