

Who do you say we are?

Psalm 119:105-112; Genesis 25:19-24; Matthew 13:1-9, Matthew 16:13-20

Migration is very much like the seeds Jesus describes in this reading. We scatter foreigners around the country and some land on the gravel, some never put down roots, some fell amongst thorns and are overtaken by poverty, circumstance and powerlessness ...and some ...

many,

thrived in the sun, found fertile soil and spawned a deep connection with the land and the people: So deep they gave her generations to come.

I look around this church and I see many migrants scattered amongst those with deeper roots going back generations. Very few, sitting here today are from this Bega valley. We all came from somewhere. My son on his father's side is 6th generation while I am what they once called a 'new Australian'. For those who retired to this area, you also had to begin again, establishing friendships and relationships. Learning how to live in a new place – in a new way.

Today we will explore a little of the migrant experience. What was expected of new arrivals and how we, as a country built on immigration and first peoples, want to be seen by others.

I'll tell you a little of my story and then I will expect you to tell me a little of yours.

A long, long, long, long, time ago, when I was very young, I married an Australian living overseas. He was the son of a diplomat and while he knew he was Australian, his formative years were lived as the life of a diplomat's son. His English mother married an Australian airman during the war. She was English to her bootstraps and made no accommodation or adjustments for her new country. She thought it unnecessary and hence, my first husband had a very English upbringing including boarding school in the UK. He grew up with a mythical understanding of this great wide land.

When I was 7 and a half months pregnant, we decided the very best place to have this child would be in Australia. It was 1970 and the English economy, even before Thatcher, was in dire straits. Being a diplomat's son, he was given a business class ticket 'home' while I applied as a 10£ Pom and travelled cattle-class on a migrant charter flight. My education or qualifications were not even considered because I was a 'wife'.

We settled in Canberra with his grandmother and he found a job with Parks and Gardens. Mind you, in 1970, jobs were falling off of trees. When I was 9 months pregnant, he was taken with a sudden urgency to move to Sydney. So, I left my doctor and prenatal classes and followed him up six flights of stairs to a 3rd floor flat in Bondi. It was a twice condemned and resurrected building with a uniquely blended smell of urine and leaking gas. He truly looked like a tenement house. He went to work in the railways. Little did I know his girlfriend lived a block away.

He seemed to work very strange hours. By the time the baby arrived I was used to him disappearing for a couple of days at a time. By the time the baby was 6 weeks old, he had disappeared completely...but not before borrowing \$3000 from my father (remember a good weekly salary was about \$45); emptying our bank account and leaving the hospital bills and an eviction notice on the table.

I was broke and alone. I was still in shock when the milkman's lad came to the door to collect his \$1.50. I must have blurted something out because he, the employee, loaned me the money to pay the bill. The manager of the building, I think was out on parole, loaned me the money to cover the immediate rent. I gave him my mother's diamond ring as collateral and true to his word, he gave it back when I had repaid the loan.

I had to get a job, immediately!... but all I had was a few maternity clothes, so I went to the local frock shop. The owner was a holocaust survivor. There was no such thing as 'lay by' in those days or buy now-pay later. I was going to buy one dress at least for an interview but she insisted that if I bought these 3 pieces, I could mix and match them into a 5 working day wardrobe. She created a pay as you wear honour system for me. She sent me next door to the shoe man, a Greek, and ordered him to 'loan' me some shoes until I could pay.

Later, I went into the remnant shop to buy some offcuts to make cot sheets for the baby. The woman, a New Zealander, told me about living through the depression and showed me how to make baby cuddle rugs out of old dressing gowns and clothes out of old curtains. She sold me about \$1 worth of material and added thread, needles and miles of reclaimed lace. Sam had the prettiest gingham sheets and pillow cases, lace trimmed.

