

Sermon Series: Trending on Twitter II

#2 Refugees and Asylum Seekers

God is our refuge, we are theirs

Of all the issues **we thought** would be trending on twitter during this federal election campaigning period, the call to “stop the boats” and the opposing battle to “bring them here” disappeared completely from Twitter, around the time of the recent Victorian State Election.

Instead, it’s been overtaken quickly – The liberal party move on to “a strong economy” and the Labor Party to “a fair go for Australia” – both major parties setting a focus that has just our nation in focus.

Even the Palmer United Party has shifted its anti- immigration focus away from border control, to portraying China’s government and business moguls as the enemy.



In the fifteen years since the sinking of the SIEV X, known as the ‘children overboard’ incident, so-called people smugglers have facilitated the

unauthorised arrival in Australia by boat of [tens of thousands of asylum seekers](#).

Phrases like 'stop the boats', 'queue jumpers' and 'deaths at sea' became a fixture in the political news cycle. Tough 'border protection' policies were in the public discourse.¹

Perhaps now, negative political and social views towards refugees and asylum seekers continue behind the scenes, **despite overwhelming evidence** that...

(Slide – 3 major points)

- The [vast majority of asylum seekers are genuine refugees](#),
- That [Australia's number of unauthorised maritime arrivals is significantly lower than the influx](#) overseas, and
- That our country's [policy approach is in violation of human rights](#).

It's concerning that many politicians known for their hard-line stance on asylum seekers identify as Christians such as John Howard, Philip Ruddock, and more recently Tony Abbott and Scott Morrison.

The heavy Twitter traffic on those issues in recent years brings into question what a Christian response to asylum seekers **should be**, and to what extent this should influence both our political views and our practice of faith.

We can turn to both the Bible and to church history to learn something of the right attitude Christians should adopt, even if they differ on some policies, where refuge and welcome to people from other nations is concerned.

(Slide – Looking to the Scriptures)

¹ While 'boat people' are not a new phenomenon in Australia, the concurrent international rise of Islamic terrorism since 9/11, coupled with an increase in displaced persons from wars in the Middle East, has brought a new edge of fear and loathing to the public perception of asylum seekers. This unease has been expressed in increasingly harsh policy responses, from temporary protection visas and mandatory detention, to offshore processing, and more recently, an arbitrary deadline for the lodgement of protection claims.

Looking to the Scriptures

1. *The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.*
(Psalm 9:9)

The **theme of refuge** runs richly throughout the Old Testament. The word 'refuge' is used in the Psalms alone **more than forty times**, with David continually characterising God as a refuge from his foes, pursuers and oppressors (e.g. Psalm 7:1-2; 9:9; 17:7; 46:1; 61:3; 62:8). As children of God, we should ask: "How does the compassion of God inform our own response to those who seek refuge from war, famine and political and religious persecution?"



2. *Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.*
(Exodus 22:21)

Offering refuge to those fleeing hardship abroad is not only modelled by God, but expected of God's people in ancient times. The Israelites were given numerous stern warnings **not to marginalise or oppress foreigners**. Why? Apart from the altruistic angle, God's people should remember what it felt like to be mistreated in an unfamiliar land (Ex 22:21, 23:9; Deut 10:19, 24:17; 27:19) and recognise the grace shown them by God. From Abraham to Egypt,

exile in Babylon to Roman occupation, the nation of Israel was repeatedly in this position, as were the early church, who were frequently harassed and persecuted for their difference.

The Apostle Peter refers to Christians as **foreigners by nature**, living only temporarily in a hostile world (1 Pet 1:17, 2:11). And while those of us living in English speaking countries like Australia have enjoyed a few hundred years of relative peace and cultural dominance, we are increasingly becoming a maligned minority due to declining religious affiliation and the church's controversial stance on various moral and social issues. Of course, our brothers and sisters in other nations of the world have experienced oppression much more keenly; the cultural unease Christians are currently feeling in Australia is just the tip of the iceberg. Shouldn't this undeniable legacy of exclusion cause us to empathise with other marginalised groups facing mistreatment at home and abroad?

