

SERMON for Pentecost 14 - August 25th, 2024.

Readings: 1 Kings 8: 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6: 10-20; John 6: 56-69.

Today is the Day of Prayer for Refugees. Let us just take a moment to think about what it might be like to be a displaced person, to have lost all that we hold dear, possibly even loved ones. Let us remember that over the centuries, many have been displaced, taken to roaming the world for a place to live.

God of the nations,
we pray for all who are displaced by war, drought or for economic reasons.
Grant your protection and grace to all who seek shelter and a new life.
Forgive the racism and destruction that have been part of history,
the disregard for pain and oppression we see experienced.
Help us shed our provincial expectations.
Take away our cultural tunnel vision.
Open our hearts to be caring neighbours to each other.
Direct our lives to just and peaceful action.
Help us to treat all as a brother or sister,
knowing we are all created in the image of God,
and we are called to share the great breadth of your love.
We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. ¹

The bible is full of stories of people being made refugees, wandering, seeking a better life, seeking freedom and safety.

Our first reading is but one example. The Israelites, after their 40 years in the wilderness, had finally reached the Promised Land. Joshua, having carved up the land to the various tribes, was now encouraging them to choose who they would serve. The response:

We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God. [Joshua 24: 18]

The voice of the psalmist, speaks also of God's love for all. I was particularly drawn to verse 18:

The Lord is close to those who are broken-hearted: and the crushed in spirit he saves.
[Psalm 34:18]

In the gospel readings, we finally come to the end of John's long discourse on Jesus as the bread of life, and more recently on eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. As I spoke of last week, for the people of Jesus' day, this would have engendered revulsion, and we hear in this week's gospel that many followers turned away and no longer followed Jesus.

Perhaps in frustration at their lack of understanding, Jesus turns to the twelve and asks if they too wanted to leave.

Peter's answer is how, I'm sure, many of us would respond:

"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." [John 6: 68-69]

Like the Israelites in our first reading, who else is there?

Jesus' teaching at this point is difficult, and it may surprise us that many who had walked and talked and watched Jesus, now turned away.

Do we find it difficult to follow Jesus?

Last week I spoke a little about sacrifice, the sacrifice of Jesus, the body and the blood, the bread and wine, and talked about the idea of eating the sacrifice to take into ourselves the essential Jesus, so we can be more like him.

I share some of what Revd Sue wrote in her reflection this week:

The controversy for us, in so many ways, is that in choosing to follow Jesus and his teachings, we choose to be on the vulnerable side, the losing side, the outside - not on the victor's side. In an ironic way this is what our text from the letter to the Ephesians makes clear. Whilst we focus on the imagery of the spiritual battle dress of the person of faith it is being written by the one, St Paul, who wields not a sword but ends his life in chains for the sake of this Jesus. And so for those who have eyes and ears it is the same for us, we who choose to follow this Jesus and his difficult teaching, choose to not wield power but to be vulnerable.

Even in Christian nations where we are scarcely persecuted for our faith, we who choose to follow the teachings of Jesus, will find that we are called upon to side with the poor, the marginalised; will be reminded over and over that we are called to a fullness of life that does depend on the emptiness of others; that we are called to humility rather than to be standard bearers doing victory laps. And maybe most of all the teaching is difficult because taking Jesus into our very being unseats our ego from the throne and our sense of control and self-interest.

It is not simply that we are to be nice and inclusive and generous – although we are in a sense called to all of these things – but that we are called to empty ourselves out as did Jesus. And this being self-emptied is not as a sacrifice or a punishment but as a path of transformation. And this teaching is absolutely counter-cultural, this teaching is difficult.

So when Jesus asks if, given it is so difficult, “Do you also wish to go away?” will we like Peter answer “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Not the easy or most rational way, but the way of life and love, the way of transformation and fulfilment, the way of being emptied and filled. Where else is worth going, who else is worth following?²

As I was reflecting on what I was going to say this week, especially or rather hopefully tying in the final discourse on Jesus as the bread of life and also the prayers for refugees, I came across the following quote, which at the time jumped out at me ... so I hope it still makes sense!

One could very well say that the answer to the question “Who is God?” is not only, and not ultimately, a series of theoretical demonstrations; the answer to the question “Who is God?” is: love your neighbour – “whom you see”, as John says – so that you genuinely transcend yourself in a properly incomprehensible unselfishness.³

Who else, where else, do we find ‘the words of eternal life’?

In Jesus, the Bread of Life, given for us, so we may give to others. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
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1. Loosely based on prayer for justice for Asylum Seekers, *Resources for Worship* Uniting Church in Australia Assembly. Posted on National Council of Churches in Australia website - *Day of Prayer for Refugees and Asylum Seekers*.
2. Revd Sue Lodge-Calvert's reflection, *A difficult teaching* posted on August 21st, 2024 on www.companionsontheway.com
3. Dr Karl Rahner, quoted in *Franciscans Day by day*, quote for August 23rd