

Sermon preached at Scots

13 September 2015

Readings: Genesis 1: 26–28; 2: 7–8, 15, 19;

Mark 10: 42–45

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...”

This last week has been one which I would characterise as being one of moral chaos. Through it we have seen scenes of chaos on the borders of Hungary as thousands of Syrian refugees press there way into Europe. Through it too we have found ourselves responding in increasingly polarised ways.

I’ve listened to the prevarications of our Government and all the “ifs and buts” coming from them and find myself disappointed, frustrated and wondering what can I do to respond. Of course there is the standard response of opening my wallet and giving money to whichever of the many relief agencies I subscribe to, but as the pictures press in, it seems to me that that is hardly a final response. I can write to the Prime Minister or my MP but it feels as though policy is set and that

As the media get hold of the issue there is everything from the emotional responses, to the sound bite commentaries ranging from the deeply thoughtful to the populist throw away lines. It seems to me that there is a polarising that is happening between those who want to respond immediately and sympathetically and those who want to take an approach that looks at the situation and want to find reasons to limit our response as a nation.

We do not have the immediacy of needing to respond to the wave of refugees as they wash up on the shores of Europe. Instead, once we decide what our response will be, we have the luxury of picking and choosing and already the categories are getting narrowed despite being signatories to various accords regarding refugees and asylum seekers. The first two voices in our dramatised response might well represent the two approaches. There are also the alternative tragedy voices, such as Rosemary McLeod’s column this week reminding us of the still ever present tragedy of the maltreatment of our young and vulnerable ones. How do we choose between such concerns?

Here we are then in the Season of Creation with today set down as Humanity Sunday, with the theme set for this year as the Word of God in creation. How do we read such passages as we have heard today. Is there an alternative reading which may shed light on our present situation? One of the issues is the way we approach the passages. While one is poetry and the other narrative, behind each is the same idea. God fashions all of earth and its creatures, including humankind out of the same stuff, so there is a clear sense that we are all interconnected by the very stuff of creation.

The key to interpreting how we act towards creation is there in the phrase “made in the image or likeness of God.” If we simply interpret dominion as the exercise of power to subdue or bring into bondage using whatever force is necessary then we are likely to see that as an interpretation which goes wider than simply the animals and living things. It is clear from the reality that we experience in the natural world that apart from the domesticated animals, the only power we can really exercise is the power of force, and even then we are often helpless. So the song of creation is never about us taking control of everything, of describing an ideal situation that we must aspire to. It is when we explore our image of God that we get the clues of how we are to be.

Nor does the second passage give us the certainty we desire. Yes God forms humankind out of the ground so we are dust from dust, and yes, God places the human creature to serve and preserve, so the second speaker has that partly right, but the whole story sees Adam and Eve being driven out of the garden through their inability to tend it according to God’s Word given to them. They become the first displaced people as they move into the wilderness outside of Eden and begin to live life in

the world. Yet even then God does not abandon them. The Genesis story begins the story of God's gracious dealings with humankind and continues on through to the forming of the people of Israel. Abraham is the first person named as a stranger or sojourner, and in the conversation with him, God includes this in a promise about the future of the tribe. That comes to a high point in Deuteronomy 26 where the people of Israel listen to Moses words to them. You shall remember that you were sojourners in Egypt and you will treat them, not as Pharaoh treated you but as God has done, by liberating them from the bondage they were under.

Liberation and compassion become a constant theme through the history, poetry, wisdom and prophetic writings of the people of Israel. Time after time when those kings who rule with an iron rod arise, the people are reminded that one of their tasks is to look after the widow, the orphan and the alien, stranger or sojourner among them. Any judgement that is mentioned is judgement not of their condition, but of how the people have treated them.

I have been impressed by the stance of Angela Merkel. She has clearly indicated that in time there needs to be a proper sorting out, but for now the immediate task is the humanitarian needs of these people before the world. Merkel said she was confident Europe would meet the challenge. "This should be possible, because Europe is based on common values, and help for those in need of protection is one of them," she said. "As a strong, economically healthy country we have the strength to do what is necessary" and ensure every asylum seeker gets a fair hearing, she added. In defending her government's decision to accept about 800,000 refugees this year she said, "If Europe fails on the question of refugees its close connection with universal civil rights will be destroyed."

Such a stance stands in sharp contrast with some of the others in Europe, notably Hungary and Britain, and it seems the New Zealand government's cautious and selective approach. The church leaders of the Presbyterian, Anglican and Catholic churches have issued public statements urging our Government to do more. The claim that our services might not cope is not backed up by the very agencies that support refugees and migrants.

"In this global humanitarian crisis where so many millions of people have been forced from their homes, a response that increases the quota of refugees accepted into New Zealand is part of what it means to be a good global citizen." says the Church's Moderator, the Rt Rev Andrew Norton. "As a Church we are called to advocate for those in need, and we believe allocating more of the country's resources to supporting refugees is the right choice. It will make a massive difference in the lives of children and families who are offered resettlement here in Aotearoa New Zealand."

The latest letter from the church recognises the reality that those outside of Wellington might not have a direct path of action. "Presbytery Central and our Wellington region congregations will have more opportunity to assist refugees directly as indications are that the 750 Syrian refugees will be re-settled in Wellington with the established community of Syrian ex-asylum seekers. I encourage you to buddy-up with a Wellington congregation to assist a refugee family. Please let me know if your congregation would like to assist a Wellington parish in this mission. I know that collectively as a denomination we can join with other people of compassion and faith to do more." The letter includes some practical things to do in response to this situation.

Taking responsibility for human beings in desperate need must be done without discrimination on any criteria other than their needs. This refugee crisis is a challenge to the global human community of its strength of commitment to human dignity and rights. For us of the Church this is a test of our human values and Christian legacy. Our identity, integrity and vocation are as 'the church of the stranger'. For we are the Church of Jesus Christ, the child refugee. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in."

This is the Gospel of our Lord, the answer of Christ. We are to serve as Christ served.

The Word of Jesus is among us. Hear that Word.