



Refugees from Burundi arrive in Tanzania
Photo: UNHCR/B Loyseau

Their Only Security is Us

This year's focus on refugees deserves the special treatment we gave Anzac Day, and more so. Because unlike the nightmare of Gallipoli and the Great War that did end, this is a horror story that gets worse by the day.

In the Mediterranean we've been watching the biggest mass migration since World War Two. Thousands of desperate families pay racketeers for space in overcrowded and unseaworthy little boats to flee the chaos in Syria, Eritrea and across sub Saharan Africa. 1800 have drowned so far this year, and the Italian coastguard alone has rescued another 170,000. With receiving countries in Europe running for cover, the casualty rate promises to keep rising.

Closer to home is the same desperate refugee flow from persecution and poverty across South East Asia, notably in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka.

Safe havens are just as scarce as they are in the north. Indonesia and its neighbours offer no welcome, Australia neatly deflects the survivors of ocean ordeals to Nauru, willing to pay that island's government A\$1000 per refugee per month for keeping them away from the Lucky Country.

And just in case that makes us feel smug, our own prime

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Welcoming the stranger has never been more urgent. For the sake of their humanity and for our own.

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Young Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
Photo: DSPR

our poverty of spirit as it is about the refugees' desperation.

The law of the sea says those who can help must. But there is no such law on land.

Unlike the old slogan for American

minister worries aloud to reporters that the boat people might be coming our way, knowing the opinion polls will thank him for his concern.

What we once saw as a humanitarian crisis is now portrayed as a security threat. Caring for refugees used to be a noble enterprise. New Zealand wore the refugees it received from Europe after 1945 as a badge of honour and welcomed later migrants as much needed labour.

But immigration has become a toxic issue, politically divisive in western Europe and America, and the flow on effect is felt here. Now we rank 87th in the per capita list of countries willing to resettle refugees.

There is no political consensus yet for raising our ludicrously low quota of 750 a year. Ludicrous when you consider there are 53 million people looking for a new home.

Even meeting the request from Amnesty International's secretary general Salil Shetty to double our quota, would, in his words, "make a world of difference". Like the parable of the mustard seed we find in this month's lectionary readings, it could grow into something wonderful, for New Zealanders as well as the refugees.

Because the current crisis is as much about us as them, revealing our paralysis of will and lack of leadership. It's as much about

Express credit cards, "Don't leave home without it", refugees carry no security when they leave. They begin a journey knowing it may never end, but such is the measure of their despair, they are willing to risk drowning with their children rather go on enduring the conditions at home.

Their only security is people like us. The ones who watch their plight on television news each night and wonder what we can do to help.

There is no legal requirement to host refugees. But there is a powerful moral imperative, rooted in the Gospel tradition of justice and mercy and a God whose hospitality is unconditional and generous beyond imagining.

Translating that imperative into government action is a challenge that overshadows most others right now, as new millions join the exodus from poverty, persecution and war.

Welcoming the stranger has never been more urgent. For the sake of their humanity and for our own.

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