

**Second Sunday after Pentecost – 18 June, 2017 – St Paul's Manuka  
Refugee Sunday – Preacher: The Venerable Dr Brian Douglas**

**Genesis 18: 1-15**

**Psalms 116: 1-2, 11-18**

**Romans 5: 1-11**

**Matthew 9: 35 – 10: 8**

A few years ago a famous movie star was visiting a part of Africa that had been almost destroyed by war, disease and hunger. The movie star went into a refugee camp and was appalled by what he saw. There was so much pain, misery and sickness. The smell was beyond description and there were people all over the place covered in filth and sores. In the first few hours he must have washed his hands ten times. He didn't want to touch anything, especially the people. Some of the people he met made him feel physically sick.

He found the whole thing quite distressing, but also knew that there was a media crew following just behind him and they were recording on tape everything he did and said. He was being very careful but only just keeping his head above water amongst all this misery and dirt.

As they moved through the camp they came to a place where a very small child was lying in the dirt. The child was obviously very sick and his face and body were filthy. The camera people shouted out: "Hey, let's get a few shots with this kid". The kid didn't move. The movie star thought to himself, "No way. I can't touch this kid. I'd vomit". Then he remembered his media profile and that all the cameras and the journalists were waiting for him to do something, so he bent over the child and pretended to look interested. At the same time he was careful not to get too close and he kept just out of reach of this sick, smelly and very dirty child. He felt so close to throwing up that he thought he was going to faint.

The cameras clicked and the photographers jostled one another to get a better look. Then one of the camera people, wearing great big army boots, stepped on the child's fingers by accident. The child screamed in pain.

Without even thinking about it and as a reflex action, the movie star grabbed the child from the dust and the dirt, and forgetting about the smell and the sores, hugged the little one close, kissing him gently on the forehead. The child stopped crying immediately. It was common

humanity that motivated him. All the prejudice and reticence was gone as he met the needs of another human being just like himself.

Later that day when the movie star was safely back in his clean hotel room, he was interviewed by the press. One of the journalists asked him about the child. The movie star said that all he could see was another human being in need of care. He didn't even notice all the things that almost made him vomit. He said that as he felt the warmth of the little child's body, he could feel the terror disappearing and see the pain leaving the child's eyes. It was then, he said, that he knew for the first time what it meant to care for another person as Jesus had done. It was then that he understood what it was like to give himself to someone else who needed him. It was then, he said, that he saw the face of God in that little child. It was then that he felt he was caring for Christ in caring for this little child.

Here was this multi-millionaire movie star so conscious of his media profile, with all the power and fame of the world, talking in a way that he had never talked before, and because of this little child in the dirt.

Today is Refugee Sunday and I could assail you with statistics and point to the needs of refugees in our world – but I am not going to do that. I could also list all the reasons why we think allowing refugees into our country is a good idea and argue against those who disagree. I am not going to do that. Instead I want to point to our God-given and God-demanded responsibility to care for other people – other people who are God's creation just like you and me. It is our common humanity that unites us and drives us to accept others – or it should.

When the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, Abraham saw three strangers coming toward him. He did not just welcome them but we are told he ran towards them, bowed down to the ground and then waited on them with food and care. In return the three strangers promised a season of plenty for Abraham and his wife Sarah. They promised the gift of a son. Even in the face of their disbelief, the promise of God was given to them.

It is this promise of God that brings us into relationship with God and with all God's people. The Letter to the Romans makes this point. It is through justification by faith that we have peace with God. Our peace with God does not depend on where we were born in the world or how much money we have. If we have such peace with God we cannot live separated from other people. It is in the grace of God that we come to

know and love all God's people. God's gift is free to all and cannot be rationed by us.

The movie star in my story realised that it is in caring for others we care for Jesus. Jesus lives in people. Jesus is present in your life and mine – Jesus is present in the lives of all people, not just some people, not just Christian people, but all people - even if we don't realise it or admit it. When we care for each other we care for Jesus because he is in all people. This is what God wants us to do in the world. The act of welcome and including people in is loaded with promise, as Abraham and Sarah discovered. The act of welcoming the stranger is loaded with promise and grace, God's promise and grace, and it is done by us as a Godly and Christlike action.

Nobody ever said that caring for others and welcoming them in is easy. It isn't. Sometimes it can be difficult, thankless and frustrating. Welcoming refugees into our country can be difficult – both for them and for us. Sometimes it can be the most wonderful thing we have ever done since it brings us blessings. But the truth is that the small things we do for one another can make the most enormous difference in the lives of other people. The truth is that we don't do it to feel wonderful – we do it for others and for God and at God's direction. Our Refugee Action Group has been trying to do exactly that in the various programs it has put together. Today we are challenged to be part of that and to live a life of welcome.

The Gospel today shows us Jesus going about the cities and villages, teaching, proclaiming good news and curing people. Jesus, we are told, had compassion for the crowds because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. It is in the context of all this need that Jesus calls his disciples to mission. He summons them and gives them authority and skill. He names them as he calls them. You and I are named by God at our baptism. This is not just a cute ceremony with babies, parents and relatives and a party afterwards. Baptism is calling us by name to ministry and it is here that we are gifted by the Holy Spirit for service.

It is no accident that Jesus's involvement with those in need: those harassed and helpless, comes immediately before he sends his followers out to help them. The same is true for you and me. In the context of our baptismal call to mission we too are sent to serve others, to welcome them and to bring the peace of God into the lives of other people.

Jesus' message for us today is quite clear. If we want to live in the kingdom of God and follow him, then we need to reach out to those in need. We are called to welcome the refugee and to care for them. This does not only mean meeting people's physical needs by giving them food and shelter, as important as that is. It means caring for people in a way that shows a commitment to justice, peace, kindness and love and that the rights of people be respected. It means moving past prejudice, our ignorance and all the reasons we put up to ban refugees. It means moving past all that and valuing our common humanity. It is in the care we show to other, yes including the refugee, that we see the face of Christ and find the gift and promise of God and it is in caring for each other that we care for Christ and his body in the world. It is in caring that we proclaim and live the kingdom of God.