

2020 12th SUNDAY

This Weekend our New Zealand Bishops have asked us to reflect upon the plight of the thousands of migrant workers caught out in New Zealand by the spread of Covid-19. It is an appropriate time to do this because today is the United Nations World Refugee and Migrants Day.

On the posters published by Caritas Aotearoa for this day the question: ‘Where is your brother or sister?’ is asked. The answer is simple: All who are immigrants to New Zealand, are our brothers and sisters. Today we pray for all of them- but especially those who are our own parishioners- and reflect upon the difficulties many of face.

If you are an immigrant, you have chosen to come to New Zealand. If you are a refugee, you may not have had the luxury of any such choice; having had to hurriedly flee your homelands because of danger.

But you share the reality that you come as strangers to a country vastly different from your own- hoping for opportunities you did not previously have. All of you are vulnerable to exploitation and human cruelty. And there is often great loneliness to be faced. Family networks have been left behind. You are on your own.

With the Covid-19 pandemic affecting the economy worldwide, our government has been quick to offer emergency benefits to New Zealanders. But the bishops note that one big chunk of the workforce has missed out: migrant workers.

In his special message for World Refugee and Migrants Day, Pope Frances calls on people of all nations to welcome and protect, promote and integrate all who come to their homelands seeking new starts.

He then gives a very explicit message: “Immigrants must be protected by their countries of arrival in order to prevent exploitation, forced labour and human trafficking. This can be achieved by prohibiting employers from withholding employees’ documents; by ensuring access to justice for all migrants independently of their legal status, by ensuring all immigrants can open a personal bank account, by establishing a minimum wage applicable to all workers and by ensuring that wages are paid at least once a month.”

I’m sure some of our parishioners can very much identify with Jeremiah’s lament in today’s First Reading: “I hear so many disparaging me; watching eagerly for my downfall.” Or with the Psalmist in today’s Psalm: “I have become a stranger to my sisters; an alien to my brothers.”

But as believers in a loving God we know that all is not gloom. Jeremiah from the bottom of a muddy well- with the taunts of his enemies ringing in his ears- was

able to call out: “The Lord is at my side. He is my protector. He is my hero. I sing. I praise the Lord. He will deliver my soul from the hands of these evil men”

Jesus, Himself, says in today’s Gospel: “Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body. There is no way they can kill the soul.”

If you are an immigrant know that while people can hurt you and put you down, while they can mock you and try to make life a misery for you, the Lord will give you strength and you will cope if you but call on Him.

And know that you are very much treasured by your Parish, St Mary Star of the Sea. Our migrant parishioners are wonderful people; full of hope; full of energy and talent... with so much to contribute to this our beloved parish. Your devotion and holiness are an inspiration to us all. Your laughter and friendliness bring colour and vibrancy to our community.

We who are Kiwi Catholics can easily come to believe that we have little to learn from you parishioners who have come to us from overseas. In 1983 I was like that; I was quite arrogant in a way.

I was asked to go as a Marist Brother to Kiribati to help start a Catholic Secondary School on the main Island of Tarawa. I arrived in Kiribati filled with grand ideas- seeing myself as a missionary sent to fire the- i-Kiribati up with a love for Jesus.

About two years later, I had the stuffing knocked out of me while I was attending a Diocesan Synod and witnessed a really heated debate between the leaders of the Legion of Mary and the leaders of the Charismatics- fighting over who should have the right to evangelize Bikenibeu, a rampantly Protestant Village on Tarawa. Finally they left it to the Bishop to decide.

I remember later saying to Bishop Paul, ”There are six Bishops of New Zealand who would just love to have your predicament.” It was on that day, I think, that I understood that Kiribati was well and truly evangelized and that if I wanted to be a real missionary, I should return to a country in greater need of conversion, my own country, and become a diocesan priest.

We are so enriched by our immigrant parishioners.

Do we properly value the rich religious background they bring to us? Do we in the words of our beloved Pope: welcome them and protect them, promote and integrate them? We must.

Won’t it be wonderful to hear Jesus say to us when we approach the Gates of Heaven: “Welcome into my Kingdom. For when I was a stranger- you welcomed Me.”