

A long walk to water – a confession of faith in a time of crisis

Sermon on World Refugee Day 2018

"Refugees are people like anyone else, like you and me. They led ordinary lives before becoming displaced, and their biggest dream is to be able to live normally again. On this World Refugee Day, let us recall our common humanity, celebrate tolerance and diversity and open our hearts to refugees everywhere."

Ban Ki-moon, former General Secretary of the United Nations

Sisters and brothers, let me tell you about a book I just read when away for a short holiday.

It is a novel by Linda Sue Park – written according to the real life story of a young refugee. The title is “A Long Walk to Water”.

One day in 1985, Salva is sitting in school when he hears the sound of gunfire.

There’s a violent civil war going on in his country, and Salva’s teacher yells for everyone to run away from their village as fast as possible.

In the chaos, Salva is separated from his parents and siblings.

He spends a few nights staying with an elderly woman in her barn, but the woman eventually tells Salva that he’ll need to keep moving, since there’s no more food or water.

Salva joins up with a large group of people from his village, and the group begins to wander across Sudan hoping to find a safe refugee camp.

After weeks of wandering across Sudan, Salva befriends another boy in the group, whose name is Marial. A few weeks later, Salva is overjoyed to be reunited with his uncle, who used to be a soldier. The uncle, recognizing that Salva’s parents are nowhere to be found, and thinking they are likely dead, promises to take care of Salva. He eventually becomes the leader of the group. He has a gun and he has military training.

One night, Salva wakes up to find that Marial has disappeared. Marial has probably been eaten by a lion.

The group of refugees finally reaches the Nile River. By building boats out of reeds, everyone is able to cross to the middle of the river, where there is an island of fishermen. On the island, Salva enjoys more food than he’s had in months. The group then proceeds onward to the other side of the river, the Ethiopian side.

The next stage of Salva's journey is the hardest of all. The group must cross the Akobo desert—a journey that will take them three days. Midway through the long march, the group encounters a group of men who are near death because they had run out of water. To Salva's amazement, some of the women in the group give their water to the men, and by doing so save their lives.

When the group is almost out of the Akobo desert, it crosses paths with a group of soldiers. The soldiers steal the group's food, supplies, and clothes, and kill Salva's uncle in front of the others. Salva is devastated by his uncle's death, but he promises himself that he'll keep on moving—just as his uncle would have wanted him to do.

Salva and the remaining members of the group march into Ethiopia, where they come to a refugee camp.

Salva stays in the camp for six years, at which point the Ethiopian government collapses, and the new government forces refugees out of the country.

Salva has no choice but to go into neighbouring Kenya - a dangerous journey which takes a year and a half, during which time Salva becomes the leader of his group. Salva leads more than one thousand young boys from Ethiopia safely into Kenya. There he stays in two different refugee camps until he is over twenty years old.

Salva is often lonely, but he befriends an Irish voluntary worker, who teaches him how to speak and write English.

11 years after the school boy Salva had to run from his home village, he is helped to move to a Western country.

11 years on the run...

And now imagine Salva arriving in the refugee-hostile Europe of 2017 or 2018.

It is only a few days ago that a rescue ship with over 600 refugees on board was crossing through the Mediterranean Sea, access denied to the harbours of Malta and Italy... It had to go on to Spain where they had promised to let them land.

What a shame!

And we all watch and wait...

What happens here, is a humanitarian catastrophe!

And the end of all human or Christian or other ethical values!

All other European countries should have immediately offered to take 10 or 100 of those poor people from the ship. 100 for Germany, 100 for France, 50 for Austria, 50 for Denmark, 50 for Sweden, 25 for Belgium and another 25 for Luxembourg and so on, and the problem would have been solved...and humanity shown to sick people, pregnant women, newborn babies, moms and kids, young and old men...

Instead, politicians here in Germany compete in ever more shameful ways of handling refugees... suggesting to shut them up in remote prison like camps, cutting down their financial, medical and humanitarian support, trying to deport them back to their countries of origin.

Bavaria is leading in chartering air planes full of young men from Munich to Kabul on an almost monthly basis. The public protests, but this does not seem to impress or change the minds of the political leaders.

Germany has seen better times...

...when public protest, church initiatives and open petitions did make a difference.

But these times seem long ago.

I feel a foreigner in my own country searching desperately for the values of welcome and dignity we once seemed to have...

I am devastated by the direction significant politicians want us to go.

I am shocked...

by the attempts of deporting family fathers without their wives and kids, by separating families and causing deep hurt and pain towards young kids, adding to the traumata they already have...,

by disrupting apprenticeships of young refugees who've been in the country longer than 5 years or so.

I can't believe that in spite of the protest of the Bavarian chamber of commerce and industry and their plea to let qualified young refugees stay, the ministry for inner affairs orders these young people be taken out of their employments and sent back to the places they'd fled from...

When Isata's church asylum last year did not end because of inhuman and indiscriminate politics, I felt as helpless and insignificant as never before in my life.

There we were: this international church community who'd given shelter to a vulnerable young woman, and nobody wanted to help her and us... not the

church leaders, nor the politicians. Even the mayor of Munich pretended his hands were bound...

At the same time clergy who'd offered church asylum all over Bavaria were ordered to the local police departments, accused of granting illegal residence to immigrants and threatened to be sentenced. Offering a safe space was made a criminal offence... I couldn't believe it.

I was so ashamed when no one spoke up for us or for Isata...

Lawyers had been silenced and ordered not to attend to asylum seekers anymore...

And only, with the support of a fearless Jesuit priest, we managed to find a brave female lawyer who helped us and Isata out of this degrading and lawless situation.

