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Note to the reader – this script has been reconstructed hastily from notes and may contain errors. Please bear this in mind when reading and disseminating. I pray that the thoughts behind the hurried words shine through

Three words. Responsibility. Compassion. Mystery.

Responsibility

Germane Greer has a wonderful quote about her time in catholic schools she says “I could have married a stockbroker and settled into a life of three cars and a carport. The nuns made that impossible because I was hungry for something else”

Greer’s story is my story too. Were it not for a little Lutheran school in the middle of a dirt paddock set amongst the wine country of McLaren Vale, I may have become an accountant and you would be able to eat your dinner tonight in peace.

I was born to Deli owning parents who are not really religious. I recall the story of a rather tense moment when my mother stared down the local priest who took issue with her demand to remove the promise ‘to obey’ from her marriage vows. There is also a rumour that my grandfather (the man I’m named after) tried to burn down a church after copping a hiding from the priest for being insolent during Sunday school. I was not brought up in the church.

My grade 1 teacher told my parents that I would never learn to read and write at an adult level. “Tom should leave school as early as he can and get a trade” they said. I was lucky to have parents who knew this was rubbish. I shifted schools but it was at that time that my parents started looking for a suitable high school with great teachers. They did not want this to happen again.

As it would happen, a new Lutheran school was opening in McLaren Vale, Tatachilla Lutheran College, opening the very year in which I would commence high school. I was enrolled number 65 of 67 of that first intake of students.

The story of how I became a Christian is simple. I saw the teachers at Tatachilla model Christ’s love in their care and concern for me and my peers. I can’t pinpoint the moment

that I became a Christian – I just felt an increasing belief that this stuff the pastor talked about in chapel was true because the teachers lived it. They didn't just talk about it.

At some point during every week our principal, Richard Bruss, would remind us of our school motto from Philippians 2:5 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus'. Even today I can recall the distinct inflection Mr Bruss' accent as I come across challenging situations in my work week.

Some of you may know, I am a recovering opera singing career who had a moderately successful career in Adelaide but I got to the point where singing wasn't enough. No longer could I sing yet another jolly Mozart opera for a mostly privileged well off audience and pretend that my life was having enough impact.

I considered becoming a pastor in the Lutheran church or becoming a teacher. But I chose the latter, studying education through Flinders University and through Australian Lutheran College. I was lucky enough to commence my teaching career as a Christian Studies and Drama teacher at Concordia College, Highgate.

Around this time a nice young girl came into my life and it wasn't too long before friendship turned into marriage.

Through the Lutheran Church, I had the opportunity to discover that not all Lutheran schools were as nice and well-resourced as Concordia. I travelled to Papua New Guinea and the US on social justice trips. My wife had for a long time had a passion to work with African refugees – specifically Sudanese women.

So it came to be that we left our comfortable lives in Adelaide to serve refugees in Egypt.

Why Egypt?

The UN interacts officially with about 250,000 refugees in Egypt. Having worked with NGOs like MSF, refugee researchers, long term missionaries, I know the number of refugees currently living in Egypt is closer to 4 million. There is a major UN processing centre in Cairo which acts as a funnel for those hoping for resettlement elsewhere. However, the Egyptian government bars refugees from accessing healthcare, education, work.

African Hope Learning Centre offers an education to 500 African refugee students living in Egypt in grades 1 to grade 11. Staff and students have a basic healthcare program including dental care, vaccinations and health education. The school also provides employment for more than 50 refugee teachers. Over 20 African nations are represented in students and staff. From Sudan into the horn of Africa, Somalia, Ethiopia, through down as far south as Uganda and Burundi, then west to Angola and up to Nigeria.

The goal of this illegal Christian school is to provide an education to build the African community which is in sore need of doctors, engineers, teachers and business people. It is hoped that this education will allow students to define and build a positive future for their

countries. This of course is difficult. Finding the finances to run the school is very difficult in a very competitive global aid market.

AHLC is reliant on volunteers due to the low educational levels of its teachers thus my role when I moved to Egypt was to train teachers inside and outside the school through being a deputy principal of the school working with another Australian as the principal, and lecture in education and theology at a refugee training college.

