

1 November 2015

Theme: Refugees

Matt 2.1-18

Me – When I was a child, immigrating to New Zealand was a great adventure.

We sailed on a ship from the chilly waters of the English Channel, to the balmy waters of the Mediterranean, through the Suez Canal, across the Indian Ocean and around Australia before catching an aeroplane from Sydney to Christchurch.

There were lots of activities for children on the ship, there was a swimming pool, games and a play area.

I remember seeing camels for the first time and watching a school of flying fish skimming across the sea.

Mum and dad bought us motorised toy cars from Port Said.

I had my seventh birthday on board and remember the celebrations on crossing the Equator.

This was all a wonderful adventure for a young boy.

What a contrast when compared to families today, refugees, fleeing war with children, cramming into small boats.

My journey was leisurely, safe and exciting.
Their journey is filled with uncertainty, danger
and trials.

My heart breaks when I think of children, 6 or 7
years old, not fully understanding the situation,
sensing the tension and fears of their parents;
tossed around in little boats that are barely
seaworthy.

I don't know the recent figures but back in
September it was reported over 2600 refugees
had drowned.

I find this hard to comprehend; people so
desperate to escape the horrors behind them
that risking the lives of their families in small
boats seems to them to be the best option.

**You – I am sure you are also moved by the plight of
these people.**

Maybe you have some experiences in life that
helps you relate to their situation.

I know that not all of those we have seen on the
news are truly refugees. Some people will be
taking advantage what is happening, using the
plight of others to slip across borders with
them, but most of those we see are fleeing real
danger and trying to take their families to
places of safety and security.

We have compassion for these people, irrespective of their faith.

We are not simply concerned about fellow Christians, we must be concerned about all who are in need.

All are created in the image of God and all are loved by God.

Over the Northern summer the world has witnessed an unprecedented exodus, migration of people from the Middle East and North Africa flowing into Europe.

We have seen tv reports showing hundreds of people walking along roads and railway tracks, gathering at bus stations and waiting at border crossings.

By sea, road and railway; masses of people, a sea of humanity has made its way to Europe. Heads of nations have met to discuss how to deal with this.

In reality the movement of people is only part of the problem; for years to come there will be issues of housing, employment and education. There is bound to be unrest between the native population of these countries and the new migrants over resources.

I don't think any government, however well intentioned, could be prepared for the scale of what has happened.

As the Northern winter approaches there is likely to be disappointment among the refugees, not enough to go around, not the longed for jobs, income or housing.

How do we think about this biblically and from a Christian perspective?

Recently we have been in a series *A Place to call Home*.

We have been considering how the bible can help us to understand the human longing for home.

In our city we have many people arriving from all over the world hoping for a new start, and to make a new home for themselves.

When you look into the bible you see people moving for all sorts of reasons:

Abraham made a journey of faith, leaving behind his country, people and his father's house.

Jacob had family problems and had to run away from home, but later in life he

sought reconciliation with his brother Esau and he returned home.

Ruth's husband died and she felt a loyalty to his mother Naomi and so left her own people to follow Naomi back to Israel.

David's life was threatened by King Saul and so he had to leave suddenly and make his home in a cave. He was on the run and needing a hide out where he would not be found.

The people of Israel were defeated by the Babylonians and many of them were forcibly taken into exile. They longed to return to Israel but God told them to stay put, to build houses, plant gardens, marry and have children; and to pray for the peace of the city.

So we find the bible has a lot to say about a variety of situations in which people move to a new home; some from choice and others through force of circumstances.

The life of Jesus brings us another insight.

Jesus and his family became refugees who had to flee from an evil ruler who was actively trying to kill Jesus.

A verse in Hebrews speaks of Jesus saying, *Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.* (Heb 2:18).

The underlying principle here is because Jesus experienced something in life he is able to help others who have similar experiences.

I think we can apply this principle to refugees.

Jesus experienced life as a refugee and therefore understands and can help others who go through similar experiences.

Jesus didn't and doesn't stand apart from refugees; rather he was one of them.

To the refugee this can be a comfort, knowing that Jesus understands their plight.

To us this becomes a challenge. Because our Lord was a refugee, therefore we must try to see refugees through his compassionate eyes.

I think it is easy for us to skip over this early part of Jesus' story because it isn't obvious what it means and we haven't often had to think about refugees.

We don't often dwell in this part of the story, because there is much more interesting parts of the story to come.

Let's think about the context.

The Magi are unconventional, unexpected characters in this story.

They are the wise men we see depicted in Christmas cards.

They were astrologers, wise men, mystics, diviners of knowledge, interpreters of dreams and messages from the gods.

In ancient Persia they were holy men, seekers of truth, soothsayers and priests.

In the New Testament the term includes those who practice the magic arts.

They had seen a star, interpreted it to mean the King of the Jews had been born and so travelled to worship him and present him with special gifts.

I think the announcement of angels and local shepherds is easier to accept and understand.

Why would God send Gentiles whose work was shaded in mystery to seek him?

The priests of the Gentiles had seen what the priests of Israel had missed.

The priests of the gentiles came to worship the King of the Jews, while the priests of Israel were oblivious.

Herod was disturbed by the announcement of the Magi

The references to Herod are sometimes confusing.

