Seeking Wisdom for the Common Good:
The case of the asylum seeker and refugee

‘At the crossroads Wisdom takes her stand’ (Prov 8:1)

Today, more than ever in this country, we need a fresh wisdom to navigate these turbulent times of transition. Given the increasing pluralistic nature of our society, the emerging tension between secular and post secular accounts of Australia, and the significant issues before us what we need more than anything is a fresh wisdom for the cultivation of civil society. ‘Seeking Wisdom for the Common Good’ is the priority for today.

I remember over two decades ago asking my academic supervisor in relation to a particularly difficult theological matter, ‘how do you find wisdom’. His response was simple, ‘by being wise’. So I tried a different tact: Well ‘what makes a person wise’. His answer was equally simple, ‘by seeking wisdom’. A circular argument if ever there was. Apparently wisdom calls us to be wise; and yet only the wise hear her calling.

We need wise persons; we need people and institutions to seek wisdom above all else. Who are the wise persons you have known; those persons who have offered advice, a word in season, that has made all the difference; those who, when you look back on your life you can recognize as critical people for your own life in a good way.

In truth we need a wisdom that ‘stands at the crossroads’ of life (Proverbs 8). As the writer of Proverbs reminds us: ‘On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out’.
At the crossroads of our lives – our family relationships; at the crossroads of our institutional life; in the cut and the thrust of political argument and social conflict wisdom takes her stand. And in the temptations of our lives to take short cuts, ignore the obvious, pursue goals for personal or party benefit.

The Gospel today captures the issue so well. The rich man decides to tear down his granaries and build bigger ones. In the ancient world a granary was a symbol of wealth and power. The granary was the investment for the future, the assurance of great income. And his appetite for more and more knew no bounds. Self interest ruled his life. But he played the fool; ‘This night your very life will be demanded of you’ (Luke 12). Not wise but foolish. He failed to see the granary was a gift from God; it was not his to grow even richer. His insatiable appetite for wealth blinded him to wisdom. And against this foolishness the wisdom writer from an ancient time stands with a placard that reads: ‘all that you may desire cannot compare with wisdom’.

What issues confront us at the crossroads of our public life that demand wisdom? Ethical leadership, Asylum seekers and refugees, indigenous reconciliation, health and education, same sex unions, controversies over the environment and climate change, welfare and inequality; the treatment and abuse of children; the divide between rural and urban Australia; freedom of religion; aid and development; ageing and pastoral care; leadership and ethics; security and peace. Take your pick! Rank them if you will.

The issues they raise are complex. There is no simple solution. It is once wisely said: ‘for every difficult and complex problem there is always a perfectly reasonable, rational when informed solution
that is wrong!’ We need a wisdom with bite; a bite that can be felt and heard at the crossroads of our life.

And just when we need it most such wisdom seems to elude us. We seem to be afflicted with a deficit of wisdom. Wisdom is trumped (pardon the pun) by other concerns. We might be living in the twilight of wisdom – and its sibling, compassion. What trumps wisdom? When people are anxious and afraid wisdom always struggles to make her voice known. When the room of our lives and nation is filled with fear wisdom exits by the back door.

The Case of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

I want to suggest that refugees and asylum are a powerful example of a deficit in wisdom. Fear and security have so invaded the moral landscape of our lives that wisdom and the courage it requires of us is simply squeezed out. We observe some significant and worrying shifts:

- From interest in the other to self interest
- From humanitarian concern to political and military focus
- From protection and hospitality to the alien and stranger to deterrence, to illegals, to those with numbers instead of names
- From moral to legalistic arguments
- From refugee as true victim ... to social scapegoat

I have observed these developments in my work at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. I have seen it first hand through the asylum seekers on community detention being cared for in our
local parish church. Australian society has been built by the creativity and resourcefulness of people who were once refugees. The present Governor of South Australia was a Vietnamese boot person decades ago. And there are so many opportunities for this country in both city and rural Australia to continue to act generously and offer care and a home to refugees and those seeking asylum.

We have a fundamental responsibility to protect and care for those seeking asylum for fear of persecution. The reason is clear for Christians. The moral obligation to care and protect asylum seekers and refugees has its spiritual and ethical basis in the long held conviction that this world and all of creation does not belong to us. It comes as gift to us from God. In particular that human beings are made in the image of God. Asylum seekers and refugees are made in the image of God. That is their primary status; before they are asylum seekers, before they are refugees; before they are identified in any way that separates and distances them from us there is something more fundamental. We share a common humanity and a common identity as image bearers of the Divine life. This is basic to the Christian tradition no matter what church we belong to. And it goes deep into our heritage. Indeed its origins lie in the people of Israel and the Jewish religion.