As I had the tools needed to help African Refugees in Egypt I felt the responsibility to do so.

I have been reflecting a great deal about African Hope Learning Centre over the past weeks, more so than normal. This is because a man named Jonathon, the current principal, will be returning to Australia with his family four months from now. African Hope will no longer have a well-trained international educational leader. This is something that should be celebrated as an African national has been trained to lead the community. But it is also a concern. White faced foreigners are protected more than African faces in Egypt. White faced foreigners know how to write funding applications and have connections to the more powerful embassies. There is a very real possibility that the future of African Hope is in doubt. I hope it does not come to be, and the man next to me in that photo, a Ugandan man named Kizito, needs our prayers.

While I am wise enough to know that I am not God, and I do believe that God is in control of all, few things annoy me more than people who try to give me comfort in this situation by saying that I don't need to worry about it – they say “God will look after them” or “God will raise up those to do what he needs done.” I saw enough in Cairo to feel greatly affronted for someone to suggest that what these African refugees had experienced was “God looking after them”. They had also waited an awful long time, and still wait, for God to raise up those to protect, support and empower them.

The stark reality is: our world is the way it is because we allow it to be so. I am not trying to guilt us all into sadness but what I am saying is that we all need to bear responsibility for all of our brothers and sisters across the world. As educators we have a duty to engender this responsibility to serve others in our students, staff and communities.

Some would put me on the missionary pedestal and say “I could never have done what you did”. It isn't a case of can't - what I did was not difficult. Anyone in this room could serve in this way usefully if they wanted to. My wife and I made a choice to serve in Egypt. To simply say “I couldn't do what you did” is an excuse. An excuse so often used to justify inaction and to do nothing to help those in need. If you can speak English, use Microsoft word and pass Year 7 maths, you were more qualified than every single staff member I worked with in Egypt. Every. Single. One.

In the last fortnight I have considered leaving my current school and returning to Egypt. Rest assured dear regional leadership you will not have another school to support through the process of hiring a new principal, I will be staying here, but I do so wide eyed. Should

African Hope close, I know it is not my fault. Neither is it necessarily the fault of the worldwide community, but we should be wise enough to know that we allowed it to close. We could have taken action to keep it going but we didn't.

As Christians in the west we often buy into a lie. A lie that tells us that it is enough for us to have our faith in God and just live our lives as best we can. It is shameful that the lives of most Christians look no different to the lives of your average Australian - mortgage, shiny car, shiny kids, overseas holidays. I'm not sure that is really what Christ taught us. We seem to live lives hidden from seeing the suffering of others and it is humanity's will that is causing the suffering in our world. This is not the will of our loving God who suffers with the oppressed. Our responsibility, is to be with the oppressed.

The Sunday just passed in the LCA was refugee and migrant Sunday, and one of the readings came from Exodus chapter 23:

“Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.

I know what it was like to be a foreigner in Egypt. I know what it was like to experience great kindness. I also know what a hard place it is to be. It is not only the African refugees that need help, so do the people of Egypt. There is widespread poverty – 50% of Egyptian children live below the poverty line.

Africa and Egypt are in the situation they are in partly because the global community, a community which you and I are a part of, chose to allow things to be.

Compassion

I must confess, it took me quite a while before I actually noticed that Jesus was a refugee. It's not that it is hidden or tucked away somewhere where you might miss it like 2 Chronicles, one of the Minor Prophets, Jude perhaps or maybe the Apocrypha. There it is in the gospel according to Matthew, another reading from the weekend just past.

There it is in black and white. An angel appears to Joseph and tells him to get his family out of his homeland or face death. They travel to Egypt and remain there until the threat passes. While I imagine this was a traumatic experience for the family, it was not one new to Mary and Joseph. As they grew up in the Jewish faith, they would have been told the stories of their ancestors being slaves in Egypt and exiled in Babylon.

Mary and Joseph would have known the old testament refrain well “By The rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion”

The figure of Jesus as the refugee is an uncomfortable one for us. It forces us to think again about those who get on poorly constructed boats in Malaysia, those stuck in badly resourced refugee camps on the borders of South Sudan or those in refugee processing centres.

