A day of prayer for refugees

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Pentecost + 14 A – Exod 3 1-15, Ps105 1-6 & 23-26, Rom 12 9-21, Matt 16 21-28

Twenty-five years ago, in July 2001, General Synod declared that the last Sunday in August each year should be a day of prayer for refugees. It was extraordinary timing! On the last Sunday of that August [26-8-01] a Norwegian freighter, *MV Tampa*, rescued 433 Afghan Hazara refugees from a distressed fishing boat off Christmas Island. To prevent the possibility of any asylum claims, our government sent SAS troops to ensure the ship didn’t enter Australian territorial waters.

Just over a fortnight later on September 11 – the twin WTC towers went down, and populist politics took their campaign into overdrive to make *refugee* a synonym for *terrorist*. Three weeks on, Australian government ministers using doctored photos made false claims that refugees on another boat, *Siev 4,* had thrown their children into the sea to force a rescue. These lies were never retracted. All this would lead to Australia’s aptly named *Pacific Solution;* the harshest anti-refugee policy in the world at the time. It continues to this day.

Back then in 2001, the UNHCR was concerned for the welfare of about 20 million displaced persons. Tragically, that number has since grown by another 100 million. So each year, as we observe this day of prayer for refugees, it’s ever more important that we do. We Christians particularly remember that the baby Jesus and his family were themselves forced to seek asylum. God is with refugees!

Refugees flee war; they escape places of natural and artificial disaster. These people desperately seek entry to

countries where they and their families might find safety, and a way to know community life again. But just as desperately, destination countries seek to prevent them from entering. Sudanese refugees escape a crazed and barbaric civil war and trek across Africa to try their luck at a Spanish enclave, only to be ejected. The people of the drowning islands of Tuvalu and Kiribati contemplate a possible future in Australia. Refugees the world over are desperate. But loud voices online, in the media and in parliaments depict them as a threat. These loud voices falsely claim they are defending us against dangerous people.

We've been thinking over the past couple of weeks about the cruel, dehumanising language that populist politics uses to represent other people's need as a threat; a threat that only they can effectively repel. It's a cruel lie they peddle for electoral gain. It persecutes innocent people who are already on their knees. It's nothing new. Western politics has been consumed with this for a long time now. And Christians and people of other faiths have steadfastly spoken out against this travesty.

Our scriptures all speak of hospitality to strangers. Paul's letter to the Romans today puts it in black and white – [13] *extend hospitality to strangers*. [15] *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep*. You know the line from the Servant Song that's based on this verse: *I will weep when you are weeping.* Singing that regularly at Inverbrackie detention centre was a consolation to the detainees.

This is very personal for me. I spent the first 12 years of my working life teaching within a schools, AMES and TAFE system that was supportive of refugees. We didn't lock people away in detention centres. They lived freely among us, supported to live and study. We sought to equip them with the best possible tools to enable them to bring their skills and insights into the upbuilding of this, their new home.

Extend hospitality to strangers. It's a simple command, and today it stands defiantly against the tidal wave of paranoid disinformation and confected hostility that washes constantly over us. It moves me deeply that this community of St John's has stood against that grotesque tidal wave for decades. St John's support for refugees is courageous, tireless, generous and effective. And by refugees, I mean both fellow humans seeking asylum from brutal conditions overseas, and also young, homeless, South Australians who need us to believe in them, and to give them the tools to find a place they can call home. *Extend hospitality to strangers.* That's the mindset of St John's as a parish, and St John's as a Youth Services provider. I came home when I returned here.

In today's first reading, we meet Moses again. And again, we've jumped several years. Last week he was the baby who *really was* put in the water, but in a tiny basket the Bible calls an Ark. He was drawn from the river into an altogether new life. Now we witness his call from God to become himself a sort of Ark for his people who will see them safely across the deep waters of death at the Red Sea.

The Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, [8] and I have come down to deliver them. … [10] So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'

It feels ambiguous on this day of prayer for refugees, because we know that this escape will eventually see the children of Israel join the ranks of the displaced for forty years. But despite their often dreadful behaviour, God journeyed with them – something I believe God does for every refugee – God as one of us all! Amen