

The heart of a stranger

By Ben Thurley

“You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Exodus 23:9

Sympathy has a fairly harmless sound in English. No longer a word of depth and resonance, its potency is emptied on countless prepackaged condolence cards. It's what we feel for stray dogs and small children with grazed knees.

However, the Greek roots of the word have the meaning 'to suffer with'. To feel sympathy is to be open to the pain and suffering of others and, in that openness, to experience it oneself.

Jesus stands as the perfect example of radical sympathy. In his life, he identified with the homeless, the poor and the outcast. And more than that, he was not content to 'exploit equality with God', but humbled himself, even to the point of a shameful and degrading death, in order to serve others and 'give himself as a ransom for many.'

This study explores just some of the profound depths of the God of radical sympathy, and a people moved to respond in tune with God's sympathy. It also pays particular attention to the place of the 'stranger' in our sympathies. Strangers in the Bible are those who have left, or been displaced from, their homeland and are

resident in a foreign land. Because of this displacement, they are often vulnerable, poor and marginalized within the societies in which they now live.

Christians themselves know what it is to be strangers and to experience God's welcome (1 Peter 1:1-2, 2:10-11; Ephesians 2:11-22). How then can this knowledge move us to sympathy and action for those who today are strangers?

Israel

Read Leviticus 19:33-34 and Deuteronomy 24:14-22.

What rights are strangers given in Israel's laws – particularly regarding work, food security and participation in society?

In what way is Israel's own experience as slaves or strangers in Egypt used as the motivation for putting these laws into practice?

What do these texts say about the character of God who redeemed Israel from Egypt?

What do you know about the rights and treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers in Australia? How do Israel's laws offer a challenge or an encouragement to our response to strangers in our land?

Jesus

Individually, or in pairs, read the following passages:

Luke 9:57-58

Luke 14:12-24

Luke 4:16-21

Matthew 2:1-23

Matthew 25:1-46

In what ways does Jesus identify in his words, actions or in the events of his life, with the vulnerable, the poor and, particularly, strangers – those

without safe shelter and security?

What kind of response does he ask of his followers?

Us

Read Romans 12.

Paul says the 'mercies of God' are the basis of his appeal to the Romans. What do you think he means by that?

Make a summary list in your own words of the things Paul asks of the community in verses 3-21.

How do you feel when you look at this list? What, for you, are the greatest challenges?

Have you ever experienced sharing hospitality with strangers, or blessings with enemies? What was that like?

How do you think the call to 'weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice' fits in with the other things in your list?

Make a list of the barriers (both internal and external) that block you from more fully 'presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice to God' in these ways. As a group, brainstorm possible ways to overcome these barriers.

Conclusion

Take some pictures or images of refugees (you could use the cover of this Target, and some of the photographs in this edition) and spread them out on the floor or table in front of the group. Darken the room, and light several candles near the photos. Spend time in quiet prayer and reflection. Jesus' words in Matthew 5:14-16 could be used as an encouragement for the group to live as the "light of the world"

