



JESUIT
INSTITUTE
SOUTH
AFRICA

Homily 16th Sunday – Year B

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The 2003 film, *Asylum*, is the story of fleeing persecution and torture in northern Iraq. Three young Kurds, Mahmoud, Rezghar and Saman, smuggle themselves into Britain aboard a freight train. Arriving in London, they register for asylum but soon experience the first blast of bureaucracy. Their papers are lost in the system – something we think only happens in South Africa.

When Saman is detained in prison and the police attempt to arrest Rezghar, he flees and hides in a church where the priest, Father Michael, is leading a service. And so begins a lengthy standoff between the police and immigration officers and the priest as he offers sanctuary. Both these men and the Church become an intense focus of the media. With Father Michael under siege with armed police, and the Press, and racist neighbours, and unchristian parishioners and even his own superiors, tension mounts until something - or someone - threatens to break. And so Nigel Roffe-Barker's social drama looks beyond politics to the *desperate human stories* behind newspaper headlines.

The right to sanctuary has long been part of the tradition of the Church: in England, from the 4th century, people used the Church as a safe place. In the 1980s, when the United States experienced an influx of people from Latin America who were fleeing oppression and human rights violation by governments in South America, many sought sanctuary in the Church.

Many Catholics who participated in liberation theology and were targeted by government forces also found sanctuary in the Church. And we know too that in South Africa, many people in the years of apartheid sought sanctuary in the Church.

The Prophet Jeremiah, in the first reading today, speaks about the scattered people of Israel. He speaks about bringing them home to a safe and prosperous place. He pinpoints the problem - the shepherds who do not give a damn for the people. Not too unlike the situation that we found ourselves in today. With the political shenanigans of this country in the last few weeks, those who are powerful and have profiles not giving a damn about anybody except themselves and their own well-being do whatever they can to avoid justice.

In the Gospel, too, we see many people coming to Jesus for physical, emotional, and spiritual sanctuary because, we are told, they are like sheep without a shepherd. Today, we are invited to meditate on this word – sanctuary. It's an important word in our Christian tradition. We are called to be a place and space where people can find some safety, where people can find some physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

A few weeks ago, the Jesuit Institute, with other organisations, launched a campaign called "This Is Home". It highlights the plight of many children in this country who are like sheep without a shepherd. Young people who are stateless or may soon be stateless, mostly due to political red tape and hardened hearts. Shepherds again who don't give a damn about people.

As God's people and people of goodwill, the key question for us becomes, how do we create a community of sanctuary in an environment where shepherds don't care about the people they are supposed to look after? Nobody should feel abandoned and unprotected where they are at the mercy of unjust forces or people who are only worried about themselves and their own self-importance. So it seems that to become a sanctuary, we need to learn and choose how to CARE. And I want to suggest that CARE is the invitation for us because each of those letters broken down tells us how we truly care.

CARE

C - Compassion

Our ability to identify with the wounded and those in need around us, the quality of our own hearts, is revealed in how we respond to people around us, as Jesus does, with compassion.

A – Awareness

We need to be aware of what is going on in our society and our world. The plight of others, the struggles of others should be in our consciousness. Social responsibility is to know what is going on in our context. There are so many people these days that say things like, “I don’t watch the news. I’m not really interested in what is going on.” And one can’t blame people at times because news media can often bend things for their own purposes. And yet, we still need to know what is going on so that we can be discerning. And at times, we need to look at what news media are saying and double-check those facts because we are very prone to being victims these days of fake news. We need to teach our children how to do that. We need to teach them what it really means to care, teach them how to become aware and discerning about what is going on in our context.

R - Revelation

It is only when our eyes are fixed on the revelation of God that we truly can care for others. Because Jesus, the Good Shepherd, teaches us how to create sanctuary for others – how to really care for others. All we have to do is watch him very closely in the Gospels. The revelation of God shows us the way that we should care for others.

E – Engaged

There’s a need for us to be engaged. Our willingness to be engaged, work with others, and bring about the kind of sanctuary that would reveal God’s kingdom in our midst today is what we are being invited to today. That would reveal God’s vision of community, the kind of community God invites us to be. And that means that we too are willing to contribute, are willing to take responsibility.

In our response to the world around us, we, God’s people, reveal if we are really disciples of Jesus Christ when we bring about God’s care for and to others. And if you are asking how you can do this, there are many different ways to do this. And it’s not always necessarily a financial way. So often, we think in the Church that when we ask for assistance, people immediately have to dig deep into their pockets.

You can take, for example, this campaign, “This Is Home”. You can sign up as we try and petition the government to change this ridiculous law that keeps young people stateless and, therefore, unable to access education, healthcare, or any other service in our society. You can do it by signing up and sharing this message with others. There already, you are showing that you care by your willingness to be engaged. There are many other ways one can be engaged. One can show that we truly care and are bringing about a community of sanctuary.

Let’s pray today that we would allow the Lord, through the harsh words of the Prophet Jeremiah, through the example that Jesus shows us as he looks upon those people and sees that they are sheep without a shepherd and chooses to care, that our hearts too would be moulded by what we hear. Therefore we too would become a place, a community of sanctuary for those who need most our support, our help, our protection, a place that they can call home.