



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE
WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

108th World Day of Migrants and Refugees

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25 September 2022

Amos 6:1,4-7; Psalm 145; 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/frank-brennan-6/homily-migrants-and-refugees>

In today's gospel we hear the parable of Dives and Lazarus. Let's start with Dives. 'There was a rich man who used to dress in purple and fine linen and feast magnificently everyday'. Today is the 108th World Day of Migrants and Refugees. There can be no doubt that the equivalent of Dives when it comes to the topic of migrants and refugees are those of us who are privileged to live in Australia at peace and with security - with secure borders and an orderly migration programme.

Let's now consider Lazarus the poor man who lay at the gate of Dives' house, covered with sores, longing to fill himself with the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. There can be no doubt that the equivalent of Lazarus when it comes to migrants and refugees are those in the trouble spots of our world who are desperate to flee to the peace and security enjoyed in countries such as Australia.

Scripture scholar Brendan Byrne notes that 'the story does not portray Lazarus as notably virtuous in any way. It is his poor and neglected condition that is the object of God's action. Nor is the rich man wicked in other respects. It is simply that his luxury so absorbed him that he did not notice - and not noticing, sealed his fate.'¹

In his message for today which is entitled 'Building the future with migrants and refugees', Pope Francis says: 'No one must be excluded. God's plan is essentially inclusive and gives priority to those living on the existential peripheries. Among

¹ Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, St Pauls, 2000, p.137.



them are many migrants and refugees, displaced persons, and victims of trafficking. The Kingdom of God is to be built with them, for without them it would not be the Kingdom that God wants. The inclusion of those most vulnerable is the necessary condition for full citizenship in God's Kingdom.²

Of course, there is no way that we can accommodate all refugees, displaced persons, victims of trafficking and those who want to be migrants. But we Australians need to admit that in recent years, our policies in relation to migrants and refugees have been unnecessarily mean, cruel and disorganised. Last month, Andrew Giles, the new Minister for Immigration Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, pointed out that almost 1 million visa applications were waiting for processing when the new government came to office in May this year. He pointed out that typically in the past there would be 40-80,000 people living in a holding pattern on bridging visas at any one time, but that presently there are over 330,000 people living on bridging visas. Australia is a nation founded on migration but we reached the stage under the last government where there were more than 200,000 applications for citizenship waiting to be processed.³ Political decisions and bureaucratic bungling resulted in too many needy people having to put their lives on hold.

With the election of a number of Teal candidates to the Australian parliament, it has at long last been possible to have a respectful debate about the topic of immigration detention in the Australian parliament. Zali Steggall, the Teal member for Warringah, raised a Matter of Public Importance (MPI) in the House of Representatives highlighting that there are still many refugees who have 'entered their tenth year in detention in Nauru and Papua New Guinea'.⁴ Mr Giles welcomed the debate saying, 'I am determined to change the tone of debate on these issues. It is probably the case that we're not always going to agree about every aspect of this very challenging area of public policy making, but I am determined that no more... will vulnerable human beings be used as political footballs in this place or more broadly in the political debate in Australia. It has been coarsened for too long. That must end.'⁵

² Pope Francis, 'Building the future with migrants and refugees', 2002, available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20220509-world-migrants-day-2022.html>

³ Andrew Giles, 'The Administration of Australian Immigration', Speech at Sydney Policy Lab, 25 August 2022.

⁴ House of Representatives, Hansard, 3 August 2022, p. 590.

⁵ Ibid. p. 591.



It would be naive to think that the new government and the Teals will agree on all aspects of policy. After all the New Labor government is committed to keeping the boats stopped. On her first overseas trip as Minister for Home Affairs, Clare O'Neil went to Sri Lanka and spoke of her committed resolve to continue working with the Sri Lankan government 'to thwart people smugglers and to prevent the loss of life and risk to livelihoods of innocent people'.⁶ The Albanese government, like the Morrison government, will take whatever action it can to stop people smuggling operations or unauthorised boat journeys by asylum seekers setting sail from Sri Lanka or Indonesia. Mr Giles says he will not walk away from the tough political choices but he has repeated Prime Minister Albanese's claim that 'we can maintain strong borders without abandoning our humanity', adding that 'we can only maintain strong borders if we elevate our compassion and humanity'.

In this recent MPI debate, Matt Thistlethwaite, the Assistant Minister for Defence, told parliament that to ensure success, 'it's important that people come through the government program.' 'In the past some people have sought to arrive outside the resettlement program.' He pointed out: 'A tough policy was put in place in Operation Sovereign Borders. It's supported by this government and it will remain in place because it has worked.'⁷

Jacinta Collins is now the Executive Director of the National Catholic Education Commission. On the eve of the 2019 election, she retired from Parliament telling the Senate: 'Australians do not want to see refugees languishing forever. While we all endorse the policy objective of deterrence, it is abhorrent to use people's lives to achieve such a goal. I regret that officials did not alert Labor when we were in government that boat interceptions or turnbacks could safely occur. Much of what followed might not subsequently have occurred.'⁸

While safe boat turnbacks and interceptions are to remain in place, we Australians living with the comfort of Dives need to do more to provide pathways to peace, security and prosperity to more of those like Lazarus who are desperate simply to have the opportunities in life that we take for granted. Providing permanent visas to all proven refugees living amongst us is a good start. Increasing our permanent migration places this year from 160,000 to 195,000 is a welcome development. Doing all we can promptly to empty the facilities on Nauru and Papua New Guinea is essential. Detaining asylum seekers only for a limited time and only for health, security and identity checks is long overdue.

⁶ Clare O'Neil, Minister for Home Affairs, Joint Media Release with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, 20 June 2022.

⁷ House of Representatives, Hansard, 3 August 2022, p. 593.

⁸ Senate, Hansard, 14 February 2019, p. 532.



Like Dives, we need to remember that Abraham sides with Lazarus, and that Abraham declares, 'Between us and you a great gulf has been fixed, to stop any crossing from your side to ours.' There'll always be more that we should do to build a future with migrants and refugees. But now we must commit to all that we can do while maintaining secure borders, an orderly migration program and a strong commitment to humanitarian assistance to those suffering at the hands of their own governments.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

Blessed is he who keeps faith forever,
secures justice for the oppressed,
gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets captives free.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

The LORD gives sight to the blind;
the LORD raises up those who were bowed down.
The LORD loves the just;
the LORD protects strangers.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

The fatherless and the widow he sustains,
but the way of the wicked he thwarts.
The LORD shall reign forever;
your God, O Zion, through all generations. Alleluia.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!