**Mat 10:40-42 Refugees & Assylum Seekers**

Today’s Gospel reading really got me stirred up this week. Not so much from an exegesis of the passage, though that was interesting, but more from where my reflection took me from there. I’ll give you a bit of background to the passage, but then I’d like to share with you some of the things I’ve been ruminating on.

This passage comes at the end of a chapter where Jesus has been speaking to his disciples about what they’re in for as his followers.

He gave them authority over sickness, disease & demons and then commissioned them to preach that the Kingdom of God was near. They were to do mighty things in his name – they were to heal the sick, drive out demons and even raise the dead! It was mind blowing stuff - but he also warned them that as his ambassadors, they could expect the same treatment he would receive…there would be conflict, opposition, persecution and arrest.

Yet he told them to minister as he did – without resources, trusting in their heavenly Father, and depending on the good will of those who received God’s word. He did not promise that everything would turn out alright – in fact, the picture he painted was pretty scary – but this was what he called them to do. It was all or nothing.

He said to them, “Those who do not take up their cross and follow in my steps are not fit to be my disciples. Those who try to gain their own life will lose it; but those who lose their life for my sake will gain it.”

Then we come to the today’s passage in Matthew’s Gospel. It’s short, so let me read it to you again:

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes God's messenger because he is God's messenger, will share in his reward. And whoever welcomes a good man because he is good, will share in his reward. You can be sure that whoever gives even a drink of cold water to one of the least of these my followers because he is my follower, will certainly receive a reward."

With these words, the disciples knew that their mission would not be completely bleak and terrifying. They were actually words of encouragement. Jesus assured them that if anyone welcomed them, they welcomed Jesus who sent them, and they welcomed the Father also; and he assured them that if they were embraced because of their message, those who welcomed them will share in the benefits of that message. The disciples knew that in the midst of whatever else was happening, there would at least receive hospitality from some.

In these verses we see something of Middle Eastern culture when it came to hospitality. In Jesus’ day, if someone welcomed an emissary of a very important person, the emissary was treated as if he actually were that person. This custom was in turn a reflection of the teaching of the Old Testament, where God’s people were told to welcome the prophets, because in so doing, they were welcoming God himself.

You’ll be familiar with this verse from the book of Hebrews “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”

This hospitality – this culture of *welcoming* – is part of the very nature of God – which is what got me thinking…..

Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites were told not only to welcome the prophets, but to welcome those who were on the bottom rung of society – the widows, orphans and aliens in their land.

Now, aliens of course, weren’t little green men. Aliens were those who were foreigners, or people born in another country, and therefore not entitled to the rights and privileges of the country in which they lived. The Israelites were taught that they were to welcome and accept the alien in their land.

In Exodus 22:21 the Israelites were told: "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner; remember that you were foreigners in Egypt.

Do not mistreat any widow or orphan. If you do, I, the LORD, will answer them when they cry out to me for help, and I will become angry and kill you in war. Your wives will become widows, and your children will be fatherless.” In other words, God warned them unless they were compassionate towards the foreigners and the socially down trodden, God would make sure they found out for themselves what it was like to live that way!

Unfortunately, Israel did not heed God’s words. In the book of Amos, we read of the terrible judgement that came upon Israel at the hands of the Assyrians, because they did not care for the poor.

What got me thinking further was an interesting conversation I had with a friend this week about this. He is adamant that Australia risks the judgement of God because of her treatment of those seeking asylum in our country. He may well be right. Time will tell. The Australian nation has certainly adopted a harsh stance towards refugees and asylum seekers.

As we sit here this morning, the media has reported that there is another boat 300 kms off the coast of Christmas Island, with 152 refugees on board from Sri Lanka. 37 of them are children. The government has refused to confirm the truth of this statement, or of a report that another smaller vessel is also on its way towards Christmas Island. However reports from other sources have said that the people on the larger boat are in trouble and in need of water and medical assistance.

I’d like you to watch a short video clip. It is the introduction to a documentary made back in 2011 called ‘Leaky boat.’ Not much has changed. It raises an issue which concerns us deeply as God’s people (clip)

The documentary goes on to report on the story of the Norwegian freighter, the Tampa, and how the government dealt with the issue. You’ll no doubt remember the furore over the “children overboard” claim. The documentary reveals that the government of the time deliberately allowed photographs of the rescue of refugees after their boat sank, to be misinterpreted as being photographs of children in the water because they were thrown there. I find it appalling that a government would allow such damaging and misleading information to be disseminated, purely for political gain.

Another thing I find disturbing is the media blackout. As the narrator in the clip said, ***“rarely have we felt so strongly about our politics, but rarely have we known so little about what was actually happening out on the ocean.”*** The journalist was correct, when she said, ***“The Australian public knew what they were told, and what they were allowed to see.”***

Another thing that comes through strongly in the rest of the documentary is the way the government went to great lengths to depersonalise the plight of the refugees, making sure that they didn’t become people in the minds of Australians.

-in the documentary, Jenny McHenry, then Head of Public Affairs in the Department of Defence, was quoted as saying, ***"We were told that there was to be nothing in the public forum which would humanise these people."***

That was because this issue is so much easier for the government to deal with while it remains a political issue, rather than a humanitarian tragedy.

In 2011, SBS aired a series of programs called “Go back to where you came from”. Some of you may have watched it. This is the clip which advertised the series: (clip)

The program showed six people with very strong, negative, opinions about refugees and asylum seekers, who were given the opportunity to trace the journey back to where some of Australia’s refugees and asylum seekers had come from.

At the end of the show all six had mellowed considerably in their opinions, and all said they had been deeply moved by the experience. They didn’t all agree on the policies that need to be put in place, or on how welcoming Australia should be to people who are fleeing from their native country. They could agree that it was all far more complex and involved more than just “sending them back to where they came from”.

It certainly is a complex issue. Anxiety around it is largely driven by fear – fear of the “what ifs”. You know - what if there are too many? What if they take over? What if they bring their conflicts with them? What if there is not enough to go around? Where will it end?

These are genuine concerns. In a perfect world, we should be able to individually screen those applying to become citizens of Australia. However, this is not a perfect world. What is a family to do when bombs and gunfire drive them from their home; when their property is confiscated and an opposing regime threatens their lives? When there is no power or food or fresh water?

And then, suddenly, there are those words from Jesus in our reading this morning: “whoever welcomes you welcomes me, whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple - truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward”.   
  
Of course it is not as easy as that. But then again: maybe it is.

Though it’s more likely to be what we heard at the end of the last clip, when the guy said, ***“It’s not something new – the fact that there’s refugees. When someone works out the answer, I’m sure they’ll probably win a Nobel peace prize.”***

The issue of providing asylum for genuine refugees is not one that will disappear with ‘stopping the boats’. The problem will remain.

And in the face of all the political scare mongering, power plays and hidden agendas, it is up to the Church to raise her voice and take the lead; to say, “We have so much – let us share something of what we have.” It’s up to the Church to speak out against deceit and injustice and greed. If we don’t who will?

If this is an issue we’ve put on the back burner because it’s too uncomfortable or too confusing or too controversial, we need to bring it out and into the light. If we don’t know much about it – then there are ways we can find out more. The documentaries I mentioned are all available online – or from the ABC shop. Put yourself on Amnesty International’s mailing list. I’m sure Selva and Juliat would tell you something of their story if you asked them. And we can all pray.

Let’s do that now.