

**THE LAMPEDUSA CROSSES. REFUGEE SUNDAY, 19.6.16 LEVIN**

Rev Stuart Grant

Readings:

2 Corinthians 6: 1 – 13

Mark 4: 35 – 41

Tomorrow is World Refugee Day, so our main theme today is, our response to refugees.

Let's begin with some comments on the two scripture readings. On the face of it neither of them really has anything to do with refugees, but I think they can help us to focus our thoughts.

In the first reading, from St. Paul's second letter to the Christians at Corinth, Paul is trying to establish his credibility with his readers by pointing out the various sufferings he has endured in his attempts to bring the good news about Jesus to all kinds of people. The circumstances may be quite different, but there's a reminder here of the sufferings that many refugees have endured and are enduring right now. Words like troubles, hardships and difficulties, being beaten, jailed and robbed, going without sleep or food, - all these words call to mind the plight of thousands of desperate people fleeing from war and unrest.

Then we heard the Gospel story of the stilling of the storm. If only the storms of violence that cause people to abandon their homes and attempt dangerous sea crossings in flimsy boats, - if only these storms could be stilled! And the cry of the disciples to Jesus becomes the cry of refugees to the rest of the world, - "Don't you care that we're about to die?"

Now I want to tell you about a man called Francesco Tuccio. He is a carpenter who lives on the little island of Lampedusa, off the coast of Sicily, in the Mediterranean Sea. One Sunday in 2011, at the height of the Arab Spring, Francesco decided to stop making furniture. He was at Mass in his local church. Among the congregation were bedraggled groups of newly arrived Eritrean migrants, weeping for loved ones who had drowned during the Mediterranean crossing. After the service he went down to the shore and began collecting the blistered, brightly coloured driftwood from the wreckage of migrant boats that had washed up on Lampedusa's beaches. He decided to make crosses from them.

As he carved the timber, he shivered at the wood's strange touch which he said made him think of holy relics, and smelt "of salt, sea, and suffering".

He asked his parish priest to display a big rough cross above the altar to remind the congregation of the migrants' desperate plight and he offered every migrant he saw a small cross as a symbol of their rescue and of hope for a new life. His work later became famous, especially when it was made the subject of a BBC news item.

This story sparked a reaction far away on the other side of the world, in Dunedin, New Zealand, in my former congregation at Mornington. One of the members there, Cam Weston, saw the news item and responded as instinctively as the carpenter had done. He e-mailed Francesco asking if he would make a cross for the Mornington Methodists, explaining that "Here in Dunedin, in far off New Zealand, we are soon to have some refugees from Syria joining our community with the hope that they can establish a better life for themselves in this peaceful part of the world. My request is for one of your special crosses to reside in my local church to be here to welcome any refugees who may attend a service, as a symbol of our recognition of the suffering they have experienced before coming to our land. We welcome all into our community, and will support the refugees as we can when they arrive."

The reply came back by e-mail, "I understand what it needs, for me it is fine, I just need to know the size in terms of the cross, I have to inform to know if I can get them the cross and the cost of shipping. Good evening. Best regards, Francesco Tuccio."

And when I spoke to Colin Gibson, who wrote the article I'm quoting from, he told me that the cross was on its way, - a cross fashioned from the shattered timbers of a refugee boat. It will soon be installed in the Mornington Methodist Church as a reminder of the suffering that plagues our whole world and the sympathetic love that suffering calls forth – as Jesus would have wished.

The British Museum has also requested such a cross, and the wood for it was chosen carefully: it came from a boat which capsized off the coast of Lampedusa on 3 October 2013 with the loss of 366 lives; a disaster which caused the Italian Navy to launch their rescue mission. Francesco has written, "I was so happy and proud when the museum contacted me. And then I asked myself a question. "If this message has reached such an important museum, visited by people from all over the world, is this

enough to break down the wall in the hearts of people still indifferent to this terrible crisis?"

The Museum director replied, "It is hard to stand in front of that humble cross, in the middle of so many opulent and priceless exhibits, and not be moved to tears. Its message is powerful, direct and so deeply sad."

What has all this got to do with us in far off New Zealand?

Some might say, not much. When we haven't got enough housing for our own homeless people we shouldn't get involved in helping to house others. Some might also say, we don't want an influx of refugees to threaten our standard of living or take away jobs.

Our government has recently agreed, very reluctantly, to raise slightly the meagre quota of refugees it allows, and there have been many comments reported in the media on how inadequate this is. Immigration has become a politically divisive issue. The fact is that many similar countries far outstrip New Zealand in their response to the refugee crisis. We rank 87<sup>th</sup> in the per capita list of countries willing to resettle refugees, and that is nothing to be proud of.

What we can be proud of are the communities in Dunedin, in Wellington and other places who are ready and willing to resettle refugees and make these desperate people warmly welcome.

Just yesterday the Red Cross in hosted an event organised by Manawatu Refugee Voice to mark World Refugee Day in the Palmerston North Convention Centre. It featured cultural performances and food, and success stories from former refugees.

Last Thursday a friend of mine from Porirua happened to mention how he was involved in getting a house ready for a family of Syrian refugees there.

The current refugee crisis is truly a modern horror story, and it is a story just as much about us as it is about the refugees. It's a story just as much about poverty of spirit as it is about the desperation of the refugees. Francesco Tuccio's inspiration to make the Lampedusa Crosses is all about trying to confront that poverty of spirit. He is trying to say to his own community on Lampedusa, and to the wider world, echoing the words of our Gospel reading, "Do you not care that these people are perishing?"

There are many people in New Zealand who do care, and are doing something about it. We can rejoice in that.

We don't have any legal obligation to help or host refugees. But we do have the powerful Christian teachings of justice and mercy and compassion. Here in Levin, where as far as know there are no plans at present to house refugee families, we may not be able to do much in a practical, hands on way. But we may be able to help financially.

If anyone does want to help in this way, we've included in the notices for today contact details for both Christian World Service, the churches' international aid agency, and the Red Cross.

I chose the next hymn, "Brother, sister let me serve you" not only with refugees in mind, but also the estimated one in five people in our communities who live with disabilities of various kinds, so before we sing I'd like to quote a few words from this publication, "Creating Welcoming Churches"

"The church itself is disabled in its mission if it does not include people with a disability. People with a disability offer the church the opportunity to understand what it is to be the body of Christ. As we make space for each other we will discover our gifts. Justice will be done when the needs of all are considered. The presence and ministry of people with a disability remind the church that no one person can minister alone. All members are called to do their part. All will learn to give and receive as members of the body of Christ. . . .

The church has the opportunity to mould a relationship of respectful equality. People with a disability are no longer seen as dependent, rather as interdependent sisters and brothers who are called to serve and be served".

And I'd like to share with you another thought I came across recently. It comes from Tony Wong, who lives in Jamaica and has been a paraplegic since 1976.

"If you fail to see the person but only the disability, who is blind?

If your heart and mind do not reach out to your neighbour, who is handicapped?

If you cannot hear your brother's or your sister's cry for justice, who is deaf?"