**Reflections for the Sunday Homily**

The Word of God that the Church offers for our life this Sunday presents the fascinating theme of the relationship between God and His people themed around the discussion on the Law.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses challenges the people whether or not they are keeping the memory of God’s wisdom and persistent love, for this is the value at the origin of the journey of liberation and freedom, out of Egypt towards the land of the promise.

The Apostle James reminds the Church that it is not enough to listen to the Word of God: one must listen to the Word, receive it and make it bear fruits that are visible: “Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves…Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Somehow, the Law should emphasize the intimate connection between the listening and the doing of the Word which is so beautifully reflected in the encounter between the Word and the young Samuel: “Samuel promptly answered: ‘Speak, for your servant is listening’” (1 Sam 3:10).

But how do we listen to the voice of the Lord who speaks to us today?

This Sunday, the Church in Australia marks Migrant and Refugee Sunday. The theme chosen by Pope Francis for the 101st World Day for Migrants and Refugees is: Church without frontiers, Mother to all. Pope Francis, in his message, reminds everyone that, “The Church opens her arms to welcome all people, without distinction or limits, in order to proclaim that ‘God is love’” (1 Jn 4:8, 16).

The Pope, himself the son of Italian immigrants who made their home in Argentina, grounds his message on the very experience of migrants and refugees as we see it today: The Church without frontiers, Mother to all, spreads throughout the world a culture of acceptance and solidarity, in which no one is seen as useless, out of place or disposable. Today this takes on particular significance. In fact, in an age of such vast movements of people, such migration can give rise to suspicion and hostility, even in ecclesial communities, prior to any knowledge of the migrants’ lives or their stories of persecution and destitution. In such cases, suspicion and prejudice conflict with the biblical commandment of welcoming with respect and solidarity the stranger in need.

This is in stark contrast with what we often read in the newspapers, listen to on the radio or watch on television. These means of communication tend to use a language of deterrence and fear such as: illegal immigrants, queue jumpers, undocumented, boat people; boarder protection. Two different voices with two different messages. Our actions are largely decided upon the way we listen to and act on these voices.
Without the possibility of constructing a fence around Australia, we have developed intricate policies to deter asylum seekers arriving by boat. For several decades, successive Australian governments have continued to implement increasingly harsh measures which punish asylum seekers in the hope that this will stop them arriving. For over 20 years both political parties have maintained a policy of indefinite mandatory immigration detention. Most detention facilities are in very remote areas and harsh environments. This is in contrast to the policies during the 1970s and 1980s of welcoming and providing assistance for Vietnamese, East Timorese and South American refugees.

Making immigration detention mandatory denies natural justice and procedural fairness.

Many asylum seekers have horrific stories which are often ignored. Around 1,000 people have died at sea over the last decade making the journey from Indonesia to Australia. This is often used by politicians to implement even harsher deterrent measures to justify doing something to stop the loss of life at sea.

Church without frontiers, Mother to all speaks a different voice. The Church is not about implementing a political policy, neither it is about a personal opinion. The Church derives her voice from that of Christ: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me”, “Whenever you did this for one of the least of my followers you did to me” (Mt 25:35-40).

The real issue here is that we are not asked to welcome and offer hospitality to migrants because we are exceptionally good people and we like these migrants very much (hopefully we are exceptionally good people and we do like these migrants very much!). Individual initiative alone and the interplay of competition will not ensure satisfactory engagement. We cannot proceed to increase the wealth and power of the rich while we entrench the needy in their poverty and add to the woes of the oppressed, (Paul VI, Populorum Progressio). The reason goes much deeper and it is to be found at the heart of our relationship with Jesus: “Whenever you did this for one of the least of my followers you did to me” (Mt 25:40). The Catholic Church in her teaching and her practice echoes the depth of this relationship with Jesus transforming it in values of life. “No one would exchange his/her country for a foreign land if his/her own afforded him/her the means of living a decent and happy life” (Pope Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum, May 15, 1891).

The Catholic Church teaches that all people have the right to live a dignified life in their homeland. Tragically, over 45 million people around the world are displaced. War, natural calamities, persecution and discrimination of every kind have deprived millions of a home, employment, education, family and homeland. The Catholic Church teaches that anyone whose life is threatened has the right to protection. Be it because of persecution, armed conflicts, natural disasters, or economic conditions that threaten their lives or physical integrity. It is the element of persecution, threat or danger, or being forcibly displaced that gives rise to a right to seek asylum rather than to migrate through ordinary channels.

So, what is the real issue?

A person’s country of birth is the single biggest factor that will determine their quality of life. A person’s level of education, ambition and intellect all run a distant second to being born in the right country. As such, the Popes have continuously called
us to abandon a culture of greed and to adopt a culture of justice and solidarity, calling us to be more generous with the world’s resources.

If prosperous nations continue to be jealous of their own advantage alone, they will jeopardize their highest values, sacrificing the pursuit of excellence to the acquisition of possessions (Paul VI, Populorum Progressio). The world’s wealth is growing in absolute terms, but inequalities are on the increase...it should be stressed that progress of a merely economic and technological kind is insufficient. Development needs above all to be true and integral. (Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate, 22, 23).

Jesus asks the people in the Gospel, and also to us, ‘look at what you do’. Are our values in order? The social teaching of the church echoes the teaching of Jesus and offers us vital parameters to order our values.

• This 101st World Day of Migrant and Refugees let us be aware that 51.3 million people are displaced globally;

• Three million refugees have been produced by the Syrian war;

• Six and a half million, or one-third, of Syrian people are displaced;

• Half of these refugees are children.

As people of faith, are our values in order? What do the values of today’s Gospel say to us as we celebrate World Day of Migrants and Refugees in Australia?

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