I had to find a baby-sitter to get a job so I went to the baby health clinic to read the bulletin board. The nurse told me there were 2 retired special care nurses living nearby and as an emergency, I might ask them. These lovely women in their late 70s agreed to act as a stop-gap until I could pay a real sitter. Everyday, when I picked him up, he would be outfitted in an entirely new layette: bonnet, boots and bodysuit.

They would have knit a new outfit each day. His clothes would be washed and wrapped in tissue paper.

Before the first paycheck, the baby was due for immunization in Bondi Junction. I had enough money for the bus fare one way and figuring he would be cranky after the shot, I opted for walking up the hill from Bondi. It's a long walk and a very big hill. A Māori bloke stopped to give me a lift. (you could do that in those days) and he told me about the Sydney markets. If you go there at 5am, any fruit or vegetables that fall on the ground get bruised, and they can't sell it. So, if you take a sack, you can eat for a week and it's free. I was pretty-well vegetarian anyway (given my pecuniary circumstance) and that certainly got us through the hardest times.

The story goes on and on. The people I met were mostly migrants. Bondi was a poor run-down area in those days. They all acted as they **thought** all Aussies would. It was a way of being Australian. They believed this was a good and fair country where everyone would lend a hand.

It was a terrible time and yet I had already decided I would not raise my son anywhere else.¹

A little over a year later, I moved into an isolated rural community with a one-teacher school. That's when I began to learn a lot about the deeper country. There's a lot to learn sitting on the end of the wharf, drinking Dinner Ale and listening to Curley's stories. Yep, he really was called Curley. That's when you begin to learn that bluey isn't blue, that 'dead set' means you can't argue with facts – and a whole lot of other Australianisms.

Before I go any further – I will admit I was one of those migrants that when they said, 'ladies bring a plate', I did... I brought an empty plate thinking they didn't have enough plates to serve on.²

Did you commit fumbling faux pas? (responses) What mistakes did you make? ³

My mother-in-law knew Australia was hot, so she took all my coats and jumpers out of my case and sent me to Canberra in June with a silk scarf and a cardigan. Did you have any weird ideas of what Australia might be like? (responses⁴)

¹ Later, I met a more realistic Australia with racism, sexism, religious prejudice and all the other stuff we would prefer does not exist.

² My migrant friends and I were so poor, it wasn't unusual to ask someone to bring a chair or fork and knife for a dinner.

³ Did you find that left-handed spanner? The congregation shared a story of inviting someone for tea and the Aussies came expecting dinner. Others fell foul of the plate scheme.

⁴ Apparently I wasn't the only one to be deluded by the weather

Those early years were tough. There was no recognition of qualifications in those days. Every taxi driver was a fine instrument-maker or a doctor. Like all migrants, I worked in factories and farms, pulled beers and waited tables for seven years while I studied and gained Australian qualifications. And all the while grateful for the people I met, who taught me in ways they will never know and for the country that gave me the opportunity to be all that I could be.

When I travel overseas, I meet people who are jealous of Australia. Jealous of our gun laws, our education system and our health system. Envious of our work ethic and play ethic and sheer enjoyment of life.

The point is, we don't want to be like Esau and Jacob – two nations in the same womb. We have come out on the heels of our First Nations people.⁵ and while the settlers were more powerful, we have so much to learn.

In Matthew 16 – Jesus asks Peter¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”⁶

No matter what the outcome of this referendum, we have to respond with a generosity and graciousness that speaks to the question, ‘who do you say we are?’. How do we want to be seen in the world? I have a migrant's vision, perhaps rose coloured, but it was shaped by the “new Australians” who welcomed me home.

Remember too, when you were an outsider and someone made room for you?

I pray

For all the seeds cast upon the wind, for all the homeless, migrants, refugees and all who have moved their centre of gravity to an alien place, to those who have lost their culture and those trying to hang on – God be with you in your journey.

⁵ We have taken the lead but now it is time to recognize every person has a right to contribute to this wonderful country. We have so much to learn from each other.

⁶ Matthew 16:13-20