

It would be difficult to think of a more devastating humanitarian catastrophe in recent years than the current global refugee crisis. This year, we seen haunting images of human tragedy we will probably never forget. Such as when over 600 drowned off the coast of Libya, when their boat capsized in April. When 71 people died in a refrigerated truck near the Austrian / Hungarian border in August. And seeing the body of Aylan Kurdi, a young Syrian boy, washed up on a Turkish beach after a failed attempt to reach Greece.

We have seen a massive tide of desperate people sweeping into Europe that could not be held back. More than three quarters of them had been fleeing conflict and persecution in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. And we have heard terrible stories of the sheer horror they were escaping from. As of last Monday 7 December, more than 911,000 refugees and migrants had arrived on European shores this year, and a further 3,550 had lost their lives while trying to get there.

So how should Christians be responding to this terrible situation? We can find some of the answer in today's reading from the Gospel According to St Luke, in which St John the Baptist, in which John teaches a message not too dissimilar to what Jesus would later teach. As well as issuing an exhortation to repent and be baptised, John delivers a fiery homily against injustice, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."<sup>1</sup>

In a recent article, American theologian Rev Dr Eric D. Barreto suggested we needed another St John the Baptist today, a fiery prophet who will preach against injustice in the world, "... who will speak prophetically and clearly in the wilderness.... who will warn us that judgment is at hand, that God will no longer tolerate the quotidian violence we deem normal... who will tell us 'the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire'... [and] who will name the sins that pervade our relationships and our communities, the injustices that structure a broken world.... And who will point us to the path God has set before us."<sup>2</sup>

A new St John the Baptist, "... might call us to the radical idea that seemingly ordinary lives can be imbued with the extraordinary spirit of God to transform the world."<sup>3</sup>

While it might be easy for us to despair at the state of the world, we can play a small but significant part in making it a better place if we follow God's call to love our neighbours as ourselves. I'm sure I don't need to remind you at the very heart of Jesus teachings are two simple commandments: to love God, and to love others, and that, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."<sup>4</sup>

The Bible contains many texts that specifically tell us of our obligation to care for the sojourner and the refugee. To give but two examples, in the Book of Exodus, we are told, "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."<sup>5</sup> And in the Book of Jeremiah, it is written, "And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow..."<sup>6</sup>

I know there is only so much we can do. Aotearoa New Zealand is only

a small country, and while I would like to see us boost our refugee intake to more than we already have, I accept we can only take a tiny proportion. But I am appalled by some of the negative and judgmental attitudes some hold towards refugees. In some countries, there are loud voices shouting for nobody to be let in, because refugees are predominantly Muslim, and therefore they are considered likely to be terrorists.

Yes, there is a tiny minority of people who identify as Muslims that engage in acts of terror. But sadly, we could say the same about a tiny minority of people who identify as Christians. And I consider it absolutely despicable that some overseas politicians are whipping up prejudice, fear, and paranoia, amongst their constituents for political gain.

One American state governor has recently caused outrage by ordering Christian ministries to immediately cease and desist giving aid to refugees. And another has put pressure on a Roman Catholic Archbishop to make charities under his jurisdiction back down from their commitment to help resettle a Syrian refugee family.

Sometimes we will hear claims there is persecution against Christians in America. Usually, these involve something like a baker getting upset about not being allowed to discriminate against categories of customers they don't want to serve, even though there is absolutely nothing in scripture to support refusing service to people. But when state governors are ordering Christians to disregard what is clearly commanded in the gospels, I say there really is persecution against Christians in America, and this is what it looks like.

But the greatest irony is that many of those who are rejecting refugees in desperate need of help, will in less than two weeks be remembering the story of a Middle Eastern family who couldn't find refuge some 2,000 years ago.

So this Christmas I ask we remember those who are seeking refuge, just like the Holy Family sought refuge in Bethlehem, and those who are still fleeing from terror, just like the Holy Family fled from Herod. They are people created in God's image. And I pray we may see Christ in them and extend to them what compassion we can offer. For when we we are doing this for them, we are also doing this for the Christ.<sup>7</sup>

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<http://theword.tk>

<sup>1</sup> Luke 3:11b

<sup>2</sup> <https://sojo.net/articles/these-days-we-need-john-baptist>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 22:37-40

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 22:21

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 22:3a

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 25:34-40