

Talk for Refugee Sunday
Canberra Baptist Church
17 June 2017

We've all been there at some point in our lives. We are strangers in a space that is strange and unfamiliar where we are surrounded by people and cannot find our place. That yawning vulnerability fills us with trepidation. We are wary and watchful.

For most of us, these sensations are mercifully brief and under our control. We can call upon our considerable resources to help us settle or to help us get home. But we know only too well that for millions and millions those feelings don't go away, because there is no longer any place of safety and certainty for them. There is no going home.

Migrants and refugees experience similar feelings about the vulnerability of those early days, but there the similarity ends. For refugees and asylum seekers, there is the huge factor of being forcibly ejected from home, often accompanied by violence and intense loss. Migrants make choices, prepare themselves - have the means to chart their futures for themselves and their families, and they have this protection of legitimacy. Refugees had no choice in their situation, but in Australia once they are legitimised, are granted much support. Asylum seekers, however, do not have the luxury of legitimacy - that special piece of paper - and therefore cannot begin to do the tasks of settling down and making a future in the new land. And we all know only too well, that many face a dark persecution in the form of indefinite incarceration where while their physical needs are met, the essence of their life and hope is slowly extinguished by years of uncertainty and vilification.

Today, however, I know I speak to you in this church, who already care for, support and advocate for refugees, and so I speak to the converted. But the journey of advocacy and support is long and complicated, and time has a way of eroding our best intentions when we do not see change happening. We need to keep encouraging each other and so today I thought I'd share something of my thoughts on what helped most during those early days when we came as migrants to settle with our family in Australia.

WHAT WERE WE LIKE WHEN WE FIRST ARRIVED?

1. We were filled with intense hope.

Hope – so strong – so bright – so exciting. Where it was kindled, we forged lifelong relationships. Where it was crushed, we quietly moved away.

2. I remember the sense of vulnerability. Even though we spoke English – sometimes it felt as though we'd dropped in from a different planet. We were almost hyper-sensitive to being rejected or judged. Every kind word took on a deeper meaning. Every careless word took its toll.

3. We longed for acceptance –for ourselves, but especially for our children.

4. And we were filled with the need to be able to recognize our heritage... There is a great grief in leaving home – the place you are planted and loved. In my current work with grief, I recognize the grief that such a loss brings, and the healing and restorative place for what is called “continuing bonds” – where there is a recognition of the loss, but a place in our current lives for ties to that place and time. Integrating and weaving our past into our new life was vital to our sense of connection and well-being. I imagine where people feel their past heritage is vilified, rejected and mocked, the task of settling and finding their place will be infinitely harder. The integration of their two worlds could well be stalled and stunted.

SO WHAT HELPED US?

1. Authenticity was vital. When I look back, I recognise that we had a very sensitive antennae for authenticity. We quickly sorted out those whose interest might be briefly piqued about our strange accents and appearances, and those who saw beyond that to who we were as people. There were many in those early days... the kindly high school principal who came past the place we were staying to drop off admission papers for school for our eldest 13 year old...the patient, sage advice from someone who is now one of our dearest friends on so many of the things that confused and perplexed us in those early days.

2. Being accepted into a community. We will never forget the warm welcome from the Baptist church we joined when we first came to Canberra. They had even collected 2 sets of double bunks, some kitchenware and clothes for the children before we came. Sure among them there were people with differing opinions and experiences to us, but our overwhelming feeling was that we were accepted and embraced. We knew that they had widened their circle to draw us in. I cannot tell you what a blessing that was.

3. Smiles - genuine, warm, friendly smiles spoke a thousand words. They cost nothing and yet were priceless.

4. Kind words - genuine, friendly, open, accepting words from strangers brought our hearts together and created bridges between us. They cost nothing and yet were priceless.

5. Gestures of friendship - were especially precious in the early days when everything was new, unfamiliar and potentially threatening. People widened their circles to draw us in. It may have cost them but for us it was priceless.

6. Knowing someone had our backs. In a very real way, knowing that someone from this place was actually alongside us gave a strength and support that was invaluable. We felt protected. We felt that someone would speak for us if we needed it. So knowing that we had friends who stood alongside us – whose aim was not to judge - was invaluable.

Because, of course, there is enough judgment in this world. We are all highly skilled at making judgment and exercising “common sense” – and there is a place for both. But judgment did not really help us settle here in Australia in those early days. Love did that. Where people widened their circles accepted and embraced us despite our differences we were able to come to the place of being able to say, “we have a new home now”.

Genesis is unequivocal when it talks about God creating human beings. We have all been created in the likeness of God. That is both exhilarating and terrifying. God chose to share His likeness with human beings, but this common humanity is not something through which I can pick and choose. What blesses my neighbour – blesses me. What causes him to bleed – causes me to bleed.

Jesus accepted no boundaries, only people. He was not influenced by the “shoulds” and “oughts” of his day when it came to vulnerable human beings. He saw, he stayed with, he loved and he served his fellow beings. He had their backs. He died because he would not leave them outside the accepted bulwarks and walls of his times. He continually widened his circle so that no one was left outside – no one.

I know that for all of us – there is the enormity of the task. However, we do have this time and this space. It is all any human being has. My favourite Saint is Mother Teresa whose life was spent loving and caring for the dying and destitute of Calcutta in India. She was a wonderfully practical woman, surrounded by literally millions in need, but she once said : “If you can’t feed a hundred people, feed just one.”

May we take courage, and use our time and resources to take just the next step - at home, at work, at church and within our varied communities - to be authentic and open, to choose to protect and have the backs of the most vulnerable people in our land today and to widen our circles to draw them in . For when we see them, we do indeed look upon the face of Jesus himself.

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