

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter**

**May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011**

**Luke 19: 1-6      “From Ashes to Easter—A Journey”**

**Refugee Sunday**

**Maggie Hosgood**

A few weeks ago I was asked to come up with some new lyrics fitting the Lenten season for a very old, musically beautiful anthem whose original words were all about smiting evildoers with the sword of vengeance and begging not to be forsaken by the Lord. I had to do a lot of digging, as you might imagine, and I came across the idea of Lent being the journey from the ashes of Ash Wednesday—and the repentance it symbolizes—to the joy of Easter and that wonderful feeling of new life that comes with Easter.

That set me thinking that for us this Lenten journey will be part of a set of journeys as we prepare to welcome a new family to Canada. They will be coming from the danger and fear and anxiety of being stateless, and from want and hardship, to what we will endeavour to see they get here: peace, security, freedom to worship their God in their own way and very importantly, a place to belong: a country to call theirs; for the first time in most of their lives a home where they are citizens, where they can enjoy all the rights and responsibilities of being Canadian.

The first journey I am thinking about is the spiritual journey through Lent. In my readings I came across the idea of Lent being a time of spiritual spring cleaning. I like this idea as it gives us a focus for clearing away our prejudices, those misconceptions that we seem to hold dear, our anxieties and our weaknesses. This is a wonderful opportunity to clean out our spiritual and emotional attics and let in the possibility of new understanding, friendship, Christian love and peace with God. It is chance to reaffirm our call from God to offer hospitality to the stranger, and somewhat like Jesus, to withstand temptations—such as that of accepting or passively listening to the anger, hatred, racism and bigotry that is often expressed against outsiders in the name of our ‘culture’ and country or even in the name of our God—and our faith.

A number of years ago the United Church was part of a sort sponsorship fair. The group that put on this event were for the most part evangelical Christians. After a couple of years we got a letter telling us that we would not be part of that year’s fair. Quite astonished, we asked, “Why?” The answer was that we would not support the statement that the only way to God was through Jesus. It was not enough for us to state that we felt, for us, Jesus was the way to God and that there were other paths for other people.

Later I began to field the question, “Why don’t you sponsor only Christians? Why does the United Church bring others to Canada?” I didn’t have a fast answer for those questions and often wound up in long ‘discussions’ about our beliefs around sponsorship. Then one day I heard the perfect answer and it has been mine ever since: “We do not sponsor people because they are

Christian. We sponsor people because we are Christian.” It made me think about Jesus’ journeys and his welcoming of the outcasts of the society of his time. We are not doing anything as daring as he did in eating with tax collectors and touching lepers. We are just following his direction to share our wealth and privileges with people who are less fortunate. The refugees who pass the government inspection to come to Canada are not the criminals, sluggards, and misfits they are often made out to be in the press. They are simply people who cannot live safely in their homeland.

This brings me to the next journey—the journey of the family’s life.

Torn from their land, their farms, in 1948 and unable to go to the Palestinian territories, they journeyed to Iraq. In Iraq they were given protection: They could live there but without citizenship and any of its rights—or responsibilities, such as doing army service. What did that look like to their neighbours? It looked like privilege. Privilege for Sunni Muslims, the minority in Iraq, yet also the people in power. When Saddam Hussein was gone, the protection was also gone and the Palestinians were once again forced to flee. Families with two generations born stateless. Where do they go? Even though Palestinians have the right of return to Palestine these refugees were not accorded that right.

And so, to one of the refugee camps set up in the most inhospitable part of the desert along the border between Syria and Iraq. Would they end up as have so many Palestinians in Lebanon and Jordan, living out their days in camps? The UNHCR—United Nations High Commission for Refugees planned these camps only as temporary holding sites and they determined to close the camps this year. The people from El Hol Camp were assigned to Canada—**IF** private sponsors could be found for them. The federal government did not offer any government-assisted refugee places to these Palestinians. But these sponsorships have been undertaken here and across Canada.

And so six more families will travel once again, this time in the hope that it will be their last long journey. Here in Vancouver they will join the five families that came last year. At last, a journey full of hope and yet not without anxiety: Will Canada welcome them? Will they fit in without losing their identity? Will Canada be ‘suitable’ or will there be a different kind of danger—a subtle one...to their culture, perhaps. Will they be able to learn English and get jobs? The orientation sessions in Syria don’t really address these worries.

And then there’s a third journey: The one we take together with the newcomers. I think a good way to begin is to think of those things we share:

- To begin we share faith: Jews, Christians and Muslims are all “People of the Book”. We worship the same one God. Muslims revere Abraham, Samuel, Mary and Jesus (and others) as do we. We share the call to look after each other.

- We share intelligence and commitment: Our newcomers have survived many trials and have often had to live by their wits, as have many Canadians, perhaps many of us. Our newcomer family is seeking that universal right of justice as members, soon to be citizens, of a society that has a Charter of Rights and Freedoms and that lives by the rule of law. This is a priceless accomplishment we share with them. Together we will share the effort to protect and maintain it.
- We will share learning: While we watch the family's progress in learning about life in Canada we will be learning about the values, the wisdom, and the joy with which our newcomers will be enriching life here. We may wind up viewing many things about our culture through new eyes—always a helpful exercise!
- And we will share hospitality on this journey. Both Muslims and Christians are directed in scripture to welcome and look after the traveller, the newcomer, the visitor. We will have a golden opportunity to celebrate this stage of the journey as we spend time with each other and finally, have a bang-up picnic where we all get together.

As we move from our first journey, the journey through Lent, we come into the promise and joy of Easter. Let us work towards the promise of joy at the end of the other journeys as well.

Amen