All of the debate and discussion around refugees in Australia seems to revolve around one simple question: “do they have a reasonable excuse for turning up on our doorstep and staying?”

We spend much of our time honing the skill of sorting right from wrong – especially in schools. Do I agree with this person or not? Is this answer correct or not. Do I vote liberal or labour? Is this idea good or evil? Is this refugee’s situation bad enough?

The skill of answering yes or no questions is helpful. Knowing if a billion dollar bridge is able to bear the daily traffic or not is a very useful skill for an engineer to have. Knowing if a young man’s broken collarbone need surgery or not, was a very helpful skill for a doctor to have, as I experienced recently.

But yes or no is not a tool to be used in relationships. When we think like this we are more inclined to judge others as wholly right or wholly wrong. When we do this, we make it very easy to dismiss people; to marginalise people and to destroy community.

In Cairo I lived a 10 minute walk from African Hope. Each day I walked over this pedestrian bridge and passed the same two beggars. A woman with terribly injured feet sold tissues. A man with no legs sat in the dirt selling packets of biscuits. Some days I gave to them and sometimes I did not. When I didn’t I would feel some sense of guilt.

The problem I faced was not primarily one of guilt, but of wanting a simple consistent rule to remove the need for me to make the giving decision every day. Then I could give, or not give, consistently - based on some personal justification and without guilt. I wanted to escape dealing with the suffering of these two people. But If I had done that, the need for me to engage with, and care for, the person in front of me would have been removed.

Once we construct a concrete rule for dealing with people we start down a dangerous path. We no longer have to engage fully with the situation in front of us. We say, “I don’t have to care because they are a fundamentally different creation to me”. It is an excuse to do nothing and feel good about doing nothing. Such rules can destroy the ability to be present in the moment and to react with compassion.

This is the kind of compassion that is recorded when we are told, Jesus, despite his troubles, had compassion on a people that were like sheep without a shepherd. In this context, Greek word for compassion, means a response from the entrails or gut. But we already know that don’t we? When we act with compassion we know that to an extent we are moving our control from our head to our heart, and I would say, giving our thoughts and reactions to the Holy Spirit. We feel the action to be right and true, not necessarily think it to be so.

Lutherans are no strangers to being refugees. In Australia we are a church born out of refugees – a people who left Europe to escape religious persecution. Lutherans know what it is like to continue to be persecuted in your new land. It is just over a hundred years ago

that Australian Lutherans had their schools and churches closed, their language forbidden and some of their community leaders imprisoned.

As Lutherans, we should have a compassionate action, a gut reaction, to those in need. More so than most, because our church has deeply felt the pain of being a stranger in a foreign land.

A Lutheran scholar writes:

“God’s justice is a life-giving justice for all persons regardless of gender, race or ethnicity, social or economic status – a justice that should underpin human relationships and the education of future leaders in society. Indeed, Luther was among the first of his generation to protest business, banking, and religious practices that favoured the wealthy few and impoverished the many. And yet...Lutheran history is marked by the refusal to heed the ancient call to act with justice, exchanging that more difficult task for charitable endeavours or stoic silence in the face of oppression.”

These are harsh words.

Deep in my soul I reflect on the conversations I had with my first principal. I am convinced he thought I was an arrogant, inexperienced, unrealistic and idealistic fool and I probably was. Perhaps still am? I remember conversations I had with him about enrolment, structures, teacher conditions, school fees.

Now I sit in the principal’s chair I have had pause to stop and think. However, my beliefs about the heart and goals of Lutheran education have not changed. My main contention lies around this:

“How is it that the schools built for a poor migrant church full of persecuted refugees are now so expensive that refugees now arriving to our country are excluded from them?”

We know what it is like to be a stranger in a foreign land yet so few of our schools seem to be open to those most in need of a supportive and transformative Christian education in the Lutheran tradition.

I also pause and think when I read that a single parent with two children receives a Centrelink benefit of \$14,500 and know that to send one child to some of our schools would cost more than that entire income.

