

Prayer Hour Service for Refugees and for Peace

Sunday 2th October saw the year of communal prayers fo peace and for refugees rcome to an end. Of course the need for prayers has not ended, millions of displaced people across the world are in desperate need of ourphysical and spritual charity.

At the final Prayer Hour, held at the Immaculate Conception Church in Clevedon on Wednesday 28th September the following testimonials were read to help the congregation focus on the needs of displaced persons....

Reading1 - Iftu Omar's Journey, Yemen

- *a fifteen year old boy tells the horrific story of hisflight from Ethiopia to Yemen and of the brutality of his so-called rescuers.*

Reading 2 - Inhuman Sentencing of a teenage boy

- *having survived a crossing of the Mediterranean Sea a teenage boy runs into the insensitive and misguidedjustice system of our so-called civilised and enlightened European countries. Systems that fail to distinguish between victins of crime and the real criminals.*

Reading 3 - Pope Francis' challenge to Christian Communities

- *Pope Francis calls upon us all to recognise that God's creation, Man, did not come with tribal, colour nor cultural differences. It was a single creation and we truly are, all in this together. He exhorts us to "transform our communities into places of welcome.."*

The following pages give the text of the three readings

Refugee reading 1 | Iftu Omar's Journey, Yemen

15-year-old Iftu Omar escaped Ethiopia because he feared for his life after his father was killed. He dreamt of a life without persecution but when asked about the danger he faced during the journey, his face had no expression. He said: "It was a nightmare that you cannot wake up from, and it will never leave me! My nightmare began when I arrived in Djibouti. I met the smuggler, who was to take me to Yemen. In total we were 57. Naively, I thought that he would bring a boat big enough to fit us all. I was wrong."

When the boat arrived it could only fit 20 to 30 people. The smuggler told us how to sit to save space - with our legs together towards our chest, and all our weight on the tip of our feet. It was hard. At night, the boat engine started, and we moved into the open sea. A few minutes later, the boat stopped and a smuggler shouted at us 'you have to stay here', and he jumped into the sea. I did not know what was going on. I looked around and all I saw was the sea. I feared for my life. I had no air to breathe because the place was overcrowded, my legs started to feel numb from the way I was sitting. We had neither food nor water. I was afraid and I regretted leaving home.

We stayed in the boat until the morning, until the smuggler came and pulled our boat back to shore. There we stayed for two days on the beach with no food or water. I was afraid. I was at an unknown place with unknown people. With no food and water I was exhausted. The finally the smuggler came back with the same boat. He had changed the engine. He shouted 'come in if you want to go to Yemen'. I was afraid that it would take us a long time - my legs would not bear the pain. Luckily, it only took two hours.

When we finally reached the shore, the smuggler shouted 'you have to get out now!' I jumped into the sea. I was very tired, but I had I reached Yemen. Suddenly, a group of men appeared. They started to divide us into groups. My group was forced to get in a truck and they drove us far away from the coast. Again, I was scared and confused. I had fled my country to find freedom - only to find myself in a worse situation.

The truck stopped. An angry looking man came to us and yelled 'get down'. I realized that I was in the middle of a desert. I was scared. After giving us food and water, the man came to us and started hitting us with black wire and asked us to give him phone numbers of our family. Some people refused, so he tied their legs together and ran over them with a motorcycle. They screamed so hard that I started to feel their pain. I was so scared that I said to myself 'this is my end, I am going to die'.

For 15 days I was tortured until I finally gave him my mother's number. Once she sent the ransom he released me. He let me go with three other people. We walked for hours in the desert with neither food nor water. In the end we reached a mosque and stayed there for three days. Now, I am staying at a center to determine my refugee status. I am recovering and I am looking towards a better future, free from fear and persecution.

Refugee Reading 2

Inhuman Sentencing of a teenage boy

Here we can listen to a member of a Christian Peacemaker Team reflecting on a teenager being sentenced to 44 years in prison for steering refugee dingy.

He bent his head down momentarily and then raised it to brace himself for the verdict and the sentence. "Guilty." "Forty-four years in prison," a staggering reality for a teenage refugee, who thought he would be released because of his age and background. All his dreams and hopes for his life, wiped away at the stroke of the judge's pen. His only hope now is in the appeals process. Knowing what he and his family were fleeing from, I felt deep pain and grief.

His crime: human smuggling. In order to pay for his family's passage he had agreed to drive the small dinghy boat transporting forty other refugees from Turkey to Lesbos, Greece. He was caught by the Greek coast guards.

His defense lawyer pleaded leniency. But the judge remained cold toward the accused. The judge's demeanor and the harshness of Greek law repulsed our Greek lawyer. She told us she had never seen a judge in this court be so inflexible and harsh in her rulings as today.

No one in the courtroom supported people making immense profits from smuggling refugees in unsafe boats. It's a horrendous crime against these vulnerable and desperate people. But the people on trial in this courtroom were not the people running these illegal businesses and getting rich. These were the young, desperate men they hired or bargained with to take the illegal risk of driving the boats without understanding the potential consequences of their actions.

And so the laws and prosecutions against human smuggling are not deterring this crime. They are not addressing the governmental regulations that push desperate people to choose illegal and unsafe ways of reaching a safe place to live.

This young man is once again a victim of our global wars. Can we not provide safe and legal passage and repatriation for people fleeing violence, and dry up the human trafficking of refugees.

Refugee reading 3

Pope Francis' challenge to Christian Communities

I, for one, can become dulled by constant reminders of the horrors of the refugees travails, so let us hear the words of Pope Francis as this month he addressed a conference of Jesuits entitled "Global Migration and Refugee Crisis".

He said "In the face of tens of thousands of persons forcibly displaced worldwide, it is important to move beyond the statistics and to realise that migrants and refugees are no different than our own family members and friends".

"Each one of them", he added "has a name, a face and a story as well as an unalienable right to live in peace and to aspire to a better future for their sons and daughters."

He recalled the life of St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, when he claimed *"that at this place and time in history, there is a great need for men and women who hear the cry of the poor and who respond with mercy and generosity."*

He asked that our responses to the refugee crisis should be *"through acts of mercy that promote the refugees' integration into European communities"* and he added that we should *"remember that authentic hospitality is a profound gospel value that nurtures love and is our greatest security against hateful acts of terrorism."*

Finally, the Holy Father urged us to *"transform our communities into places of welcome where all God's children have the opportunity not simply to survive, but to grow, to flourish and to bear fruit."*