

EVENSONG SERMON – CHRIST CHURCH SOUTH YARRA

September 18, 2011

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Your Vicar has kindly invited me to preach, offering virtually carte blanche on topics, even to regaling you on archidiaconal doings! I don't think so.

Instead, I thought we might think theologically about a matter that all Australians are being asked to grapple with at this time, I speak of refugees and asylum seekers.

I opened with those couple of verses from St. Matthew's gospel (2:13-15) as a reminder that Mary & Joseph took their infant child into Egypt seeking refuge, fleeing from the unholy, megalomaniac Herod the Great.

The flight into Egypt is a treasured foundation of our Coptic brothers and sisters. The probably short time that the holy family stayed in Egypt has given rise to many amazing traditions that have grown up in that culture. A number of towns mark the places where the holy family rested and ultimately stayed.

We do well to remember that it was fear that drove Herod and the people of Jerusalem to go in search of the infant Messiah. How interesting that today they exist with an even greater fear of the people of Bethlehem and so have constructed a 10 metre high concrete wall around that city, that stands as a symbol of that perception.

Over the span of 2000 years artists have tried to paint this scene (the flight into Egypt), but few if any capture any sense of fear or panic in Mary and Joseph, this was no summer holiday to Sharm el Sheik after all, rather people running for their lives or more precisely to save the baby.

Egypt is once again providing sanctuary to outsiders today, it is hardly the most stable environment for a refugee, in recent weeks there has been a flood of people fleeing to the border from Libya, taking flight with virtually no possessions, just grateful to be alive. This is a country experiencing massive political change itself, with a huge population problem (25 million people living in Cairo alone) and hardly a decent driver among them!

All over the world people are on the move, it is estimated that the figure is around 2 million refugees. The Australian debate is about an annual immigration figure of about 14000 people and of them how many can be refugees. Clearly, these are small numbers but what is important is the attitude of our population. There is a fear factor that is of Herod style proportions among us. Our politicians seem to be happy to follow rather than to lead on this issue, they seem to be afraid to lead, apparently the public is in fear of being swamped by outsiders, that Aussies will lose jobs, that they will cost us money to keep them or something. There are many schools of thought, clearly for some in our community we ought to close the borders completely, stop so called queue jumpers and for others if people are desperate enough to risk a leaky boat they should be welcomed. The spectrum of opinion is vast.

Let's return to ancient Egypt. In our first reading we heard about the children of Israel journeying back to the promised land. They have escaped the shackles of Pharaoh, crossed the Red Sea, given Moses (their intrepid leader) a hard time about many things and now they find themselves in the desert of Zin and they are hungry. Their leader reminds them that the Lord has promised to be with them and that promise will be honoured, they will survive. I wonder if Moses knew how! The next day they wake to discover manna on the ground all around them, this naturally occurring phenomena a bread like substance with a honey taste they perceive it is food from heaven.

The facts are for people of faith that the provisions of life do come from God, every time we say the Lord 's Prayer we ask "Give us this day our daily bread", by which we surely mean at the most basic level we trust that God will provide.

The psalmist picks up this theme

The Lord is faithful in all his deeds, the eyes of all look to the Lord, He gives food in due season, the Lord is near to all who call upon him, he upholds all who are falling and raises up those who are bowed down.

Mary proclaims (perhaps in even stronger terms)

He casts down the mighty from their thrones and he lifts up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away.

We could restate: He casts down the mighty (like Herod) from their thrones and he lifts up the lowly (like asylum seekers and refugees). He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away.

Simeon challenges us prophetically at every Evensong as we hear his welcome speech of the infant Messiah, He is to be a light to enlighten the nations and the glory of his people Israel. If only the Church today could be such a powerhouse for change and enlightenment. History records that it has happened and it is still possible, yet we struggle with being a city set on a hill or even a light shining in the dark. The fear factor that we see elsewhere when we boil it down is as close as our heartbeat.

We live at a time when bad laws are being dreamed up and enacted (not always with success) and harsh political responses are rarely challenged by Christian leaders. It was Bismarck who said if you want to retain respect for laws and for sausages, don't watch them being made. The vulnerable in society need a voice, a courageous champion that will draw attention to the misinformation and the exaggeration that is making this debate so one sided.