I find it unsurprising that recent studies have found that those on lower incomes are far more likely to donate significantly than those on middle incomes. According to one study, those living on less than \$45k per year on average, give a greater percentage of their income than those earning between \$45,000 and \$10,000,000. It is only those who earn more than \$10,000,000 than start to exceed the level of giving demonstrated by those on less than 45k a year. It makes sense though doesn’t it, those who have experienced the difficulty of making ends meet first hand, those that have felt it in the gut, understand it far more than those who have not.

Have we simply forgotten our past? Have we had it so good in Lutheran schools for too long? Are we too comfortable?

Serving in Egypt profoundly changed the way I look at the world. One of the first purchases I had to make when I arrived at my current school was a class set of iPads. I remember looking at the JBHiFi education catalogue proudly offering my discounted education price of \$550 per unit. All I could think was that for that amount of money, I could feed all 500 students at African Hope for over 2 weeks.

How is it that we have allowed ourselves to charge such a pricey fee to enter the wonderful world of Lutheran education. A place where people hopefully engage in the mystery and see God?

Mystery

1st John 3 tells us “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

The trouble with Lutherans, and for the moment I’ll pretend that we only have one flaw, is that we are so good at feeling God’s endless abounding mercy and grace and feeling saved, that we forget that God’s mercy and grace is not meant to stay with us – it is to be shared.

As Jesus reminds us, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life” God doesn’t NEED your good deeds but his people certainly DO.

One of the conference organisers, Nev Grieger writes: the “don’t have to do anything” formula to earn God’s favour too easily gets twisted to become ... “there is nothing that we should do in response to God’s love for us”. Perhaps Jesus is reminding us, that **we** demonstrate that we have a life in Him, only when we reflect a response of love and care for those around us. Through and in Him, we should automatically look beyond ourselves and share what we have in order to enhance the well-being of others.”

In my reflection for our school newsletter this week, I paraphrased John’s words thus:

“What kind of Christian has plenty but does not share with those in need? Words are not enough – Christians are people who act out the love of God”

Let me put it another way, what kind of school claims to be Christian but does not include those in most need?

I have to say, being the principal of a primary school in Melbourne was not part of my plan. It was never part of any plan I could have possibly thought of. For starters, I don’t like kids. Teenagers, Year 9s to be specific, were my people. Secondly, I’m a trained senior school

drama and Christian studies teacher. Thirdly, after being burnt out on serving a refugee community in Cairo, the last thing I wanted to do was serve a community with a high level of migrant and refugee families. Finally, as a Crows supporter I didn't want to move to Melbourne – especially as our regional director is a port power supporter!

I don't use this sort of language very often, but I feel in my soul that this is exactly what God had a mind. At the same time that I was to be returning to Australia, the principalship at Sunshine became vacant. Sunshine needs the kind of person that understands the refugee struggle. I also needed a place to remind me of some of the wonderful ministry that Lutheran schools are involved with. For a few brief moments, God's mystery became a little less cloudy.

I remember few moments from my early days as principal but I do remember this one clearly. Arriving at one of our regional meetings, a good soul looked at my badge and said 'Sunshine Christian School? What are you doing here? This event is for Lutheran schools!' It is true that we are not well known – and there is a reason for that.

Sunshine began as a school of the Uniting Church in 1982. Faced with closure, one of the most spectacular things the LCA has done in its history was to allow the school to join LEA in 2004 with the support of a little congregation in Footscray.

I don't want to pretend that Sunshine is the pinnacle of schooling but I am immensely proud of the staff and students of sunshine.

Our SES score is 88. The majority of our families are from the bottom two quartiles of income. Most of our families are classified in the bottom 2 categories for occupation, and most of our parents did not complete schooling beyond year 9. Most of our families do not speak English as a first language, 84% of them to be precise. Around 30% of our families are from refugee backgrounds.

It is not unusual for a parent of a perspective enrolment to have spent more than 5 years in a refugee camp. It is sadly, often I hear of mothers and fathers of our children being in camps for more than 10 years.

In our student body of 93 students, we have over 20 nationalities and languages. We are mostly practicing Christian (really practicing Christian, not the twice a year enough to get a pastoral reference Christian) with a smattering of practicing Hindu and Buddhist families. We have 4 Lutheran students but they hail from South Sudan and the Philippines.

