

In Search of Freedom

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist, June 23rd, 2024 - Leviticus 19:33-34, Matthew 2:13-15 & Mark 4:35-43)

Some of my friends at school were the children of people who had arrived in Australia as refugees after World War 2, but back then I didn't understand what that meant. It was when I went to university that I first met a refugee. It was in the 1980's and this man had come from Vietnam in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. His story was not dissimilar to many other Vietnamese refugees, he had escaped with some of his family, hid in the jungle until they could get on a rickety fishing boat and begin the journey to Australia. Along the way they were attacked by pirates. Australia back then welcomed these people and helped them resettle and, in his case, enabled him to go to university. Despite the trauma he had been through he found a sense of freedom here and he went on to have a very senior job at Telstra. He and others like him would have known what it was like to be on a boat in the midst of a storm fearing for their lives, just like the disciples did in our story today. Jesus provided them with safety, back 40 years ago this country provided those refugees with welcome and safety.

The bible as we can see from our readings today is very clear about how we should treat refugees, asylum seekers, foreigners, strangers or aliens in our midst. The Hebrew scripture is clear – you shall love the alien as yourself, because remember you had that same experience in Egypt. No ifs or buts about it.

Then in our second reading we see that the infant Jesus is forced with his family to seek refuge again in Egypt due to a tyrannical king. As Jesus grows, he tells us in many ways and many times how we should treat strangers – we need to welcome and provide for their needs, in so doing we are serving Christ. Gender and ethnicity are irrelevant in the Kingdom of God.

The way Australia treats asylum seekers has changed since 9/11 and I ask myself why we as Christians are relatively silent about this, given what our faith story has to say about this.

Every person in this world has the right to seek asylum, to seek refuge and safety, they are not illegal, and they are not jumping the queue. It seems to me despite changes in government we are still harsh in the way we treat these people. Shouldn't we make more noise about welcoming people and provide safety for them.

There are many reason people need to leave their homeland:

- Their home villages have been burnt to the ground and they have been displaced
- They have received lashes for simply sharing a drink with their mates
- They have been sexually abused by the police who came looking for a sibling
- They have been framed for an offence committed by another
- They have had their Master's thesis taken by their supervisor and passed off as their work because they dared to ask questions
- They have worn their hijab incorrectly and been reported
- They have asked questions in their university law class and been kidnapped on the way home

- They have become Christian
- They have had all their art works in an exhibition destroyed by the police

And for many more reasons.

When they got to Australia initially, some were sent to Woomera in the desert and incarcerated. I met an Afghani once who had been at Woomera and he told me that he was never called by name only ever referred to by a number – the first step in dehumanizing people seeking freedom. Then asylum seekers were detained offshore for extraordinary lengths of time. Still after more than a decade many of them have not had their visa situation resolved and have been forced to live in limbo and uncertainty adding to their trauma, trauma on trauma.

What would Jesus who calmed the sea and fears of his disciples do for these people who have survived a stormy sea but not found a genuine welcome here? What should the followers of Jesus do?

A decade ago, Rev Tri Nguyen, himself a Vietnamese refugee, set off from Brunswick Baptist Church with a replica boat and three asylum seekers (and a support crew) to walk to Parliament House in Canberra. *(show picture)* His aim was to express his thanks to Australia by leaving the boat there (it is still at Parliament House) for the gift of refuge he and his family experienced. He also wanted to raise awareness for justice for people seeking asylum as he was acutely aware of how things had changed since he came to Australia. That is why he walked with three asylum seekers – two Iranians, one who arrived here as an unaccompanied minor, and one Kurdish person. He was conscious of where he had received welcome and hospitality, the three he walked with experienced fear and punishment and yet all of them simply sought freedom.

Another asylum seeker friend is an artist and on your screen are parts of two paintings depicting the plight of those who get on a leaky boat seeking freedom.

The next pictures are also her's, but after she has experienced welcome and hospitality in this country and I think indicate a sense of hope for the future.

It is my prayer that all asylum seekers in our midst might experience welcome and hospitality, mercy and kindness and the kind of safety Jesus provided when he calmed the stormy sea. Amen.