Our tradition can boast of many saintly beacons of light, some of them have led movements that have transformed the world, William Wilberforce, Archbishop Luwum, Archbishop Tutu. This week our lectionary bids us remember the life and witness of John Coleridge Patteson. As Anglicans go in our region his biography was very impressive. He came out of the English aristocracy of the 1820's, his uncle was the poet Samuel Coleridge, his father a doctor. He was an eminent scholar and linguist. His teacher for a time was George Augustus Selwyn who came to New Zealand as a bishop. It was Selwyn who encouraged the young Patteson to come to Australasia and Oceania soon after his ordination to the priesthood. Patteson travelled about the islands for 5 years in his wooden schooner taking the message of the kingdom of God. He did this at the time when an illegal trade in moving islanders as slaves was going on, this was called black birding. Tragically Patteson became a victim of this era, when he arrived alone on the island of Nukapu near Santa Cruz and was clubbed to death, his body was found floating in a canoe, it is thought that he was mistaken by the natives as a blackbirder.

I have had the privilege of preaching in the lovely chapel of St Barnabas on Norfolk Island, which has been for many years the epicentre of the Melanesian brothers. Patteson's life of faithful service to the people of the islands is still highly regarded and a strong motivation for their godly and humble attitude to life.

We live at a time that I struggle to see any dynamic political or prophetic leadership emerging to help inform our community about the issues that dominate our newspapers. I wonder where is the passion of Patteson, Tutu, Wilberforce. St. Paul pondered these things it would seem in his time, he writes to the Romans words of clear encouragement "Welcome one another as Christ welcomed you. For Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's faithfulness...and in order that the gentiles might glorify God".

If we think about the flight of the holy family into Egypt, and the golden threads that run through tonight's readings, it is surely not so difficult for us to see a theological solution. I have left considerations of compassion, justice and safety out of my thinking but they would further inform me that we are currently along way from a Godly

outcome. Petro Georgiou said (a couple of years ago) *We need to refute the voices of fear that claim that we are being swamped by refugees and that our sovereignty has been compromised. Above all, we need to uphold and apply our society's principles of compassion and humanity, not just when it is easy, but when it is hard.*

Anglicans (and I think Melbourne Anglicans) have vital role to play in these kind of issues. Again a little surprise quotation from Petro Georgiou, he said, *"For me, one of the most powerful images of the turn of the tide in 2005 was being approached at an Anglican Church service in Kooyong. These were not your usual suspects. They were elderly, they were overwhelmingly big 'L' liberal voters, I could tell. What they said was in essence, 'We thought we faced an invasion. We were wrong. We did not appreciate that we were putting women and children behind razor wire or that people were being put in indefinite detention. We used to agree with mandatory detention but now we have seen its consequences and we need to make it right.'"*

This year our Archbishop has launched a program called "Making the word of God fully known". The aim in the first place has been to try to get some engagement around the local community and so the 2011 theme is "Seeing the parish with fresh eyes". Fifteen parishes from across the diocese are currently on the first stage of a pilot program of revitalization.

In parallel with this has been the beginning of the Perry Institute, a virtual learning centre that will equip lay people and clergy for ministry. In 2012 the theme will be "Serving the parish with fresh focus". I would hope that all this work and effort is honoured and that there might be a ground swell particularly in catholic parishes that enables greater focus on living and thinking in a godly way, and promotes zeal that might breathe new life into tired structures and energize us about the issues of our day locally and beyond.

St. Paul concludes this passage to the Romans with a doxology

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." We too need a healthy slice of that blessing, and it will come as manna for hungry souls and as light to those in the dark.

What is required of us is the right attitude or frame of mind, to ask ourselves are we in Jerusalem with Herod and his lynch-men or in Bethlehem with the refugees and asylum seekers, are we in stuck in Egypt making bricks or on the risky journey to the promised land, are we with the slave trading black-birders or with Bishop Patteson working on that mission we still call the kingdom of God.

I could do with a dose of hope and probably a plate of manna, but we need to know that this is a way with lots of risk and of sacrifice.

Ray McInnes

Vicar of St Silas & St Anselm Albert Park
Archdeacon of Port Phillip, Bayside, & Kingston North