In the last couple of weeks, as we have watched the terrible events unfolding in Afghanistan and the desperate attempts of thousands of Afghanis to escape the newly-restored Taliban regime, no doubt many have wondered what this situation might mean, not just for Australia’s foreign policy, but also for our refugee and migrant intake programs – especially since it might be argued that Australia has contributed to the humanitarian crisis that is presently unfolding before our eyes?

If Australia’s Prime Minister, Mr Morrison, is to be believed, the answer would seem to be: nothing at all. Indeed, the status quo will be enforced even more strictly than it has before. Mr Morrison has been at pains to point out that only those persons approved through the existing immigration regime will be permitted to settle in Australia, on the grounds that doing anything different will only send a signal to people smugglers that Australia is “open for business”; while the Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Dutton, has asserted that the government needs to take a hard line with any potential migrants on the grounds that “terrorists” might try to come to Australia for the purpose of committing violent acts in this country.

These sentiments have been broadly supported and echoed by the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Albanese.

This bipartisan insistence on a “tough approach” confronts us with the question: how are we, as Christians, meant to respond to these statements and assertions? Well, it being the age of Google, it will come as no surprise to anyone to realise that it only takes a very quick online search of the Bible to discover that the political consensus in our country is starkly at odds with what the biblical witness says about how the People of God are to deal with foreigners and migrants.

Indeed, my own quick search uncovered at least 265 passages in which the words “foreigner”, “stranger”, or “alien” are mentioned. And what is more, the vast majority of these passages exhort the people of Israel to the neighbourly, hospitable and just treatment of foreigners. Indeed, time and again, both the Mosaic Law and the prophetic tradition – whose essence is captured in today’s Gospel reading - demand that God’s Chosen People deal justly and compassionately with their neighbours and with the resident aliens living among them.

But beyond the bald fact of the sheer number of these injunctions is the less frequently noted truth that these commands are often accompanied by one of two contextualising statements, statements that provide, as it were, both the background for the injunction and its deeper meaning. These statements are often overlooked or treated as mere addenda to the commands; but in the context of our present circumstances, and in the wider context of Migrant and Refugee Sunday, it seems to me that these statements are, if anything, as or even more important than the command itself.

The first such statement reminds the people of Israel that they were foreigners and strangers in the land of Egypt, where they were enslaved and oppressed precisely because they were not Egyptians. As the text repeatedly declares: *For you were aliens in the land of Egypt*. And for the people of Israel, that very fact of alienation, that very fact of “being the other” was central to their own identity, marked and celebrated in the sacred event of Passover. By reminding the Hebrew people of the centrality of this experience of otherness to their own self-understanding, this contextualising statement calls on them to be who, in fact, they are: the “other” who understands the dehumanisation that “otherness” involves, and who accordingly refuses to apply the prejudicial criteria of “otherness” to those who are strangers and foreigners among them.

For, indeed, the word alien conjures up stronger imagery than merely “foreigner” or “stranger”: it evokes a sense of menace, of the one who is so utterly strange and different that they are removed from us, without any common ground between “us” and “them”. In the context of alien, difference is not a virtue or even a vice: it is a threat, to be deflected or contained before it can cause any harm. The centuries of anti-Semitism that preceded the 20th century enabled the Nazis to quite easily depict – and their audiences to quite readily accept – the image of the Jewish people as not “really human”, that they were not really “people” as we are. And this depiction, and this acceptance, lead directly to Dachau and Auschwitz and Belsen and all the horrors of the so-called “final solution”.

And in Australia in the years since 9/11 – a tragedy that itself became the defining justification for the west’s occupation of Afghanistan - how easily have we accepted the depiction of our Muslim sisters and brothers as “other”, as a “threat” that is less than human and which therefore warrants inhumane responses? This is not to deny the atrocity of 9/11 or of any other terrorist attack; it simply indicates the extent to which we ourselves are guilty of the prejudice of “otherness”, of dehumanising and reducing human beings to a category of threat: a process that has lead both to the bandying about of vicious prejudices in our media, and to the obscenity, not just of the so-called “War on Terror” and Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, but of the sanitising of this obscenity behind phrases such as “extreme rendition” and “enhanced interrogation”.

The second contextualising phrase that often accompanies the commandments regarding foreigners is a reminder that the Hebrew people are not the indigenous people of the Promised Land; it is a land that Abraham lived in as an alien, and into which they have come as foreigners and outsiders. Again, the text declares: *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien*. And elsewhere: *I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan*. In other words, the Promised Land comes to the Hebrew people not as a right but as gift, a gift that involves responsibility and stewardship – not just for the land, but for the people living in it. Importantly, this involves and includes people who come into the land after the Israelites; the land is not to be locked up as a fortress and held sacrosanct for one people only. Their self-understanding as a species of resident alien, as outsiders occupying a land to which they were not indigenous, gave the ancient Hebrews pause for thought: the land was not theirs to possess by exclusive right, but to hold as a light to all the nations, an embodiment of what life lived in relationship with God entailed and promised for all humankind.