As principal, I, along with the pastor and one support staff member, represent the Lutheran staff contingent. The interesting thing, is that almost 100% our staff are the real deal practicing Christian. And that is a blessing too rarely seen in our schools today.

This environment makes it easy for us to do crazy things like instead of increasing school fees by 6% every year as it common practice, we do everything we can to drag them down.

This year we kept them the same as in 2014 and rolled in camp and excursion fees in a way that half of our parents are now paying less in fees than what they did 18 months ago.

It is the kind of place that when the principal breaks his collarbone, one of the school parents drives around the suburb looking for his car so that their family can offer their support and give a gift of chocolate and tea. Where one of the senior Myanma church members contacts their entire network of church community across the country to pray for his healing.

It's the kind of place where a practicing Buddhist father tells me: "I don't want my daughter to go to a public school. I know your school is a good school. You will not ignore her soul. You will teach her about God. You will teach her about duty to others. This will not happen at the other local schools"

It is the kind of place where a school council writes a mission statement that looks like this:

- To provide a quality Christian education in the Lutheran tradition
- To work towards individual and community wellbeing
- To engender the responsibility to serve others
- To share the appreciation of cultural inclusivity
- To foster the individual God-given talents of all in our community.
- To make enrolment available to all, regardless of financial status, cultural background or academic ability

The author of Matthew recorded the flight of Jesus' family to Egypt to remind his Jewish audience of something very important. That Jesus knew what it was like to be persecuted and to feel like a stranger. For the first Jewish Christians who saw Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecy, they would be persecuted, made outcasts and I imagine forced to flee at times. To become a Christian was to become like the refugee.

Somewhere between actions not mattering at all and actions being all important, there is a middle ground of the Christian life. There is no perfect rule that God gives us – he forces us into the mystery. A mystery that forces us to keep caring, keep entering into the suffering, keep reevaluating, all the while relying on grace and faith, rather than law and rules.

As humans we are living in the kingdom of this world. A world in bondage to sin. A world that cannot save itself. While we live on this earth we weep by the waters of Babylon for we are living in a foreign land. We were created to live in perfect communion with God, with his people and his creation. But we messed it up.

The compassionate response from our God of great mystery was to take responsibility for not allowing this to be the end. He did not pretend that everything was ok. He did not simply turn away, throw in a few dollars and pray for someone else to do it, he sacrificed his only son, so that all of humanity would not live outside of His kingdom forever as refugees. This is the Gospel we bring the world.

Ministry in Lutheran schools is hard work. Making budgets work, dealing with staff issues, parents who don't want the Christian part of our education but want to academic results, this all takes from us.

The challenge for us is to remember that, as servants of Lutheran schools, we are blessed richly.

Our schools can be called Christian Schools and have crosses prominently displayed. We receive funding from the government to help operate our schools. We can pray and worship where we choose. We can record that we are a Lutheran on the census. We can stand on the street and proclaim the gospel. In other countries, any one of these things would place our very lives in danger. I think we have largely forgotten this.

We have a duty to bring our school communities into what I will call the dance of responsibility, compassion and mystery because that is where the gospel lies. It is the kind of place which challenges the status quo. It is the kind of community that transforms things.

It isn't just about the refugee. Lutheran schools must work to include all those on the margins of society. It also isn't just about the kids. We have parents, staff and congregation members just as much in need of hearing and experiencing God's mercy.

The leaders in your school communities need for prayer and support but they also need your help to keep our schools in this dance. As a principal it is easy for me to get caught up in measuring my school by the enrolment numbers and the financial surplus. Across schools, it is also easy for us to look up to those P-12 schools with thousands of students, hundreds of staff, old buildings, playing grounds and a swimming pool, and think that they are the pinnacle of Lutheran schools. That might be how the world sees it.

But perhaps the marker of a good Lutheran school is how well they include the marginalised, oppressed and refugee.

So as you attend this conference, it is my sincere prayer, and the prayer the community that I serve, that you may be challenged, empowered and strengthen in your ministry. Your communities need you to provide sound leadership, courage and passion for the servant heart of our schools.

What you do matters. You never know when your humble and quiet example, might awaken a passion for serving God and his people, in a young person.

Blessings.

