

**We cannot walk alone.**

Today is the last day of Refugee Week 2021. It was with this in mind that I “saw” today’s reading in a different way; I’m not saying the disciples were refugees, clearly they weren’t yet, even though Jesus had been a refugee at a very early age, but the crossing of the sea, and the storm they faced, certainly brought the issue to my mind. That is the lens through which I invite you to read the passage today.

The 1951 Refugee Convention is a key legal document and defines a refugee as: “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.” We could also add, sexual orientation. Fearing death, torture, imprisonment.

Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country. They often have had to flee with little more than the clothes on their back, leaving behind homes, possessions, jobs and loved ones.

This being the case, why are nations so terrified of refugees? Why do people hate them so much? Why are they treated in such a horrible way? Particularly when the powerful countries of the world are so often responsible for creating the situations for which people flee their country? Does our faith welcome refugees or push them away?

When they fear staying in their country more than they do the journey to safe harbours, where so often they are not safe. The logo of the United Nations Refugee Agency is so easy to understand - two hands coming together to protect, to give refuge, to give security. And we all seek this in life, don’t we?



But challenges of the past year have exposed the deep inequalities between us, including in housing, income, and access to healthcare, particularly the Covid 19 vaccine, where churches are now speaking of Vaccine Apartheid. But the crisis has also shown how interconnected we are – that the wellbeing of each of us depends on the welfare, safety, and hard work of others. We are part of a shared ‘us’: this is so clear as from the Old Testament, where we can find in Leviticus 19; 33-34 this feeling – “*When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.*” We cannot forget that soon after the birth of Jesus, the baby, Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt because their life was in danger.

The sense of refuge is essential to the Bible, and because of this it is essential to our faith response to God’s love: Abraham, Daniel, Ruth, and others. The theme of Refugee Week 2021, ‘We Cannot Walk Alone’, is an invitation to extend your hand to someone new. Someone who is outside your current circle, has had an experience you haven’t, or is fighting for a cause you aren’t yet involved in.

Not only disciples crossing the lake caught in the storm, but the many refugees we read about who cross seas in great danger, often losing their life trying to get somewhere safe. Can we try to imagine what life must be like where they come from that crossing even with their children is preferable to staying where they were?

In the Gospel reading, the disciples were terrified, even when some of them were fishers by profession, used to travelling through storms, we should remember that in Biblical times, the sea was the expression of chaos, even of the absence of God, and when they go to Jesus in their desperation they ask - “*Don’t you care is we*

drown?" – will not this be the same feeling of the refugees today? Can we just look on to what is going on to them as if it were not our reality?

Two weeks ago, we were horrified when the news told us about a toddler's body that was washed up in Norway, this child had drowned during a migrant Channel crossing, Artin Iran-Nezhad, who was 15 months old when he drowned as did his parents and two older siblings in October last year, his body turned up in Norway on New Year's Day and only identified two weeks ago. Are they not God's children? And all who risk their lives in such a way – they are God's children.

The Gospel reading is so well known, but if we ONLY think of frightened disciples turning to Jesus, we have missed the point. The point being that in the midst of the chaos that surrounds, God shows up. As I said last Sunday – the tree spreads its branches for the birds to find refuge, doesn't God care for the human family in need? God, in Jesus, is promising liberation, and through Jesus is creating relationships. We believe in God who rescues us, God who is in the boat during the storm with us (where us includes refugees), and the reading shows us what God is willing to do to rescue the people of God. We cannot walk alone, sail alone, live alone. **How we treat refugees reflects who we are.**

I leave you with two quite different images of the same biblical scene. The first drawn by Cerezo Barredo, a contemporary Spanish Missionary artist; the other painted by Neil Thorogood, a URC minister. Can you imagine yourself in any of these situations? I for one would be terrified.



**Collect for this Sunday.**

*Saving God, entering the flood and storm of chaos and confusion: speak peace to a fearful heart that we might find our faith in him whose word brings rest to all creation; through Jesus Christ, lord of wind and wave. Amen*

## The Immigrants' Creed

I believe in Almighty God, who guided the people in exile and in exodus, the God of Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon, the God of foreigners and immigrants.

I believe in Jesus Christ, a displaced Galilean, who was born away from his people and his home, who fled his country with his parents when his life was in danger and returning to his own country suffered the oppression of the tyrant Pontius Pilate, the servant of a foreign power, who then was persecuted, beaten, and finally tortured, accused and condemned to death unjustly. But on the third day, this scorned Jesus rose from the dead, not as a foreigner but to offer us citizenship in heaven.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the eternal immigrant from God's kingdom among us, who speaks all languages, lives in all countries, and reunites all races.

I believe that the church is the secure home for the foreigner and for all believers who constitute it, who speak the same language and have the same purpose. I believe that the communion of the saints begins when we accept the diversity of the saints.

I believe in the forgiveness of sin, which makes us all equal, and in reconciliation, which identifies us more than does race, language, or nationality.

I believe that in the resurrection God will unite us as one people in which all are distinct, and all are alike at the same time.

Beyond this world, I believe in life eternal in which no one will be an immigrant, but all will be citizens of God's kingdom, which will never end. Amen

"The Immigrants' Creed" is excerpted from *The Book of Common Worship: 2018 Edition*.