

Refugee or Refugee: a new perspective worthy of emulation

Introduction

Few months ago, Pope Francis called every Catholic parish, religious community, monastery and sanctuary in Europe to take in one refugee family that has fled “death from war and hunger.” He said that the church should embrace refugees and migrants “without distinction or limits ... without frontiers.”

While different countries and parastatals work to fulfil this humanitarian obligation, there are lots of responsibilities and commitments that come with this resettlement plan. Canada in the milieu of this development aligned her humanitarian admission program to accommodate 25,000 more Syrian refugees before the end of 2015. Consequently, different parastatal need to plan and prepare to play sensitive roles in this entire resettlement process in Canada.

Religious institutions are important to this process. For instance, the United Church of Canada and Anglican Diocese are working earnestly to raise fund, collaborate with agencies and even provide support for families of the refugees. However, considering the intricacies involved in the process such as different background, cultural differences, understanding, way of life and other different experiences of individuals and groups to be resettled, there is need to create a forum for discussion of perspective which will help create a conducive atmosphere for these people to operate.

Since the church among other religious institutions is involved in the entire process, I believe that this subject can be addressed among the congregation. Thus, as an applied theatre practitioner, I worked with the church to use the tool of theatre to discuss boldly the idea of ‘Refugee and Refugee’ especially during the Christmas season of joy, love and sharing. The season of Christmas all over the world is important to Christians because it is the time we commemorate and celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, perfect time presented itself to use the season to further examine alongside church members, well-wishers and community members an issue that pertains to refugee to create the understanding that:

1. The history of the Christian journey itself is similar to that of the refugee especially with Jesus Christ’s parents being on the move from one city to another such as Bethlehem, and Egypt among others during/after the birth of Christ Jesus;
2. The protection of Jesus Christ in Egypt when king Herod ordered total massacre of babies under the age of two; and

3. Giving a new perspective to the idea of refugee as in the meaning of the word 'refuge'

We therefore believe that examining these subjects will create a paradigm shift in the reasons Christians should support the new refugees beyond pity, hence the reason for the production titled '**Jesus the Refugee**'.



Jesus the Refugee

Drama "Jesus, the Refugee" and Candle Light Service at Emmanuel Baptist Church, Cedar Hill, Victoria took place on the 24th December 2015 with over three hundred persons in attendance. It is usually a well-attended Carol in the city of Victoria particularly because of the songs, candle light and other innovative programs featured. This year, the famous Christmas story of Joseph and Mary was told with from the perspective of Jesus as the refugee. It was a three month long project which culminated into a performance. David Dawson, Joan Dosso and I had series of discussions on the theme; during our interactions and meetings, we developed the script; I guided the writing process and Joan wrote the script with the exception of the Narrator's introduction written by David Dawson who played the narrator in the drama.

I worked with the church to devise the theatre piece based on the theme. Joseph and Mary were played by Taiwo Afolabi and Anna Watts; we also had different musical groups embellish the theatre piece with Christmas songs. It was staged managed by Joan Dosso and directed by Taiwo Afolabi. The story explores the need for movement from one place to another, theme of refugee, problem involved in movement and the importance of providing solutions to these problem by the people of God especially when we understand that being a refugee is not a situation that calls for pity but which calls for love and support without pity.

The story starts with the Narrator introducing the theme of vulnerability revealing Mary being open to rejection by her betrothed Joseph. Angel Gabriel appears to Mary, delivers God's message of divine encounter which will result in her pregnancy of the Holy Child Jesus. Joseph rejects her but finally agrees after he has been convinced by the Holy Spirit. The story reveals the trouble both couple faced while in Bethlehem for the census as decreed by King Herod. Fortunately, they got a manger for Mary to give birth to Jesus and finally ran away from King Herod who planned to kill every child under the age of 2 years living in and around Bethlehem. The story presents different contemporary facts to the congregation such as medication, unemployment, food bank, security, kindness, giving and love among others. Garnished with harp music at the background, series of poems, and Scriptural readings to drive the theme of

the discussion to the congregation, the drama was well enjoyed by the congregation based on the positive responses which I got as an actor and director of the piece.

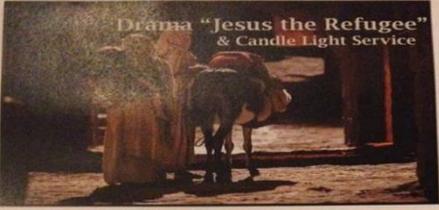
Commenting on the connection between the Christmas story and the theme of Refugee/Refuge, a member of the congregation expressed while speaking with me appreciated the relationship between Jesus' birth story and that of contemporary and tropical issues such as refugee and resettlement. According to her, the story is timely and contemporary. After the presentation, the service closed with candlelight showing spreading the theme of the gospel. We used lots of contemporary imageries, pictures, facts and figures such as food bank, manger, and Egypt among others to support the story being told. We had congregation from different parts of the world including but not limited to Japan, China, US, Canada, Nigeria, Australia, Bangladesh, Kenya and Europe among others.

In conclusion, the essence of the project was to draw attention to certain words to better understand the complexities of global refugee and migrant movements especially when we don't have a way to actively engage with the issues and individual experiences. Such words include refugee, refuge, resilience, belonging, inclusion, exclusion, home, joy, and fulfilment among others. The realities and depth of these words are revealed to the Christians in these words of Joseph thus:

*"The birth of Jesus was celebrated in the heavens but ignored here on earth
Jesus began life with little fanfare*

*Choosing a quiet, selfless life of servanthood,
Embodying the Father's love
No barriers were built around the heart of Jesus
To protect his vulnerability
He made the passage from being the one who is the healer
To the one who is wounded
From the man of compassion
To the man in need of compassion;
From the man who cries out
"If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink"
To the man who cries out
"I thirst"*

*From announcing the good news to the poor,
Jesus becomes the poor, the refugee,
He crosses over the boundary line of humanity
Which separates those whose needs are satisfied
From those who are broken and cry out in need."*



**Drama "Jesus the Refugee"
& Candle Light Service**

Christmas Eve 2015

Actors
Joseph: Taiwo Afolabi **Mary:** Anna Watts
Inn Keeper: John Burke **Narrator:** David Dawson
Scripture Reader: Richard Motchman

Women's Ensemble
Yan Ping Cui Blanche Phanichphant
Julia Dawson Jin Sung
Joan Dosso Masako Takenaka

Musicians
Violin: Jasper Meikeljohn, Halumu Takenaka
Cello: Nicole Phanichphant **Clarinet:** Leo Phanichphant
Harp: Mary Wolfe **Piano:** Jeannette Yager
Soloist: Stephanie Wilkinson
Set Design: Masako Takenaka, Taiwo Afolabi
Musical Director & Script: Joan Dosso

Poetry Quoted from:
Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons*, 2015.
Jean Vanier, *The Broken Body*, 1988.

Taiwo Afolabi
Queen Elizabeth Scholar
University of Victoria