In the Jewish religion the stranger and alien require of us hospitality and compassion. Leviticus 39:34 expressly demands in relation to the stranger: “Thou shalt love the stranger as thyself.” The Talmud (Oral Law) mentions that the precept to love, or not to oppress the stranger, occurs 36 times throughout the Jewish teachings
The Rabbis stated that “nothing should be done to annoy or injure the stranger, or even by word to offend their feelings”. And Jesus was a Jew; this was his origin and it is easily forgotten. The Gospels of the Jewish Jesus tell the story of someone who offered hospitality to the stranger, the outcast and the despised. Jesus was always crossing boundaries to search for those in need of healing and sanctuary. You did not hear from his lips phrases like ‘sovereign borders’; his agenda was the goodness of the sovereign God of his life and all life. In the gospels people were always breaking into his life and space, intruders, nameless! Out of desperate need they would come through roof tops, thrust through a crowd, call out along the road side making fools of themselves, suffer public humiliation – in short whatever it takes to seek healing, care and protection. Jesus didn’t regard them as queue jumpers or illegals. He had compassion on the people especially the mistreated and suffering, and especially women and children. The gospels of Jesus are a manifesto for asylum seekers and refugees; they are a manifesto for the way we ought to regard such fellow human beings; the gospels offer a moral framework for our common humanity and at the heart of the gospels is Jesus’ life of hospitality and compassion to the stranger. It got him into trouble.

Jesus was an asylum seeker and a refugee: at the very core of our faith is the story of Jesus the refugee seeking asylum. Jesus’ ministry among the strangers and outcast defined his life. Why? Because it was in his blood; he came from refugee stock. As a young child Jesus became a displaced person. His parents fled to Egypt to escape the
ruthless violence of one King Herod. He was a child refugee. He was taken to a foreign country without passport, with parents who had little to show they could support themselves in another place. He didn’t travel by plane, he didn’t travel by car or train; he didn’t even go by boat. Probably a camel! Was he an illegal? Did the Egyptian authorities send him to another country to be processed? It sounds so absurd doesn’t it. Outsourcing care and protection quickly becomes abdication of responsibility.

Born in a food trough, he spent his early years as a refugee in a foreign land, clearly cared for and protected. When it was safe he returned to his country of origin. But even then had to settle in a different place from which he had come for safety sake. His identity was shaped from earliest days as a stranger, asylum seeker and refugee. And he lived as a refugee; ‘foxes have holes and birds have their nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’. At present in our world there are 50 million people with nowhere to lay their head. In a couple of decades there will be 150 million.

Befriending the asylum seeker and refugee is our responsibility as human beings. It is what we are called to do as followers of Jesus; letting their voice be heard when they have no voice; attending to their cries; in order that they can find consolation in their trauma and fear. Being advocates for those who have no helpers and defenders. In truth how we respond to asylum seekers and refugees will be a litmus test of how we respond to any in need much closer to home.

I want to end this occasional homily with a somewhat free adaptation of those haunting words of Jesus at the end of Matthew’s Gospel. The
subject of course is the final judgment (Matt 25:31-46).

31 When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations including Australia will be gathered before him, and the Lord will separate people and governments, one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was an asylum seeker and you gave me safe haven in your own home; I didn’t have a visa or passport but you treated me a child of God; I was a stranger who couldn’t speak the language and you welcomed me with the language of love, 36 I was frightened and with barely the clothes on my back and you clothed me with kindness and care, I had lost loved ones in conflicts and persecutions and you comforted me, I was in detention and despairing of life itself and you never gave up until I was freed.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you an asylum seeker and welcomed you, or without visa or passport and treated you as a child of God, a stranger of different race and language, sick, afraid and befriended you, in detention and we became an advocate for your plight? And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these asylum seekers and refugees, you did it to me.’

Here is wisdom with bite! To live this kind of tough wisdom will demand something more from us than platitudes or pious sympathy.
It will cost us something; it will require courage. My friends we are on a great pilgrimage seeking wisdom for the tough issues in our lives, our churches, our diocese and our nation.

On this Willochra Sunday; this special occasion to celebrate the life of the Diocese and its witness in the world let us resolve to stand at the crossroads – to take our place in the cut and thrust of life – to stand there. Why? Because that is where wisdom is to be found; and that wisdom has a name – even Jesus Christ, savior and Lord.

Amen

Rt Rev’d Dr. Stephen Pickard, Canon Theologian of the Diocese and Executive Director, the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture.

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