One church leader who learned about Isata's story last summer, said to me that never since World War II had churches and clergy been so close to being criminalised as they were and are now... just for doing God's work and following in the footsteps of Jesus...

We are living in crazy times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership in too many countries of this world.

It seems to me that it is more important than ever to be followers of Jesus before anything else – nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography... Our identity in Christ must precede every other identity! I pray that the world will see Jesus' words in our doing... that we are his disciples because we have love for one another. (John 13:35)

When politics undermine genuine Christian theology, we must have a closer look at the politics. The church's role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. The government's role, I believe, is to serve the common good by protecting justice and peace. When that role is undermined by the political leaders, it is the people of faith who have to stand up and speak out. Martin Luther King Jr. said: "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state." The conscience of Europe by the way – has long lost its life in the Mediterranean...

It is often the duty of the churches or the Christian leaders to speak the truth in love to the people and to name and **warn against temptations, racial**

and cultural captivities, false convictions and inhuman political intensions.

I searched and read a lot recently to find words and texts and speeches of clever people who do not accept the conservative and nationalistic move my country and other countries are making...

Church people in many places agree to the observation that we are living in a time of crisis, and that the church must return to Jesus Christ.

...sounds so easy, doesn't it?

Jesus is Lord. That is our common ground. It was central for the early church and it needs to become central to us again. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar was not – nor any other political ruler ever since.

If Jesus is Lord, no other authority is absolute.

Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God he announced, is the Christian's first loyalty, above all others.

So often we pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Our faith is personal but it is never private, meant not only for heaven but for this earth!

The question we face is: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? What does our loyalty to Christ, as disciples, require at this moment of history?

I believe, it is time to renew our approach, our ethical arguments, our theology... maybe just simplify them? Just asking what Jesus would say, what he would do...

Let me try and find out for us, what we believe, where our 'Yes' lies and when we have to say 'No'...

I believe each human being is made in God's image and likeness. In this we see our dignity, worth and God-given equality to all of us as children of the one God who is the creator of all things.

Racism therefore is a brutal denial of the image of God. Our understanding of a global community of Christ does not allow any toleration of racial discrimination. Racial justice and healing are biblical and theological issues for us. "They are central to the mission of the body of Christ in the world", say a whole bunch of American bishops in a text they put together on Ash Wednesday this year. A hopeful text which encourages us not to allow nationalism and racism in today's world.

I believe we are one body. In Christ, there is no oppression based on race, gender, identity or class. (Gal 3:28)

The body of Christ, where those great human divisions are to be overcome, is meant to be an example for the rest of society. We are meant to be an example for the rest of society!

...proclaiming justice, freedom, love and reconciliation.

We must not accept any mistreatment and violent abuse of any human being! We stand for respect, protection and affirmation of every single human being, in their families, at their work places, in politics and in the churches.

I believe how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself. (Matthew 25:31-46)

God calls us to protect and seek justice for those who are poor and vulnerable.

And our treatment of people who are oppressed, strangers, outsiders or otherwise at the margins of society is a test of our relationship with God, who made us all equal in divine dignity and love.

We must by no means tolerate the language and the practices of politicians who plan to ignore and abandon the most vulnerable children of God!

We must offer a safe space for the immigrants and refugees, a place they feel loved and cared for. We must not accept the neglect of the well-being of low-income families and children, and we must resist repeated attempts to let health care become a question of the individual income and not the individual need. We must not put the rich over the poor.

I believe that Christ's way of leadership is servanthood, not domination.

Jesus said: "You know that the rulers of the world lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you..." (Matthew 20:25f)

I believe politicians are called to public service not to public display of power and might.

We must not tolerate any moves towards autocratic political leadership as happens in too many countries these days. Authoritarian rule is a threat to democracy and the common good. We must resist it and make the basic human needs our greatest concern.

I believe that churches and nations are part of an international community whose interests always surpass national boundaries.

The most well-known verse in the Bible starts with "For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16) ...which means, we should love and serve the world

and all its inhabitants, rather than seek first narrow, nationalistic advantages... We must reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others. And we must hope and pray for genuine global development that brings human flourishing for all God's children. Global poverty, environmental damage, violent conflict, weapons of mass destruction, and deadly diseases in some places affect all places, and we need wise leadership and international cooperation to make a difference...

Jesus summarizes the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind. This is the first commandment. And the second is: You shall love your neighbour as yourself..." (Matthew 22: 38)

Loving our neighbours I guess, has no exceptions...

I believe, what we can do as a church, what we can do at Peace Church in these crazy times of our world with more questions than answers is:

to be open
and loving
and kind.

Let us with our whole lives confess our faith.

Let us lament, repent, and then repair.

If Jesus is Lord, there is always space for grace!

...as shown to Isata, and shown to Salva.

A few months after her church asylum **Isata** was a free woman with a permission to stay...

And Salva? The boy from the story I began with?

Salva found a family in the United States of America who adopted him. He got parents and four siblings, went to school, studied mechanical engineering.

He founded a non-profit organization to help develop and improve life in impoverished Sudanese villages.

Amen.

Silence

Introduction to the Lighting of Candles

God travels with us in the shadows.

God knows who we are.

We long for life which is full and free.

We long to know the truth,
and we want to leave behind us
all the things which hold us back.

We want to move forward in faith
but the journey often seems too hard,
and many of us stand in helpless fear
before that which is hidden in our past
and in our future.

Let us think of the past, and of the future, let us remember people's stories,
sad stories, cruel and unbelievable stories, but also those with a happy ending.
Let us remember our own journeys and those of others.
Let us remember the goodbyes and farewells of our lives, and the experiences
of welcome and new beginnings. Let us remember all that and take some time
to light a candle at one of those tables with a tray with candles....

While we light candle let us sing: Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin
with me... **MH 431**