

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 26 JUNE 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Matthew 10: 40-42; Romans 6: 1-4

“Living without Fear”

I don't know how many of you watched the SBS program “Go back to where you came from” this week. I only had the opportunity to watch the last part of the series, but it was enough to bring home to me, once again, that you really don't know what you're talking about until you've actually been able to put yourself into someone else's shoes.

The program showed six people with very strong, negative, opinions about refugees and asylum seekers, who were given the opportunity to trace the journey back to where some of Australia's refugees and asylum seekers had come from. After meeting with some refugees and asylum seekers who had made it here, they experienced some of the horrors of their journey and the places they came from first hand. They also met with some of the friends and family in refugee camps or place of origin that had been left behind. At the end of the show all six had mellowed considerably in their opinions, and all said they had been deeply moved by the experience. They didn't all agree on the policies that need to be put in place, or on how welcoming Australia should be to people who are fleeing from their native country. They could agree that it was all far more complex and involved more than just “sending them back to where they came from”.

Not surprisingly fear was the main deterrent for opening our borders and changing the practice of putting people in detention centres to be processed for long stretches of time. What if.....

What if there are too many? What if they take over? What if they bring their conflicts with them? What if there is not enough to go around? Where will it end?

Last month at our Mind Body Spirit evening, Associate Professor John Tobin came and spoke to us about these issues. A very enlightening talk that made it clear there is a lot of political scaremongering going on around the issue. That there are indeed huge issues, and very complex ones, but that it is not at all helpful that “they'll flood our borders with their boats if we are not careful” is used as a political catch cry, and misinformation is used to create fear and anxiety in the public mind drawing the attention away from the less simple, but much more real issues that need addressing.

I am no expert on refugee and asylum seeker issues, and I have trouble remembering all the facts and figures. What the media publish worries me, and I find it hard to look past the presentation of the cases made in the political arena. As so many others, I find fear catching up with me sometimes. Surely we don't want “them” to take over. Surely Australia can't just keep taking “them” in. Surely we can't just let anybody in without checking if they are genuine refugees, or terrorists? I want my children to be safe, and my grandchildren, if I can have any say in it. And surely, as one of the participants of the SBS television program said: “We can't shoulder the responsibility or guilt for all the poverty and violence in this world”. It's too big for me this problem, and I have got enough on my plate just keeping me and mine safe and provided for.

And then, suddenly, there are those words from Jesus in our readings this morning: “whoever welcomes you welcomes me, whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple - truly I tell you,

none of these will lose their reward”.

Of course it is not as easy as that. But then again: maybe it is.

The six people on the SBS program started with giving a bit of their time and were prepared to open their mind and heart a little bit. They returned from that experience as people who were prepared to think again, and perhaps open their hearts and minds a little further than they had done before to see if they could create a little bit more space for those they had met and whose plight they had come to understand.

It didn't change the world, but it opened some doors. It didn't blow them wide open, but created space for further, creative, thinking about the issues that was guided less by fear and defensiveness and more by genuine compassion and understanding of where the other was coming from (literally in this instance!).

A glass of cold water will not change the world. But if you open the door to your heart and you are willing to see someone's need for that glass of cold water, it will change the way you see the other. And that in turn will change the way you approach the issues that may come with welcoming the other into your heart and home.

Fear has no place in faith. It died with Christ. That's basically what the Apostle Paul says in the passage we read from Romans 6. That in baptism we die with Christ to rise to new life. As followers of Christ our life is put on a different track. The Jesus track. Where seeing someone's need for a cup of cold water here and now is more important than the question of what happens should we run out of water later on.

It may be hard to surrender to this, to have faith, and live it, but there is a great freedom in it. It's like jumping into the arms of a parent from a scary height to discover you are held and safe. It's learning to live the reality of that message Christ lived: that generous love and compassion will make your life a rich place, bearing a wealth of fruit. And not a place where fear and anxiety close doors and narrow us in, until there isn't even room to hand a cup of cold water over because of fear of missing out on something for me or mine further down the line.

Of course this all needs to happen sensibly and responsibly. But for us, as Christians the question if we are inspired by love and compassion or by fear and anxiety should be foremost in our minds. Our desire to put ourselves in the shoes of the other and care where we can be stronger than our natural inclination to defend and protect what we have and think we control.

According to Professor Tobin the Church is, now (and should be always), one of the most powerful dispersers of accurate information on the Refugee and Asylum seeker issues. One of the few places where media and politics have not completely succeeded in clouding and oversimplifying the issues. He told us the Church is doing an enormous amount of work both overseas and at home, both in the countries where refugees and asylum seekers come from, and in the places where they end up once they've started moving to help find solutions and give support where it is needed. The Church is a place where there are people who dare to care, who dare to risk giving of themselves. Literally by working with these issues all over the world. Or in other ways, even if it is only by keeping themselves informed and refusing to just go with the flow of whatever the media and politicians come up with. The Church, and the Uniting Church in particular, is a place where people are made welcome, whatever their background or ethnicity. A place where people are prepared to think outside the square and find ways for others to find safety, fit in and be given the opportunity to grow and flourish. A place that dares to follow the dream of that man two thousand years ago who

said that all it takes to build a better world is to love back the God that loves, and to love the other as much as we love ourselves,

And that starts, believe it or not, with a glass of water. Here, now, in this Church, in your life. It begins with noticing the need of another and responding to it by giving, even the simplest little bit, of yourself.

Once you've shared that cup of water your world changes. Because, once you've let that person in and got to know them, there will be more you'll want to give than just that cup of water you started with. Your boundaries become porous, and other things, other gifts will start to slip out. And while you, in this way, will be letting Christ in through the front door, your fear will leave quietly through the backdoor. Deflated and defeated, by love.

You'll start to think differently, more creatively, more generously, more compassionately, about how much more you've got to offer. Amen.