

Refugee

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
December 24, 2019, 9:00 pm
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I'm conflicted about this Holy Evening. Part of me basks in the glow of singing the great gentle hymns like O Little Town of Bethlehem. But we approach Bethlehem through the shadows of Advent, and a deeper meaning of Christmas shines bright. The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us as a child – but not just any child. God arrives as an infant who has nowhere to lay his head, and must spend his first vulnerable days of life not in a home, but in an improvised, makeshift shelter. God arrives as part of a family who must hurriedly flee a campaign of terror – we know the “slaughter of the innocents” story is rarely read on Christmas Eve, but King Herod's tyranny looms in the background of this night's story, into a foreign country, go the tired parents.

In a word, Jesus was a refugee.

And this is not a minor detail in the Christmas story. In fact, it is the opening note in the song that would become Jesus' life and ministry. That young refugee grows up into a teacher well acquainted with scripture, with its oft-repeated refrain to welcome the foreigner, indeed to “love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”.¹

Jesus was a refugee – a refugee whose very birth and presence loomed powerfully in the minds of tyrants like Herod. It was probably from that powerful sense of being a refugee, an outsider, that Jesus' teachings about clannish thinking emerged, the type of thinking among his followers that we serve primarily the “insiders,” and if we feel so inclined, maybe we serve also alleged “outsiders.” Remember the iconic “Good Samaritan” parable? Jesus calls us to embody neighbourly mercy, no matter the culture or creed or religion of those we seek to serve. After all, what is “good” about the parable's Samaritan is that *he serves across lines of religious and cultural hostility*.

It amazes me how out of touch some people can seem on social media: talking about refugees and immigrants taking from our social fabric. I cannot think of a new Canadian in my life who does not: 1) express gratitude whenever possible for what they have; and 2) work very hard in all they do, and expects the same of their children. I have shared with you before my experience of feeling like the other. Living in foreign lands, listening to foreign languages. But then, as a “foreigner” we are invited into homes of host from the country, served a delicious and exotic meal, and, perhaps learn a few words and key phrases in their language. Followers of Jesus are called to embrace learning of another culture, and the radical hospitality of the Samaritan who cares for us. Sometimes I might be dependent upon the good graces of a person or family that is strange to me, but who takes me in when I need it.

Have you ever had a moment of vulnerability? Perhaps an experience of being dependent on the care of another. Whether it is in another country, welcomed by hosts, or, perhaps being in ill health and appreciating the caregiving of another. Jesus was a refugee, very, utterly human and vulnerable – a baby. Imagine his mother's and father's

¹ Deut 10:19

experience, disoriented, but so grateful to be cared for by the gifts and generosity of the visitors that night.

May we meet Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise ones, in our sense of our vulnerability. Our humanity, our frailty.

To follow Jesus means we turn toward those who most need refuge and assistance, without regard to their religion or cultural origin, or gender orientation, or any attribute that today becomes the basis of so much bigotry, even here in Canada. May we go home to our places of warmth and love, or maybe for some of us it's a roof over our heads but not much more. May we follow Jesus, the refugee, into the world reaching out in a special way to supposed outsiders, welcoming strangers.

May our mercy and imagination and love stretch us in daring ways.
That relative with whom you have a broken relationship – say hello.
That stranger you meet on the street, say hello. Perhaps nothing else – Hi.

God who came to dwell with us on the first Christmas morning as a vulnerable, needy infant with nowhere to lay his head IS the refugee, the stranger, the spirit calling us to reconcile broken relationships. Dare to believe. Amen. ²

² This Message is based on a reflection found on the website of the SALT Project, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/12/5/jesus-was-a-refugee>