

Pentecost 15 – 28<sup>th</sup> Aug 16

Readings: Jeremiah 2: 4-13; Psalm 81: 1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Today is observed as Refugee and Migrant Sunday by the Churches together around Australia on or around the last Sunday of August each year. Indeed our own lectionary lists today as a Day of Prayer for Refugees – a decision made by the General Synod in 2001. Refugee and Migrant Sunday is a celebration of the dignity of people who are refugees and migrants and the contribution they have made to life in Australia. And it is important to acknowledge and celebrate that contribution – a contribution made since the earliest days of European settlement, gaining momentum in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by immigrants among whom were many from China and Afghanistan, and then in the twentieth century with immigration from around the globe. I saw a terrific story on the TV news a couple of weeks ago – it was the ABC or SBS – I can't remember now. But it was the story of a young Hazara woman from Afghanistan. The Hazaras are a persecuted minority there and she and her family came as refugees when she was 9. Fast forward 10 years or so and she has just joined the Australian Army – the first Muslim woman to do so. She said she wanted to give something back to Australia for all it had given her. For me, it epitomised the best of our acceptance of migrants and refugees. By and large, Australia has been really quite successful at it. But lest we get too self-congratulatory, we have to acknowledge that our world stands at a crossroads and so do we. Around 60 million people across the world are now displaced, more than at any time since the World Wars; torn from their homelands and pushed out of their communities and over borders by the viciousness and violence of war, conflict, persecution and poverty. Human displacement presents us with really complex issues. In Australia, despite our best efforts there is still endemic prejudice from many towards migrants and refugees. A report released this week following a survey of over 10,000 people indicated South Sudanese and, maybe surprisingly, New Zealanders face the worst of it. We also face the shame of offshore detention on Manus Island and Nauru and the documented terrible effects on detainees. Personally I think it's tragically ironic that as the Royal Commission holds many institutions including the church to account for abuse of children, and rightly so, the same spotlight is not shone on government.

I want to look at today's readings with the focus of Refugee and Migrant Sunday in our minds – at least for now. Somehow as a nation we need rise above the slogans and politicking, to embrace our better selves rather than our worst selves we sometimes see displayed and ask much more serious questions of ourselves. A key question is how are we to respond to the suffering of those who see no option but to flee their homes and countries? Turn our backs in isolation – or embrace it in all its messiness and seek collective ways forward? Humans have a natural tendency to gravitate towards others who are like them. We all naturally look for belonging in a group that makes us feel welcome, safe, loved, special and important. The difficulty with this, however, is that we can then too quickly define ourselves by “us” and “them” – the definition of our own place in a societal group becomes just as much about who's not in as who is in.

The debate regarding asylum seekers in Australia over the past fifteen years has been one of “us” and “them”. Discussions around “illegals”, potential “terrorists”, “keeping our borders secure” have been rhetorical devices used by both major political parties, as well as by populists demonising asylum seekers to show how strongly they wish to protect “Australian values”, which they never

seem to define. By contrast, today's readings lead us to think of interdependence – a much wider all-embracing vision I think.

In our first reading Jeremiah's God expresses disbelief in very human terms that the nation has turned from God to follow gods of their own making. They have not only abandoned their loving and protective God, they have come to believe that they can go it alone without the help of the one who brought them into existence and rescued them from slavery. They have forgotten their heritage of grace, choosing instead self-reliance and personal and national autonomy over divine-human interdependence. One commentator says the behaviour of Israel reminds him of a teenager who boldly rebels against his or her parents, proclaiming her or his freedom while using the parents' credit cards. Now, differentiation in our lives is essential to our growth – we all strike out on our own at some stage, but God desires interdependence rather than absolute independence or utter dependence. God wants Israel to grow up; but God also knows that healthy growth depends on recognizing the source of your being survival and the gifts that enable you to live a fulfilling life. Life in all its aspects - economic, political, religious or spiritual, relationships lived without an affirmation of interdependence and recognition of God's in all things, including our own achievements, leads in the end to chaos and disintegration. The antidote is not a return to being passive before God and others, giving away our divine gift of free-choice, and it's not radical individualism, that takes no account of the role of God and others in our own lives, but a recognition that we are truly interdependent, a recognition of the interplay between creator and created world.

Psalm 81 in my Bible at home is headed "God's appeal to stubborn Israel" so it continues the theme from Jeremiah, that of divine-human interdependence. When we turn from God individually or corporately, there are negative consequences for us and for all the created order. But God is always willing to welcome us home to a great feast, the feast finest wheat and honey from the rock, the feast of abundant living in relationship with all of creation.

The reading from Hebrews begins "Let mutual love continue" and so describes a lifestyle of spiritual interdependence and mutuality. The reading suggests a way of life in which we attend to God's presence in every relationship. It commends the practice of hospitality to all – and hospitality is one of the great Christian virtues. It urges us to remember prisoners as though we were prisoners, those being tortured as though we were being tortured. In the context of today we could go on to remember refugees and migrants as though we were refugees or migrants, those in immigration detention as though we were there ourselves. Always remember that in people we meet no matter where they are from we may be entertaining angels in disguise, and this reality calls us to treat everyone as an angel in the making. Imagine living as if the people you encounter are messengers from God, the source of insight and wisdom and the invitation to generosity and care. And behind all of this is the idea of interdependence – God, ourselves and everyone with whom we come in contact.

Jesus' "parable" highlights relationships and interdependence. The practice of hospitality is not, as was the practice among those to whom Jesus spoke, to create a sense of obligation. That is, I'll invite people who can do something for me in return at some stage. Again, in my Bible at home, the passage is headed "Humility and hospitality". Humility is essential in healthy human relationships. The issue is not that of disgrace or dishonour if you are told to move to a lesser seat,

but the willingness to see yourself in relationship with others not as special and deserving of privileges, but part of the fabric of human interdependence. In the realm of God, the playing field is levelled economically, relationally, and spiritually. No one has the upper hand, and although some people may be more successful economically or more awakened spiritually, or have the benefit of higher education, our growth and success is relational as well as individual. Remember that God shows no partiality, and that God gives us all different gifts to use for the building up of the whole. Jesus continues the conversation by counselling that we welcome persons who cannot at first sight benefit us. Again that has a resonance with Refugee and Migrant Sunday – remembering that in the practice of hospitality and recognising our interdependence with all people – we may well entertain angels unawares.

I want to change the focus now and say that as my ministry here concludes soon, this idea of interdependence is also worth reflecting on in the life of the parish. Maybe that's your homework – to think and pray about interdependence in the life of the parish. In a healthy parish there are no silos – we are all interdependent. All the ministries – clergy and people, the worshipping communities, recognising that one is made up completely of those who have sought refuge in Australia from the awful violence of South Sudan which still continues, and all the other ministries; Kids Time with God, RI in Schools, Mothers' Union, Men's Society, Music Box, the Pilgrim study groups, the bell-ringers, choir and organ, the support centre, the variety market, the hospital chaplaincy, the catering group, the craft group, the wardens and parish council, the ministry of the office, the archives group, volunteer cleaners and gardeners – have I left anyone out? All the ministries we exercise are connected and interdependent and essential to our well-being as a faith community.

The spirit of our time in Australia and other western cultures is of self-made individualism and libertarianism – and we see the result of that in the fault lines and fracturing of relationships in society. Are we becoming as a society that is poor, crippled, lame and blind spiritually, ethically, morally. Our call as church is to provide a healthy environment, grounded in healthy interdependent relationships, to encourage everyone to embrace her or his identity as a child of God, to restore and bring to life the image and likeness of God very human person carries. And in doing so, as Jesus says, we will be blessed.