Looking to church history

1. *I was a stranger and you invited me in...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25:35,40)*

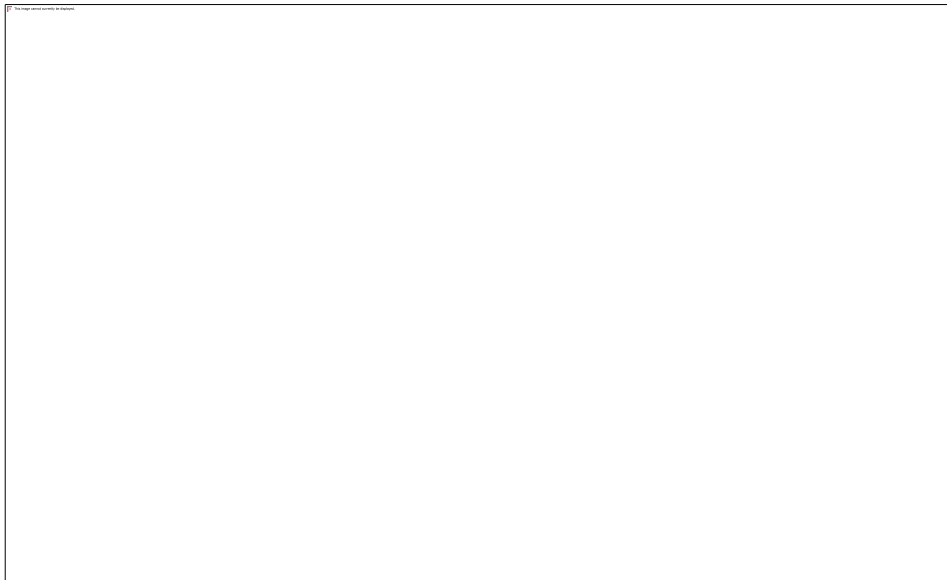
Our Christian ancestors of faith were by no means perfect at translating their faith to action. Christians have sadly been responsible for a range of atrocities against people of different nationalities, cultures and religions. However, there are many examples throughout church history of Christians taking Jesus at his word when he identified with the stranger to whom we show hospitality (Matt 25:35,40).

2. *All who arrive as guests are to be welcomed like Christ (Rule of Saint Benedict 53:1)*

For centuries, Benedictine monasteries have been [known as places of physical and spiritual sanctuary](#), offering hospitality to all manner of travellers, no questions asked. The Scriptures indicate that the practice of sharing resources with the needy was also a strong feature of the early church (Rom 12:13; Heb 13:2; 1 Pet 4:9), which we know included people of many cultural and religious

backgrounds. [Calvin and Luther were also strong proponents of being hospitable to persecuted Christians during the Reformation period.](#) These examples reflect a strong legacy of compassion towards the unfamiliar and bereft.

[Brief story of visiting Assisi in Italy and learning of the role of monasteries during the 2nd world war]



These principles were never more strongly demonstrated than during the Holocaust, when many Christian families and communities were compelled to harbour Jews whose very lives were in danger. Although Christians were not the only ‘righteous Gentiles’ of this period, the stories of Christians who were involved in this social resistance indicate that their actions were a direct outcome of their faith.

For example, famous Christian author **Corrie Ten Boom’s** family provided sanctuary and practical assistance to many of their Jewish brothers and sisters in their own home, later paying the ultimate price for their compassion. They were so convinced of God’s love for these people that they risked their own lives to act out their faith.

Another lesser known instance of Christian hospitality during this period is that of the French **Huguenot** community in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. Well acquainted with religious persecution, [this community worked tirelessly to provide shelter and safe passage to more than 3,000 Jews.](#)

These poignant examples of sacrificial **hospitality to strangers** show how physical and spiritual refuge can be a powerful witness of God's love to the persecuted.

The fact that our nation's current policies regarding asylum seekers are so opposite in spirit to these compassionate responses should be very concerning to Australian Christians.

The church today

Thankfully, many Christian individuals, churches and communities, are taking decisive action to welcome refugees in spite of the hostile policy environment.

Media articles, letter writing campaigns, petitions, rallies and protests have often been used by Australian Christians to raise awareness of the injustices experienced by asylum seekers in Australia, and to call for policy change. Grassroots movements have also been at the forefront of offering accommodation, financial help and practical support to refugees and asylum seekers in the community and in detention.

Common Grace, Love Makes A Way, the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce and Christian NGOs such as Anglicare and the St Vincent de Paul Society are just some of the many initiatives putting Christian faith into practice in this area.

It's often difficult to know what practical actions we can take in our own lives to welcome those in our midst, and offshore, who are seeking shelter and support in our peaceful and prosperous nation.

Whether through prayer, social media, hospitality or advocacy, we can all do our part to welcome our Lord through helping a stranger.