

Pentecost 2                      Refugee Sunday: 'Life on the margins'  
Gospel (Part I) Luke 8 v26-30



It will soon be holiday time and I expect many of you will be heading for the lakeside side or seaside and taking a boat trip. There is something about getting into a boat and floating through a very different environment that intrigues and refreshes us. When Jesus and his friends sailed across Lake Galilee, it was not that kind of trip; it was not for personal pleasure or relaxation but turned out to be transformational.

That Lake is sometimes called the 'Sea' of Galilee because it was so big. Loch Ness is the largest freshwater lake in UK but lake Galilee is three times bigger in surface area. Lake Galilee is roughly pear-shaped and eight miles across at its widest point. To get to the scene of today's gospel meant crossing the vast lake at its widest point. Unless they were particularly fortunate and had the wind behind them all the way, they would have had to tack this way and that, at least doubling the distance sailed. This was no day trip, getting home again for tea: they were going to stay awhile, once across.

But why embark on such a journey? Their mission was to get people thinking about God in a new way: how close he was to his people instead of a remote God who had done great things, long, long ago, for a chosen few (the people of Israel). Why spend all that time on the lake where there only fish to speak too!

It is possible that they were going as what might be called 'strategic refugees'. They may have felt forced to leave the Tiberias area, on the other side of the lake, for their own safety. Although their only purpose was to build loving, peaceful communities in which all were equally important, those that ruled the roost and enjoyed their power were soon plotting to stop Jesus' mission. Jesus may have

persuaded his friends the time was right to put clear water between themselves and those who were rising against them. In today's refugee jargon, they might well have been Internally Displaced Persons, refugees –albeit by choice- in their own country.

Jesus' friends would not have known what to expect when they reached the other side: indeed they might not have reached the other side at all, that day, because fierce storms could sweep across that broad expanse of water. Once across, would they be able to understand the local dialect and find somewhere to rest? All things considered, the position of Jesus and his friends resembles the plight of today's refugees, pictured above, trying to cross the English Channel in a small dinghy, except that these people are heading for another country. There are eleven on board and authority, in the form of HM Coastguard, in military drag, is watching their every move. They have no idea how they will be received, although they may now know that they face the prospect of being sent to another continent, while the legitimacy of their claim for asylum is considered.

Jesus and his friends would also not have known how they would be received and what a shock they got! They were confronted by a wild and naked but strong man, shouting and begging that they should leave him in peace: he had suffered enough. People brought the man trouble: the locals could not handle those that were different and harassed him, calling him names.

'Legion, legion, legion---'.

They feared that he was possessed by evil spirits and wanted him to keep well away, because he was a disruptive element in the community. He had become a refugee from that community, forced to live among the dead.

Jesus reaction was exactly the opposite: he immediately tried to help the man by freeing him from the fear instilled by others. Jesus asks for his name, no doubt expecting to hear his birth name but instead got his cruel nickname, the one with which everyone taunted him: 'Legion', the wild man replied. The next time, the villagers came out to taunt their victim, they hardly recognized him; he was a man transformed as we heard in part II of the gospel (Lk 8 v 35\*-39). For the wild Gadarene, the emotions induced by someone asking for his given birth rather than calling him by his degrading nickname, would have startled him. He was being treated as an equal rather than an outcast and was becalmed by the experience.

If Jesus was standing on a beach on the Kent coast when another dinghy containing asylum seekers attempted to come ashore, how would he react, how would he greet them? By asking their names, offering to rid them of all the threats that had made them risk their lives, taking steps to integrate them into a community, where their skills could be used and lives given purpose again.

As individuals and as churches, our duty is to welcome refugees as neighbours, just as Jesus might have done. To do so and to criticize policies that treat refugees as a threat and a nuisance is to be compassionate, not political.

The very observance of today as Refugee Sunday is a step in the right direction but should represent a continuous concern, not a 'one-off'. Our instincts should always be to welcome and comfort strangers, not to raise their fears. Compassion breeds compassion and love breeds love. The wild Gadarene became an advocate for Jesus. Let us, by the way we consider and treat refugees, do likewise.

Neville

\*Note the omission of four weird verses (31-34) about evil spirits begging Jesus not to leave them homeless but transfer to a nearby pig herd, which Jesus did, only for the herd to go mad and self-destruct in the lake. These may be inventions of some storytellers, for whom the original was not sensational enough or from detractors, wishing to stir up fears about Jesus, the Wild Galilean. Luke, a man inclined to add embellishments of his own, used the gory details in his narrative.

\*\* As a final hymn, we sang this special hymn for Refugee Sunday to 'See amid the winter snow' : you may care to sing it in the privacy of your homes!

1. God, how can we comprehend, though we've seen them times before,  
Lines of people without end, fleeing from some senseless war?  
They seek safety anywhere, hoping for a welcome hand!  
Can we know the pain they bear? Can we ever understand?

2. You put music in their souls; now they struggle to survive.  
You gave each one gifts and goals; now they flee to stay alive.  
God of outcasts, may we see how you value everyone,  
For each homeless refugee is your daughter or your son.

3. Lord, your loving knows no bounds; you have conquered death for all.  
May we hear beyond our towns to our distant neighbors' call.  
Spirit, may our love increase; may we reach to all your earth,  
Till each person lives in peace; till your world sees each one's worth.