

**Refugee**

*Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23*

Pope Francis, a few days ago, met a number of refugees who had come to the Vatican. They were recently arrived refugees from the Greek island of Lesbos. The Pope went on to unveil a cross in the Vatican's Belvedere Courtyard to remember all migrants and refugees who are forced to make perilous journeys in search of a better life.

Two life jackets that told their own story. The first one was given to the Pope a few years ago by a group of rescuers. The life jacket belonged to a girl who drowned in the Mediterranean. The second one, delivered to Pope Francis by another group of rescuers just a few days ago, belonged to a migrant who was lost at sea last July. No one knows who he was or where he came from. The Pope told 33 refugees recently arrived from the Greek island of Lesbos, that he had donated the first life jacket to the two Vatican officials responsible for working alongside refugees, telling them 'This is your mission'.

The Pope said he wanted it "to mean the inescapable commitment of the Church to save the lives of migrants, so that then we could welcome, protect, promote and integrate them."

Addressing those gathered in the Belvedere Courtyard in the Vatican, Pope Francis underlined that it was injustice that forced many migrants to leave their lands, and to suffer abuse and torture in detention camps. "It is injustice that rejects them and causes them to die at sea". Pope Francis said he decided to do this to, "remind us that we must keep our eyes open ..., keep our hearts open ..., to remind everyone of the indispensable commitment to save every human life, a moral duty that unites believers and non-believers."

"How can we fail to hear the desperate cry of so many brothers and sisters who prefer to face a stormy sea rather than die slowly in Libyan detention camps, places of torture and ignoble slavery?" the Pope said. "How can we remain indifferent to the abuses and violence of which they are innocent victims, leaving them at the mercy of unscrupulous traffickers? Our ignorance is a sin".

Nearly two years ago I visited two refugee camps. One in Bethlehem, called the Aida Camp. It has been in existence since 1950; first tents, now buildings. A place where dispossessed Palestinians make their home. The first people forced to live there are now grandparents. The second refugee camp I visited is in the Jordanian town of Husun, the Al-Mofti Refugee Camp. It has been in existence since 1967 and is home to Palestinians, there since the Seven Day War; and now Syrians.

For many Palestinians the symbol they cling to is the key. Many of them, forced into the life of the refugee, kept their housekeys when they fled, in the hope that one day they would go home. Refugees, waiting to go home.

At the end of 2018 around 70.8 million people were forcibly displaced across the world. Of these, 25.9 million were refugees, whilst 41.3 million were internally displaced within their country of origin. 80% of the world's refugees are living in countries neighbouring their country of origin, often in developing countries. 50% of refugees in the world are children.

This Sunday between Christmas and Epiphany is one that affords us a look at one of the less comfortable parts of the story of Jesus' birth, the massacre of the Innocents, ordered by a jealous King Herod who feared a rival to his shaky throne, and the flight of Mary and Joseph, with Jesus, from Bethlehem to Egypt. What we read this morning is a story about refugees under threat of death, who are forced into hiding. We also have echoes of an earlier Bible in Joseph, the one with the many-coloured coat, who also faced death, and is sold into slavery, and ends up in Egypt. We forget this part of Jesus' story at our peril, for here we see the story of Jesus reach out across two thousand years and speak directly into the situation faced by so many in our world today.

It's not hard to imagine the scene. Joseph's terrifying dream is enough to make any human break into a cold sweat, to set the heart beating furiously, to make the whole body quiver with the question: will we escape in time. The infant, worshipped at one moment, the meaning of His birth, the promise of His life seemed in that bright and shining moment so momentous, so filled with

hope, and now this nightmare. Joseph moves from promise to terror with the dreaming of one dream.

The nightmare doesn't end when Joseph awakens. There is a frenzy of activity: stuffing together whatever they have, walking down the street and out of the gate onto the main road to get to Egypt as fast as possible, the child crying, the mother exhausted, Joseph's heart clutching in his throat every time he sees a soldier. The nightmare doesn't end when they get to their place of refuge. It grows greater, spreading beyond Joseph and the new family, pervading the whole region they have left behind as the blood of infants darkens the Bethlehem earth, and their inconsolable mothers set the land echoing with their grief.<sup>i</sup> There is nothing sentimental about Matthew's 'Christmas story'. It is set in the turbulence and terror of a violent history. Tyrants kill children, and families flee in the middle of the night. No shepherds come to see the wonder, and no heavenly choir of angels sings. But still, in it all, through it all, God remains real, God remains present. God is alongside the frightened.

The story echoes down through the centuries. People still lead lives forced from home and safety, forced from family and friends, forced from their roots and their future. If not by violence and persecution, then by economic or ecological plight. In other ways many of us can be in flight from something. The past, the present, the future. Family worries. Health worries. Money worries. Work worries. Relationship worries. To be a refugee does not always mean we have to be without a home. Each of us, at different times, in different places, have sought refuge from something: a person, a situation, a set of circumstances. If not now, then at some time in the past.

Here, in this place, in this church, there is a form of refuge, a form of sanctuary. Not an escape from the realities of what can be hard living and a hard world, but the reassurance that God remains near, and a constant reminder that in this world there are still places and still people who help us to safety. Or they remain beside us in any and every time of need.

There are bits missing from this story of Joseph, and Mary, and Jesus, the refugees. Someone must have helped, along the road from Bethlehem to Egypt. Someone must have helped in those frightening first days in Egypt, a strange land, with a strange language, and strange food. Someone must have given shelter, at least to start with, and work, so that Joseph could support his family as best he could. And it is in these gaps in the lives of refugees, in the horror and fear and uncertainty and embarrassment and grief, that good people, maybe prompted by their faith and their humanity, reach out to help, speak out to show solidarity, listen out to hear the hurt and the loss. If this was for Joseph, Mary and Jesus, might it not be for us, and those in our world who still need refuge, and sanctuary?

We cannot easily fix the causes for refugees, though we can try; we cannot easily fix the causes of things at home, at work, in health, in relationships that cause people to seek sanctuary, but we can try. But until the 'fix' comes, whatever that might be, here, with God, and with the children of God, let us provide a safe place, a protected place, where at least we can stop and draw breath, with all those in need, and provide a moment of refuge and respite, until we are ready, again, to turn around, face the world, and know the Christmas promise to be true. Emmanuel. God with us. Always.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

---

<sup>i</sup> Thomas H Tröeger, Feasting on the Word Year A, Vol 1, pps 165-167