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According to the latest statistics, there are more than 65 million people who have forcibly left their homes because of war or persecution. This is the highest number of refugees since World War II. The largest number, 11 million, are from Syria. The vast majority still remain in refugee camps where conditions are very poor and beyond description.

Many experts say that the situation will get worse as the numbers of refugees continue to grow. From their perspective we can do nothing to resolve the problem and nothing to stop it because the matter is very complicated. So, nowadays many people ask, ‘What can we do for the refugee crisis as ordinary people?’

The other day I happened to read a story of Aya, a Syrian child refugee living in a camp in Lebanon. She was the millionth Syrian child refugee according to UNHCR. Aya was eight years old, but never went to school due to poverty. Her older siblings had to work at vegie farms all day, and she had to look after a younger brother and an older sister with a disability.

Her life context wasn’t good at all, but she didn’t lose hope thanks to many people supporting her and her family. Her dream was to become a paediatrician to help poor children like her. She said, “I want to be a good doctor, so I can treat people without charging them anything.”

There was no more detailed explanation of her dream in the article, but I guess that she would’ve met good doctors and people in the camp, which might have influenced her a lot. Our support doesn’t only meet the needs of those in trouble, but also keeps them hoping and dreaming even in times of crisis. Her story tells us to do what we can do for them even though they seem small and trivial, as our efforts and concerns could make a huge difference in someone’s life.

Last Sunday, our congregation took a group photo standing with crossed-arms and uploaded it on the Common Grace website to participate in a campaign, ‘Churches Standing in Solidarity,’ to support the men on Manus Island. You know, since the closure of the Manus camp, the refugees there have been violently removed, and they are fighting to find freedom and safety.

Taking a photo of our congregation and uploading it isn’t a big thing, but it can be a good sign of solidarity giving them hope and peace. They might feel that

they aren't alone. Yes, there are many things to do for the weak and the oppressed in our community if we have concerns for them.

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Isaiah 40:1-11, today's first Bible reading, is the scripture for those in crisis. In verses 1 and 2 the Prophet Isaiah declares God's message to them: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed.”

At this, the expression, ‘her hard service,’ means the Israelite Babylonian captivity. After the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian Empire, many high class people had been forcefully taken in Babylon three times. In this passage, God comforted the Israelite prisoners and declared that their captivity would end soon. It's God's promise for the second Exodus, their new life.

This passage shows that our God is concerned about suffering people, supports them to overcome troubles and trials, and guides them to a new life. This is God's comfort. May God's heavenly comfort be with all the suffering people in Manus Island and all around the world. May God's comfort be with you all whenever you need it.

Remarkably, God's declaration of comfort was followed by his invitation to his comforting ministry. In verses 1 and 2, God consoled those in trouble, and then he invited them to be a channel of his healing and restoring works. Verse 3 says, “A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”

In this, ‘the way for the Lord’ and ‘the highway for our God’ indicate God's salvation and liberation for the Israelite captives. Furthermore, they symbolise all God's works for healing the brokenhearted and binding up their wounds. What's interesting is that God commanded his suffering people to prepare and make straight the way. You know, they were desperately waiting for God's action, but God ordered them to be part of his wonders.

This provides us with a truth that we were all born to be loved and comforted; and also we were called to help those in needs. We were all invited to be a channel of God's grace for our neighbours by preparing and making straight God's way. This

is the dual blessing for God’s people that we should recognise and enjoy; being comforted by God’s grace and comforting others with God’s love.

The Hebrew word translated to ‘prepare’ is *Pana* (פָּנָה) which means ‘to face.’ That is, preparing the way for the Lord means facing how our neighbours suffer and seeing how God works for them. And, the Hebrew word translated to ‘make straight’ is *Yasar* (יָשַׁר) which means ‘to like.’ Making straight the way for God signifies loving God’s way and doing it as he wants.

These two words, *Pana* and *Yasar*, show well what it means to care for the marginalised in our society. They teach us how to comfort the brokenhearted and bind up their hurts. Yes, to support our neighbours or friends, or even strangers we should face what troubles they are undergoing first, and try to see how God would work for them, thinking deeply what Jesus would do; this is preparing the way for the Lord. If we feel confident of God’s ways for them, we must make efforts to implement it in our life context as much as we can; this is making straight a highway for God.

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Last Sunday my family watched a new release movie, ‘Wonder.’ Celine and Helen, my two daughters, had already read the novel ‘Wonder’ written by R. J. Palacio, and they really wanted to watch the film. So we chose it, and it was good; it gave me great food for thought.

I don’t want to be a movie spoiler for those who plan to watch it later, so I just want to share one of my impressions about the film. The movie is about a young boy named Auggie Pullman who starts to go to school, quitting home schooling. He is supposed to be in the fifth grade, but he has never attended school before because of his facial abnormality associated with a genetic disorder.

From the first day of school, Auggie had to take off his beloved astronaut helmet covering his face. He was removed from his comfort zone. All the students looked at him as if they had encountered a monster, and his school life was terrible. He was bullied, and always ate lunch alone. No one liked him. Then, someone approached him; he was Jack, a classmate.

There were complications, but they were able to build up a good relationship. In Auggie’s school life, Jack was like a channel of blessing. Thanks to the friendship with Jack, he got more confidence in himself, could build other relationships, and could make space for embracing others.

Yes, one person is enough; one supporter could make a huge difference. On top of that not only Auggie, but Jack was also blessed a lot from that special meeting. They helped each other and grew together.

[4]

Sisters and brothers,

A voice calls us this morning: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Our life is like the wilderness and the desert; it’s so hard to prepare and make straight the way for God. But, this is the life we were called to live as a people of God, like John the Baptist who was a great example of taking risks to prepare the way for the Lord.

We are now spending a season of anticipation waiting for God’s peace and grace. In this season our God is looking for one person comforting his suffering people by preparing and making straight God’s ways. Through that one person, the miracle mentioned in verses 4 and 5 will be realised:

“Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.” Amen.