

Homily for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2017

This Gospel is really hard to preach on because I, like most of you, live a pretty comfortable, middle-class life. Certainly, there are things to be concerned about for the future: What will healthcare look like down the road? What about Social Security? What about jobs? Will our kids be safe from drugs? Real, understandable concerns. But:

Six-year old Weaver, a boy with close-cropped light brown hair, recently arrived from Qaraqosh with his family. Weaver does not speak; but he screams, shakes and jumps up and down.

His father, Azhar George Matti, 53, says the boy spoke in Iraq but stopped when the explosions began.

A teacher in a Catholic primary school in Qaraqosh, Mr. Matti has two other children — a 10-year-old daughter, Lourde, who should be in fifth grade, and another son, 7-year-old Lucien, who should be in second grade. His wife, Rajja, 41, with black hair swept back into a ponytail, seems to stare through the wall as he recounts the family's journey.

"One day after a liturgy, I saw a priest and five parishioners coming out of the church. ISIS took each one into the marketplace and shot them," says Mr. Matti.

"I prayed for ISIS, too," he says, in addition to their victims. "They don't understand what they are doing."

The Matti family fled to Erbil by car. For one year, they lived in one room in an empty building. Then they sold their car and bought plane tickets to Amman [Jordan].

"It was a very hard experience in Iraq." Though their current situation is still poor, Mr. Matti speaks positively. "It is good for our spiritual lives now," he says.

"God will provide."

Sister Hanne Saad, 71 years old with bushy eyebrows and short white hair, sits beside Weaver. She wraps her arms around him as he shrieks and bounces, rocking him gently.

That's from a report from the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. It's the story of only one family. Around the world sixty million people are refugees – about one in every 100. In Syria, which has been in the headlines today since our government has stopped refugees from there entering the U.S. indefinitely, six people in ten have fled their homes – an estimated twelve and a half million people homeless refugees.

After Mass, I will go back home and raid the refrigerator. You'll probably go home, or out to [dinner / breakfast]. I'll have a roof over my head tonight, and a pretty predictable day tomorrow and the day after that. So, probably, will you. There's nothing wrong with any of that. But we can't forget. Another story:

Ahmed survived the disaster, but he can't find a reason for his life any more. He lost eight members of his family at sea, when on October 11, 2013 their boat sank shortly after it has left Libya with hundreds of Syrian refugees on board. Three dozen people died in the tragedy.

Ahmed and the members of his family paid 3,000 [dollars] per person in order to get on board. As they entered the boat, however, suddenly some Libyan militiamen showed up and held guns to their heads.

All of a sudden a ship emerged behind them with the militiamen on board and followed their boat for hours. They wanted to force it back to Libya. As these efforts failed, the gunmen started to shoot at the defenceless refugees and severely injured many of them. Soon the bullets punctured the boat, and it sank within minutes.

Ahmed survived; eight members of his family drowned.

I don't want to live in a world where these things happen – where people are forced from their homes and countries by violence, and then preyed on again when they seek refuge. Yet I do. And so do you. How do I – how do we – listen to the Beatitudes, then walk out of church without a resolve to do something? I admit this is a hard question to answer. We don't set national policy on refugees – although we vote for the people who do set that policy. As believers in Christ, we should certainly pray regularly for refugees and for more open hearts toward them, and for a more just national policy and international order. And as people who haven't lost everything in the way our fellow children of God have, we can give to organizations that care for them. Sister Hanne Saad, who was calming Weaver in that first story, gets resources from the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. But there are plenty of good and effective charities – looking them up on Google and making a donation certainly takes less energy than organizing an escape across the Mediterranean as Ahmad did.

You no doubt remember, as I do, the scene a little further along in this Gospel in which Jesus comes as Judge, and his terrifying words, “Go away from me with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For ... I was a stranger and you never made me welcome.” Saint John Paul II said before his death, “Today, the illegal migrant comes before us like that ‘stranger’ in whom Jesus asks to be recognized. To welcome him and to show him solidarity is a duty of hospitality and fidelity to Christian identity itself.”

In just a minute we'll turn to the Eucharist, in which God gives us hope that He can make new life come out of darkness and death. I know some of you face personal darkness, and can't deal with any more right now; that's ok. You can ignore what this homily is about, at least for now. But most of us have some ease, some surplus, some time and energy we can spare to “welcome the stranger.” We might pray at this Eucharist that God will help us to direct those gifts wisely, for the sake of Weaver, and Ahmad, and the sixty million more like them. We might also pray for our country, that we and our leaders do not have to hear those words of Jesus at the judgment. A lot is riding on doing what we can to welcome the stranger.