

21 June – Refugee Week (Psalm 86, Genesis 21:8-21)

This Sunday marks the end of Refugee Week the theme of which this year was ‘a million stories’ and we heard just a few of those stories, briefly, on the Soccerroos video, and I heard a few of those stories at the *Canberra Refugee Support Geoff McPherson Education Awards* on Tuesday – which was a wonderful morning! Doug has been telling me this for years, and he is right!

But ‘a million stories’ isn’t just a catch phrase. It is a reality. This year Australia welcomed its millionth refugee since the end of World War II, and that, I believe, is something to celebrate – in terms of the human suffering we have alleviated, and the gift that these people have been to this country! (If you go to the post office this month you can buy a special stamp that has been created in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Refugee Council of Australia.)

These ‘a million stories’ have become our story in this country. They have shaped who we are. So, this morning I want to give you a moment to think about a refugee story – it might be your own story or a friend’s or a story that has really impacted you - and to share that with the person sitting next to you...

This morning’s Bible reading – a challenging Bible reading – is very literally another refugee story. The name Hagar means *‘the stranger’* or *‘the foreigner’* and may actually not be a name at all!

In Genesis 16 we are told Sarah, the wife of Abraham, had an Egyptian slave, *‘the foreigner’*, and thinking she would never have children, she gave her slave to Abraham, and from this union a child, Ishmael, was born. I could say that this practice was customary, but, with a similar story in our news at the moment, we recognise this as sexual servitude. An estimated 41,000 people live in modern slavery in Australia and one quarter of these, according to the AFP and Institute of Criminology, in sexual servitude.

Our reading picks up Hagar’s story, after Sarah has given birth to Isaac, and here Sarah reacts, as many people react to refugees, fearing that their presence means there is less for them. *“Cast out this slave woman with her son;”* Sarah says, *“for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”*

Some of the rabbinical commentaries try to soften the harshness of this by interpreting Ishmael *‘playing with Isaac’* as Ishmael tormenting Isaac, but the Hebrew word *‘playing’* is just a play on Isaac’s name. It simply refers to laughing.

There was a lot of laughter at the CRS Education Awards! I don’t have pictures because we were reminded to respect people’s privacy, but you can imagine – all the nerves as small children shook hands with dignitaries as their stories were read out. And – as Doug had promised me – almost every single one was aspiring to one day be a doctor!

I am not sure they will *all* be doctors, but looking at their energy and joy and passion for learning, I know they will all do something amazing!

Even more moving were the teenagers whose stories included years of disrupted schooling, fleeing Afghanistan for temporary stays in Lebanon or Iran or Pakistan, sometimes being unable to attend school in those places, and now working so hard to catch up!

One of these young women spoke at the end on behalf of all the award recipients and she said that one thing that was common to all their stories was the struggle of starting again – having to learn how to start again.

In verse 14 we read that Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away – and they are forced to start their lives again.

But the hardships of doing this are real. In verse 15 we read that after wandering in the wilderness for some time, the water ran out, and in desperation Hagar placed Ishmael in the shade of a bush and *“went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, ‘Do not let me look upon the death of the child.’”*



This unfinished painting by Jean Francois Millet depicts the agony of this scene. Hagar, turning away from her child, lifting up her voice and weeping.

Perhaps the most heart wrenching of the stories of starting again we heard on Tuesday were the stories of adults – women who had careers in Afghanistan or other places – who were starting again; a former teacher working hard to retrain, a women who was a doctor in Afghanistan wanting to graduate from her English studies, so she could start training to be a doctor all over again.

And the extraordinary young woman who gave the speech who, after years of disrupted education, laid out her plan to become a maxillofacial surgeon. And listening to her, I had no doubt that she would do it.

Such people are a gift to this country, but what is also a gift is their lived example of resilience and perseverance. Instead of scapegoating *‘the foreigner’* perhaps we can learn from *‘the foreigner’* how to face and work through the challenges we all experience.

In verse 17 we’re told that God hears their distress. Ishmael’s name, in fact, means *‘God hears’* so in verse 17 there’s another play on words to make this point, *“God heard the voice of the boy”* or *“God heard the boy named God hears”*.

I find this story extraordinary because here in the Jewish canon we have the great heroes of Jewish faith, Abraham and Sarah, portrayed in a less than

flattering light, and the clear message that God hears all who are in distress. Verse 20 concludes the story with the words, *“God was with the boy.”* As Jon Levenson, a Jewish scholar, puts it, *“Ishmael is read out of the covenant but emphatically included in the promise that is larger than the covenant and preceded it.”* All people are God’s people. God’s mercy, God’s listening, God’s responding extends to all people.

I heard an echo of that great divine generosity in the young woman’s speech at the awards. She said for the first time in their lives being in Australia means that the future is clear. Other places offered temporary refuge, she said, but Australia is unique. Australia is a place where people from different places can genuinely feel, finally feel that they are at home.

And I thought, *“What an incredibly precious thing we can offer people as Australians – this gift of being home again. And what a contribution such people – with such passion for this country - make to us.”*

As Australians, we are, on the whole, a nation of immigrants. People who should understand what it means to start over. People who should understand, as Socceroo Awer Mabil said this week, that, *“We all belong in this world.”*

And as Christians, we are 100% people who have been given a chance to start over. People who we belong to God and God’s great love for our world.

As we follow the one who hears the cries of the refugee, who responds to the cries of the refugee - the one who was a refugee – and remember how God met us in our alienation – let us welcome refugees.