And so to those who wonder how the Hebrew Scriptures are in any way relevant to 21st Century Australia, might I humbly submit that a self-understanding as a resident alien people occupying a land to which we are not indigenous could not be more urgently relevant than in 21st century Australia – especially in a context in which our leaders presume to declare on our behalf that we shall determine who comes to this nation and the circumstances under which they come here – as though we were the indigenous people of this land, as though we hadn’t callously brushed aside the claims of indigenous Australians in our occupation of this country. To those who say the Hebrew Scriptures have nothing to say to modernity, I say you are wrong: and in the case of our present political consensus with respect to refugees generally and the Afghanistan situation specifically, I say you could not be more tragically, more terribly wrong.

For surely, in the reading from Ruth, we have encapsulated the deeper meaning contained in these two contextualising statements. Today’s passage occurs after Ruth and her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi have returned to Israel. Both are widows; both are dependent upon Naomi’s extended family and upon the charity of their neighbours. But Ruth is also a Moabite, a people who, though related to the Hebrews, were often in conflict with them. So her position is especially precarious: not just economically, but socially: she is one of “them”, one of the oft-times enemy, not one of “us”, probably not to be trusted. Ruth is the ultimate outsider; she is alien.

Today’s reading finds Ruth in the field belonging to Boaz, following behind the reapers as they gather the crop, picking up the gleanings they leave behind. This is in accord with the Mosaic commandment that the Hebrews allow the poor and the foreigners to take up whatever is not harvested. But when Boaz sees Ruth and enquires after her, the information about who she is elicits an extraordinary response: Boaz specifically instructs Ruth to use his fields for gathering the left-over harvest; he invites her to attach herself to the women of his household; he accords her protection against the unwelcome attentions of any of the men; and he offers her to drink the very water that his own people have drawn for themselves. In other words, Boaz draws Ruth into an economy of grace: economy in the original, theological sense of the word, which describes the relational love which God both extends to humankind and commands us to accord to one another. Boaz, in effect, makes Ruth part of his own household: and again, the word “economy” pertains, derived as it is from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning a household and the relationships it sustains. Boaz becomes an “economist” in the truest, proper sense of the term: the *oikonoumos* who takes responsibility for the web of human relationships by which a household is upheld.

And note the basis on which Boaz does so: contained in his response to Ruth is an explicit acknowledgement of all that she has surrendered, all that she has left behind in order to follow Naomi into a strange land to live among a strange people. No suggestion here of queue-jumping, or of being an “economic refugee” who somehow is less legitimate than other categories of refugee. Boaz says: you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. Surely that is the essence of what it means to be a refugee, a migrant, an asylum seeker, with its implicit dislocation of connections to family, friends, culture, and country? Tellingly, Boaz recognises that Ruth has come seeking asylum; her decision was not a matter of choice, but of necessity, for she has sought refuge and protection under the wings of the LORD, the God of Israel. Boaz’s response to Ruth is both an embodiment and acting out of that protection, and its unconditional extension by God to the whole of humankind.

I think I can safely say that no-one pretends that the issue of displacement, and the movement of people across international borders is a simple one that can be addressed through simplistic means. All the more tragic, therefore, that the majority of our politicians appear to have plumped for a simplistic set of “solutions” that are more concerned with winning votes than they are about addressing the injustice that so often prompts human migration. All the more tragic that the bulk of the Australian public appear to embrace a prejudice-ridden nationalism that ignores the facts of our own history of occupation, never mind acknowledges the brutal realities of displacement and statelessness. All the more tragic that, as a nation, we are not prepared to face the complexity of this issue for fear that this will force us to consider all the ways in which our national and international policies create or exacerbate the very conditions that force people to seek asylum far from home.

Therefore, on this Migrant and refugee Sunday, as we reflect on the biblical witness, let us also reflect on our own self-understanding as a society. We, who are a nation of immigrants, do we understand what it means to be “other”, or do we practice the prejudice of “otherness”? We, who made a nation by dispossessing the original inhabitants of this land, do we hold this land as gift available to others, or as exclusive possession defended by xenophobic assumption? The readings we have heard today call our attention to the choices that lie before us, and to the consequences of these choices. Let us, therefore, in the words of that cautionary passage from The Book of Deuteronomy, let us make that choice whose outcome is life – both for ourselves, and for others.