

**Refugee Sunday Sermon preached  
by Archbishop David Moxon  
at St Paul's Inside the Walls Episcopal Church**

**Rome, Sunday July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015**

Take my lips O God and speak through them, take our minds O God and think through them, take our hearts O God and love through them this day.

It is a great privilege to be here with you this morning and to reflect with you about mission with refugees on this refugee Sunday. Your commitment to refugee ministry is remarkable and transformative, through the Joel Nafuma refugee centre, the refugee Artisans project and the publication of the "Welcome the Stranger" letters. So I speak here with you about something that is real for you every day. It is a privilege to be here with you in this place.

The gospel reading you have just heard is one of the most dramatic in the New Testament; the stilling of the storm that threatened to overturn the boatload of disciples. This kind of crisis is one of the most common in ancient near eastern stories and myths. There are Baal and Marduk the storm gods who triumph over the raging waters of the monsters of chaos, Yam and Tiamat. In today's Psalm, 107, God is the victor in combat with the forces of chaos at sea. We have just said the words from this psalm "He stilled the storm to a whisper and quieted the waves of the sea. Then were they glad because of the calm".

Jesus in this gospel has the God given power to still the storm. Previously he has been described as a healer, an exorcist and a worker of human miracles, but so could many other religious figures of the time. But not one of them could still a raging storm, a storm which frightened even seasoned fishermen like these disciples. This tells us that he is seen as invoking the powers of God in creation in a unique way; "Who is this that even the waves and the sea obey him?" For the Gospel, this marks him as Son of God long before the resurrection.

However, when you consider the plight of refugees travelling in boats on the Mediterranean sea hoping for their freedom, and learn of so many drownings when boatloads of people sink from the waves of the storm, or from rickety hulls, or from neglect and abandonment, you ask the question, where is the God of Jesus Christ who stilled the storm? Where is the power of God? Does God care?

This is the question the disciples ask Jesus in the storm: he has been sleeping in the boat during the tempest at sea and they wake him and say to him "Do you not care that we are perishing?" This is a very honest and also very serious challenge. If we feel that our relationship with someone begins to feature a lack of care, then that relationship begins to crumble. The sense of a lack of care is a fundamental flaw in any friendship or partnership.

This is the question we ask when refugees die at sea in large numbers. Where is God? Does God care? This question is all the more poignant and urgent as we think of the facts today. United Nations people speak of the overwhelming refugee crisis we are facing and the huge strains on their capacity to cope or respond.

The United Nations speak of the plight of refugees today, of up to 33 million people who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group are outside the country of their nationality and cannot avail themselves of the protection of that country. So also with internally displaced persons who had to flee their homes and cities of residence in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters.

Where is God? Does God care? Can these storms be stilled, can a word of peace be spoken, can a stillness come?

The beginning of a response to this challenge is found in the depths of the same bible that this story of the storm comes from:

In the Bible narratives Jesus and his parents slipped into Egypt to escape Herod's infanticide. Moses and the Israelites were delivered from Egyptian tyranny into the promise land. Early church believers poured out of Jerusalem to save their lives and consequently the gospel reached new corners of the world. The apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos and wrote the book of revelation. All fled their homeland because they were singled out by leaders within their own country as targets for persecution. They were refugees.

So we begin to see that the story of refugees in the bible is a story about God, and about God's people. This is a crisis that God shares in intimately, by undergoing it personally. So the beginning of an answer to the question where is God? is that God lives within this crisis. God is there. This is why Pope Francis celebrated mass on an upturned refugee boat on the beach at refugee island of Lampedusa. He was saying this is where God's real presence, pain and redemption are witnessed to.

The Bible also witnesses to the fact that God loves protects and provides for refugees. In Psalm 146 God watches over them, in Psalm 91 God provides refuge for them, a shelter from the storm, and shade from the heat. In the book of Deuteronomy and the book of Numbers, God shows no partiality to natives of a country, refugees and indigenous people have equal status in God's sight. God has no country. In Deuteronomy chapter 10 God defends their cause providing food and clothing for them. In Luke chapter 4 Jesus announced that the essence of his ministry was to help people in refugee like situations.

A further response from the bible is that God calls us to respond to this crisis because we are already bound up with it as God's people.

God expects us to love refugees and to give freely of their resources to help them. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy it says love refugees as you love yourselves. In many places it says treat refugees fairly and stand up for them when others mistreat them. In Luke 3 and Matthew 23 it says share your food and clothing and shelter with them. In Hebrews 13, Isaiah 58, and Luke 14, it says invite them into your homes. Set aside part of your income to help them it says in Leviticus 19, Deuteronomy 14, 24, and 26, Galatians 2 and James 1. In Luke 12 and Matthew 19 it says sell your possessions to help them if need be. Most challengingly of all in Luke 14 and Matthew 25, the last judgment includes the challenge about how refugees were treated.

This is a strong, unmistakable record of one to one and community based responses, but what about nations as a whole? In Isaiah 16, verses 3 to 5 it speaks of rescuing refugees from persecuting

nations, giving shelter to them from their destroyers. In Deuteronomy 23 it says, never return refugees to their oppressors. Let them live with you and give them a choice as to where they can live with you.

Have these texts been taken seriously? Do they speak and come alive here and now? "Does God care?" Look at the back of this church, with the refugee artisans project, look underneath this church with the Joel Nafuma Refugee Centre and look in the publications of this church with the "Welcome the Stranger" letter series. Where is God? God is here, through the work of your hands in these ways, as St Teresa of Avila said:

*"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."*

You are Christ woken up, speaking a word of calm and peace. You are Christ in the boat, you have got into 'the same boat' as refugees and are speaking a word of hope and stillness in the face of the storms that have raged over and about their lives.

Where is God? Does God care? You yourselves, here and now, are the tangible evidence. I thank God for you.

David Moxon