

Homily – Christmas 1 – 29/12/19

I reckon most of us respond better to the stories of individual people rather than the statistics which give analysis of situations being faced by groups. World Vision's child sponsorship program connects well with this insight because it invites us to sponsor Miguel in Guatemala rather than the whole village he lives in. The money will certainly make a difference in Miguel's life, and the life of his family, because health care, education, and employment opportunities will be greatly improved. But, sponsors will not learn about falling infant mortality rates, or improving literacy... each year they will instead learn about Miguel's developing love of soccer!

Having recognised this bias towards individual story we might admit then that it's easier to relate to the batting scores of particular Australian cricketers in the current Test Cricket series, than the number of people who recently fled from conflict in the Syrian Province of Idlib.

The United Nations estimate that at least two hundred and thirty-five thousand people fled the region in the two weeks before Christmas. Some of these have gone over the border into Turkey, but the majority now live in internal displacement camps near Aleppo. This would be like the total population of Townsville and Bundaberg completely relocating to Brisbane in two weeks, and for them to potentially remain there for years!

Let's take a moment to think about this Queensland parallel and imagine the pressure on housing that would quickly develop if that number of people suddenly arrived in Brisbane; the pressure on health care and education providers; and the large numbers of unemployed people. It would be tough for the people of Townsville and Bundaberg because they'd left their homes, gardens, and businesses behind... and it would be tough for the people of Brisbane to find their parks and gardens full of improvised tents, and their way to work crowded with people begging for financial assistance.

But, hold on - I hear you say! Idlib is a long way from Australia, the people there speak different languages to us, and we don't even know their names... so let's talk about the batting of Travis Head, or the bowling of Pat Cummins!

In some ways the Gospel this weekend invites us to hear the story of a family who lived in a country far, far away. A family forced to flee the country of their birth and live as refugees for some years before returning to their home country, but not their home town. A family who did not speak English but whose names are very familiar to us.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and that a group of wise foreigners came to visit him from the country we now call Iran. They came with expensive gifts and acknowledged him as a future king, so his family would have been forgiven for thinking that his future would be blessed with wealth and public acclaim. But it was not to be in the way they expected. His adopted father Joseph had a dream in which he was warned that king Herod the Great wanted no rivals to his throne and that unless he left Bethlehem immediately his baby would be killed.

It sounds romantic because it was such a long a time ago... but, remember those two hundred and thirty-five thousand who fled Idlib Province just before Christmas this year? They have names, and had homes, and belonged to communities... and they don't know what will be destroyed while they are away. Indeed, they don't know if they'll ever be able to go back to where they came from.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that Joseph took Mary and the baby at night to Egypt. He did not travel in the day when it was safe to see things, but at night when most people were asleep in their homes. At night where his journey was hidden from the eyes of neighbours and the patrols of soldiers. It seems that the fear of being caught by Herod's soldiers was greater than the fear of being waylaid by bandits or wild animals... so they fled over the border into Egypt.

While in Egypt they would have heard about the babies that were killed in Bethlehem and maybe they would have known some of those families because Bethlehem was not a big place. I imagine that Joseph and Mary would have grieved the murder of those children, and would have been thankful that their baby had not been killed. But, I also imagine that they would have felt guilty that they had survived when others hadn't. It's a lesson from the lived experience of many refugees who come to Australia from places of conflict. People can feel guilty that they have come to a place of safety when so many family members and friends have lost their lives... or, remain behind in overcrowded and poorly resourced refugee camps.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that this family, this Holy Family, lived as refugees in Egypt for some years with all the challenges that go with this: learning a new language; living in a culture with different values and religions; selling things of value to rent a place to live and buy food; finding a job; and no matter how long you stay, always being perceived as a foreigner. The years in Egypt would not have been easy.

Then Joseph had another dream advising him that Herod had died and that it was safe to return to Israel. So, good-bye to the friends made in Egypt because there would have been friends after that length of time, but no return to the hometown of Bethlehem. This was because the new king, Herod's son Archelaus, was well known for his cruelty. Instead, Joseph took his family to the little nowhere town of Nazareth in the district of Galilee, which King Herod Antipas had oversight of, and this later became known as the hometown of Jesus.

So, Matthew's Gospel reminds us that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus lived as refugees in Egypt, and perhaps after this as internally displaced people within Israel. Hopefully this engenders within us a greater sense of compassion for those who have come to Australia as refugees in our time? Partly because their experience echoes the early experience of Jesus and his family, and partly because his direction for us to love neighbour and welcome stranger takes on greater significance.

For many years now our communities are becoming more culturally diverse with people who have come as migrants and refugees. Some of them look different to the way we look and speak more than one language... and yet we share life together. We are colleagues together at work, we are parents together taking our children to school, we meet at church or when playing sport, and we shop together for groceries and clothes. We might live next door to each other or walk our dogs along the same street.

If you're not sure how to respond to someone who comes from another culture then The Golden Rule is a good place to start: we relate with them the way we would like to be related with. A genuine smile, and the Australian greeting, 'How're you going?' is easily given, and easily returned. Sometimes this can develop into shared friendship and hospitality for a season or even a lifetime, but for all people we know we can pray for God's blessing...

So, let's pray now:

Holy God, we give thanks for the opportunity to remember that as you shared our humanity you knew life as a refugee. We ask your blessing on the unprecedented number of refugees in our time and pray for your blessing on them: that they get the support they need in order to survive, and even flourish. We also pray for peace and justice in the countries they have fled from... We pray in the name of the one we call 'Prince of Peace' - Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen