

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 2 AUGUST 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

John 6: 24-35

"Save Darfur"

1. Darfur on our horizon

Darfur was placed on our horizon last Sunday night at our Mind-Body-Spirit seminar by Professor John Langmore, Professorial Fellow in the Department of Political Science at the University of Melbourne. The utterly traumatising plight of the people of Darfur was graphically presented in the Amnesty report, which Mary Steele has read to us.

John Langmore informed us that since the civil war broke out in 2003 it is estimated that more than 200,000 people were killed and around 2.7 million people live in camps in appalling conditions. Since 2003, it has become a state of humanitarian emergency, attracting one of the largest relief efforts in our time.

Darfur comprises three states within Sudan. The conflict involves the Sudanese military and the Janjaweed, a Sudanese militia group from the Afro-Arab tribes of northern Sudan. The Darfurian rebels are primarily from non-Arab ethnic groups. The Sudanese government has denied its support of the Janjaweed, but is accused of financial assistance to them and of targeting civilians. Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell has described the attack on the people of Darfur as genocide, a killing of a whole people and an utter disruption of their lives.

This mass murder, rape, and dislocation of Darfurian citizens are appalling. John's presentation on Sunday night evoked deep emotions of anger, and compassion, and a sense of powerlessness. A deep desire to do something raged within me.

2. Dealing with the contradictions of western compassion

Through that night, I drifted through a journey that I would like to share. The people of Darfur were close to my heart, as the presentation kept on rolling over in my mind. A range of stages emerged. Anger at injustice, at the pain and suffering inflicted upon innocent people, particularly children, and the defenceless. It was then that John's suggested responses returned to me. Yes, I thought, we should take up John's suggestions. At least we can do something! In addition, I felt better!

Now, being a reflexive person, I attended to this sense of relief with curiosity. I delved further. How did my thought of action and my feeling better make the plight of the suffering of the people of Darfur any better? There are contradictions here, I realised. I do feel better, but that is about me, and while positive, hopeful feelings function as motivating agents, this of itself does not change or lessen the plight of the desperately poor that face famine and atrocities of war.

I recalled that since the 1980s a body of writing called postcolonialism had sought to change the way western people view the life of non-western people. This meant realising how and where we look from, and attempting to look from the other side. As Robert J C Young (*Postcolonialism*, 2) has written:

It means realising that when western people look at the non-western world what they see is often more a mirror image of themselves and their own assumptions than the reality of what is really there, or of how people outside the west actually feel and perceive themselves.

The film *Beyond Borders* signifies these contradictions. It is the story of Sarah Jordan, played by Angelina Jolie, of a rich westerner who is deeply overwhelmed by the tragedy of Ethiopians in 1984. She raises \$40,000, buys supplies and actually travels with the trucks to a refugee camp in Ethiopia. She stays in the camp, only to be totally out of place. Or, rather, she has transported her comfortable western life into this impoverished space, symbolised in her nice tent and her lovely white dress and matching hat! As one film critic wrote, *Beyond Borders* may tell the story of those who risk their lives by helping the desperately poor, but it turns out to trivialise the pain and suffering of the actual people by reducing them to a backdrop for western compassion and good intentions. (David M Kimmel, *Worcester Telegram and Gazette*, 01/01/04)

3. Called into a spirituality of relationship of dialogue and ongoing action

In our passages over the last few weeks, we confront similar contradictions. In the stories where Jesus feeds the hungry crowds, walks on the water to his storm-distressed disciples, and this week when Jesus being the bread of life nourishes the deepest human hungers. The contradictions are when the large crowds and the disciples misrecognise what is being offered by Jesus. They relate out of what they do not see, their own self-interest and desire for their own outcomes. The disciples in the feeding of the 5,000 in Mark's version desire to help the hungry crowd from their own perspective and evaluations: send them away we can't feed them!

Jesus exposes the contradictions of this compassion-for-others on our own terms, and calls them to "go and see" what resources exist among the two communities, the church and community, and guides them to organise the crowd to feed themselves. In John's version, in last week's reading, a boy's generosity of offering loaves and fishes enables the crowd to be fed.

William Loader suggests John's Jesus teaches a spirituality of relationship, in which love is celebrated and generated, and that faith means trusting this and "becoming part of God's life in the world". (<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPentecost9.htm>)

To deepen this, we are called to engage in a constant dialogue with each other and ourselves. This dialogue must be a critical, reflexive spirituality of relationship. One that trusts and accepts the discomforts of exposing our contradictions, to keep attempting to look from all perspectives; from our own and the others'. Only in this way can we be truly compassionate and more than self-interested in our work of distributive justice-compassion.

4. A call to action to enable Darfurians to save themselves

To believe we can save Darfur is a colonial mindset, of the west having power over non-western countries. They are asking the international community to work with them, because they want to save Darfur.

I take up Professor John Langmore's suggestion of a way Australians can respond to this crisis in Darfur. He informed us that both the US and Australian governments have been slow and minimalist in their support of the UN's programmes to address the crisis. The US and Australian lack of political will is related to their view that Darfur does not have strategic value, compared to Iraq and Afghanistan. What we can do is approach Australian political leaders with clear suggestions for generous and long-term aid, personnel and other resources.

I am calling on this congregation to begin a campaign calling the Australian government to respond to this crisis by: 1. Working together to write letters to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith; 2. Sending an organised delegation to visit Mr Petro Georgiou MP; and 3. to do this together with 10 other Uniting churches who are keen to work together in our community.