

Sermon for Sunday, September 6, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

This week
many of us have been horrified by the image of a little boy
in a red t-shirt and navy shorts
lying on a beach in Turkey.
Little Aylan, along with his big brother and his mom and dad
was trying to get to Europe after fleeing from Syria
in the wake of the war there and the rise of Islamic State.

Aylan
has put a human face on the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean.
Hardly a day goes by
without people drowning in desperate attempts to travel by boat
from Morocco and Algeria to Spain,
from Tunisia and Libya and Egypt to Italy,
and from Turkey to Greece.

Most
have been displaced
by war:
Aylan's family
had moved twice within Syria
before crossing the border to Turkey
where they had settled for a couple of years.
That's what most of these refugees do:
travel overland
to Turkey or northern Africa.
Most come from Syria:
about half the population there
has been displaced.
Every second person.
Of those,
two thirds
have moved elsewhere in Syria;
the other third,
four million people
have become refugees,

flooding into Turkey and Lebanon and Jordan
where they are trapped in refugee camps
without work
or education
or hope.
Many others come
from Afghanistan
and Eritrea.

And the countries they have taken them
can't cope.
More than eighty percent of the world's refugees
are being cared for by developing countries,
countries that themselves
are struggling to provide
for their own citizens.
Many of them
are still caught up in the unrest that followed
the Arab Spring;
where once they were relatively stable
they can no longer provide
a secure life and livelihood
for refugees
and so the refugees pile onto small boats
and set out on treacherous journeys
that all too often
end in death.

We have remained
relatively untouched by the crisis, protected by the vastness
of the Atlantic Ocean
and the rigor of our border controls .

But as Christians
that picture of little Aylan
challenges us.
It forces us to ask
what does it mean for us that every time
we participate in the baptismal covenant
we promise

to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves,
 we promise
 to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human
 being.

On Friday we received a pastoral letter from our bishop
 prompted by the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean
 and other events
 closer to home.

I'm going to read it to you in a minute.
 But before I do
 I want to draw your attention to the parable our bishop
 refers to at the end.
 It is the parable
 of the rich man
 and Lazarus at the gate,
 and I'll read it after the bishop's letter.

But before I begin
 I can't help noticing the parallels
 between the parable
 and our readings today.

From our Old Testament reading:
 "Those who are generous are blessed,
 for they share their bread with the poor.
 Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
 or crush the afflicted at the gate;
 for the LORD pleads their cause
 and despoils of life those who despoil them."

And from our epistle:
 "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have
 works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of
 you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply
 their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

And now to the bishop's pastoral letter.



September 4, 2015

To the people of the Diocese of Long Island

"A Call to Stand with God's People"

This week has brought an unusual combination of significant and profound needs to the attention of the religious community:

- The images of refugees struggling to find safe passage to Europe from the destructive evil being perpetrated in Syria, Africa and the Middle East;
- The heartbreaking image of a dead child on a beach, drowned during his family's frantic attempt to find refuge in the confusing crush of so many needing help to escape the inhumanity in their native countries;
- The daily news of deadly violence in our nation.

These harsh realities come to our attention just as the Presiding Bishop and President of the House of Deputies remind us that this Sunday, September 6th, we are called upon to participate in "Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to End Racism". (You can read the entire statement on the diocesan Facebook page and the website.) We are reminded that "...racial reconciliation through prayer, teaching, engagement and action is a top priority of the Episcopal Church...."

There is a significant intersection among these realities, a crossroad right here in the Diocese of Long Island.

In this most diverse diocese in the nation, the tensions created by racial inequality, white privilege, economic inequality and access, and the ever-growing number of "day workers," must be addressed by the church. The "day workers," mostly Latino people who have come across our borders - some documented and some undocumented - most often serve our wealthiest communities but have no real access to the simplest of human accommodations.

As we watch in horror the plight of the refugees from Syria and North Africa, and as we attempt to reaffirm a commitment to addressing racism by confession, repentance, and commitment, we do not forget the countless faces of Lazarus at our gate, our own backyard gate. Near and far are those whose plight for freedom, access, education and basic human rights is too easy to ignore. We are God's people; they are God's people. We are not given our identity by any political rhetoric. We are given our identity by the Word of God.

If we are horrified by the sight of refugee children drowning in an attempt to find freedom, if we are concerned enough to take racial reconciliation seriously as a church body, then let us undertake some tangible effort to alleviate the suffering of God's people at our gates.

Let us fight the good fight to build bridges for the strangers in our midst, not walls.

Let us put our resources and time and energy into addressing the obligation from the Gospel of Jesus Christ to care for people, all people, and particularly those in the most profound need.

This fall we continue the transformation of St. Thomas, Amagansett, from a summer chapel open only twenty days a year to a parish community focused on serving the needs of the ever-growing population of immigrants on the east end of Long Island.

Across the diocese, from Riverhead and Mastic Beach, Brentwood and East Islip, to Freeport, Jamaica, Rosedale, Elmhurst, Flushing, Jackson Heights and throughout our parishes in Brooklyn, ministry about, and for, people for whom English is a second language, and green cards, education and employment are necessities, must be our outward and visible expression of care in Jesus Christ.

Crisis after crisis, this is all about God's love for people-all people. We pray and act on behalf of the Gospel to eradicate the racism, sexism and economic classism that enslaves God's people under the veiled statements such as: "they don't belong here," "they don't work hard enough," and "they ought to speak English."

For the sake of all God's people, for the safety of our children, and the well-being of the creation we are called to preserve, it is time to admit that a trickle-down, capitalist economic system finds no resting place in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Policies that protect us from other people of God can be evil in their result, if not actually evil in their intent.

The intersection of events this past week, which find a crossroad here in the Diocese of Long Island, find us having to make choices. Is it not time to be the church of Jesus Christ, standing firmly with those little boys dead on a beach, and with those discriminated against by the institutions we all take for granted and ignore?

I recommend as a starting place for your reading and prayer, the parable found in the sixteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel beginning at the eighteenth verse and following. It's time for church to be church, to stand with God's people, for God's people - all of us.



The Right Reverend Lawrence C. Provenzano
Bishop of Long Island

The Episcopal Diocese of Long Island
The Episcopal Church in Brooklyn, Queens, Nassau, and Suffolk

A reading from the gospel according to St Luke:

Jesus said,

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”

But Abraham said, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.”

He said, “Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers— that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.”

Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.”

He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”

He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” ’