This is because in the New Testament there are three kings named Herod.

Herod the Great ruled at the time of Jesus' birth and who died about 4 years later.

Herod Antipas, also known as Herod the tetrarch, son of Herod the Great, who was involved in the deaths of John the Baptist and of Jesus.

Herod Agrippa, who was the grandson of Herod the Great, and who ruled at the time the book of Acts was written.

So when reading the New Testament we may need to take a moment to think about which of these rulers it is referring to.

Herod the Great appointed King by the Roman Emperor and acted as their agent, as military prefect of Judea.

He ruthlessly suppressed any Jewish uprising or revolts.

He is known for his great building projects which included grand buildings in the port town of Caesarea, a palace in Jerusalem, the Antonina fortress and the reconstruction of the Temple.

Herod was ruthless in holding on to power.

On coming to power he ordered the execution of many Jewish leaders who might have opposed him.

His family was a mess of bitter rivalries, feuds and divisions.

He ordered the murder of one of his wives.

Herod suspected his sons of trying to usurp him and in murderous retribution had three of them executed.

On his death bed he ordered the death of notable men in Jerusalem.

Herod had no scruples about executing people, even his own wife and sons; so he would hardly have had second thoughts about executing the baby son of a carpenter.

While the slaughter of the innocents is only recorded in Matthew's Gospel, there is no doubt that this was the sort of order Herod would easily give to protect his own position as king.

Herod would allow no rival, however obscure, to be thought of as the King of the Jews.

The political situation with Herod is not unlike the situation we have seen in our modern day, where despots rule with an iron fist.

Since Kim Jong-un came to power in North Korea, 70 officials including family members have been executed.

Recent reports tell of chemical attacks in Syria by government forces of Bashar al-Assad which have killed people of all ages including children. At various times in history we see strong-armed leaders, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and others, use their power in ruthless and cruel ways against civilians.

In these political situations there are often very few options for people, but to flee and find safety in another country.

The threat to Jesus' life was very real and so his family had to flee to Egypt where they stayed until Herod died, about 4 years later.

In the Old Testament in the story of Joseph we find the people of Israel taking refuge in Egypt to escape a great famine.

Later in the time of Moses we see God rescuing his people so they can go and worship him, and also find a home in the Promised Land of Israel. This gives us a picture of God's plan of salvation, a thread that runs through all the Bible.

In different circumstances Jesus also took refuge in Egypt.

Matthew pointed to a couple of Old Testament prophecies to show that Jesus' time in Egypt and the death of the children had been foretold by God through the prophets.

When we read them in context these prophecies may seem a little obscure to us, however Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience who would have these links to the Old Testament an important part of the evidence that God was at work through Jesus.

We are not told anything about Jesus' time in Egypt.

We know that Jewish people had sought sanctuary there in times of need or danger throughout the centuries.

We also know that there were Jewish communities in many Egyptian cities.

So we can imagine that Joseph and Mary became part of one of these communities for the time they were in hiding.

They were in a strange country, with a different language, looking for accommodation and employment.

They were a long way from home with no citizenship and no rights.

So Jesus spent the early part of his childhood in Egypt.

They could not return home because while Herod lived their lives were in danger.

The threat to Jesus' life, the hasty journey to escape danger, and living in a foreign land were all part of Jesus' infancy and childhood.

What difference does this make to us?

Many of you will remember Jesus' teaching about the King accepting people into his kingdom and giving an inheritance, while rejecting others and not allowing them to enter his kingdom.

Jesus commended some saying, *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to*

drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Mt 25:35). ... 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' (Mt 25:40).

Although it is taking these verses out of context I think we can fairly rephrase this to say, *When I the refugee was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I the refugee was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I the refugee was a stranger and you invited me in, I the refugee needed clothes and you clothed me, I the refugee was sick and you looked after me, I the refugee was in prison and you came to visit me. 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'* (Mt 25:40).

If anything, because our Lord was a refugee, we must surely be all the more compassionate, generous and loving to those who today share that refugee status.

Added to this is Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan which he told when it seemed some Jewish leaders were trying to avoid their obligation to help others.

This story of generous help and compassion from an enemy reminds us that our neighbour is not necessarily someone who is like us or who believes what we believe, but is simply anyone who needs help from us.

In the light of Jesus' teaching about compassion and his own experience as a refugee; and also thinking of how God in the Old Testament spoke of his loving concern for the strangers and aliens living among the people of Israel, I think we should be compassionate and generous towards the refugees who will soon be arriving in our country.

In terms of compassion these are our neighbours who will need care from us.

In terms of God's grace we should be willing to help these people regardless of whether or not they are Muslim or Christian.

We may not be able to help the masses of people who are flooding into Europe, but surely we must be good neighbours to those who arrive on our shores.

I am glad that earlier in the year we were able to send a gift of about \$5000 through TEAR Fund to help refugee children in Syria, but now I ask, how will we help those who arrive in New Zealand?

Will they find a welcome here?

Will they find a place to call home?

Part of our vision to be a spiritually healthy church is to be a people who serve with compassion.

So I encourage you, as individuals, families and as a church – be compassionate.

Let us demonstrate God's love and compassion as Christian people so that people will see His light in us and give him glory.