

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

REFUGEE SUNDAY

SUNDAY 30 AUGUST 2009

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Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

"The Dark Side of Mobility"

xen-o-phile: somebody who likes foreigners: somebody who likes the people, customs, and culture of other countries, or things from abroad.

1. The dark side of mobility

Throughout human history, the refugee has been an enigmatic being. A being not fully human, a being of out place, the object of suspicion, envy, projection and derision. Characterised over time as foreigner, sojourner, peregrine, stranger, alien, queue jumper, they are isolated at the borders. Only granted entry into and by religious and social constructs. Only then to be obliterated once welcomed into a foreign system.

As Julia Kristeva has written in her book, *Strangers to Ourselves*,

While in the most savage human groups the foreigner was an enemy to be destroyed, the foreigner has become, within the scope of religious and ethical constructs, a different human being who, provided [the foreigner] espouses them [the constructs], may be assimilated into the fraternities of the "wise", the "just", or the "native". (Kristeva, 2)

Today we mark **World Refugee Day**. In this act we enter into solidarity with the 16 million refugees in the world who represent the dark side of mobility. Today we remember these people, uprooted from their homes by war, persecution, violence and the ambivalence of nations.

The plight and suffering of refugees today is unimaginable.

The average stay for refugees in camps is now 17 years. Some grow up knowing life only in the camp but with stories of their ancestral homeland and the injustices their families have experienced. Less than 1% are resettled in another country.

http://www.cws.org.nz/files/World%20Refugee%20Day%202009_0.pdf

Asylum seekers in Australia have also undergone great suffering. Father Jim Carty, a Marist Father and Coordinator of the House of Welcome, introduced the story of Ibrahim by writing,

Australia, historically, has been harsh and at times inhumane toward some groups and individuals in our community. One such group is made up of those who arrive here and are stateless. (Carty, *Humanus Nullius*)

2. There is nothing closer to a human being than another human being

Before we hear the story of Ibrahim, let us look at our text for this morning, Mark 7. What insights do we gain for our response to refugees and strangers?

Mark has just shared the story of the feeding of the hungry crowd in the wilderness. In that story, Jesus looked at the crowd differently to his followers, the early Church of Mark's time. They were concerned that it was getting late and that Jesus should send them away to get their own food. This was a pragmatic ethics. Sensible, rational even. Unconsciously, the disciples made them into strangers, foreigners.

In marked contrast, Jesus' compassion was evoked! He saw them as family, people in relationship with him, human beings of primary concern.

The church of the first four centuries struggled with the issue of hospitality to the stranger. With radical Christian clarity, Augustine challenged the alienation of the foreigner with the declaration of the universality of love for the other, any other: "there is nothing closer to a human being than another human being". This universality of love for neighbour is radical because it overrode the primacy of "otherness from blood and ethnic or national origin" (Kristeva, 84). What transformed the otherness of the stranger, for Augustine, was love for every human being expressed in the image of Christly love. The tragedy was, as Julia Kristeva notes, "the absolute aspect of this religious bond soon collided with human needs as well as with the demands of States and soon afterwards those of nations." (Kriteva, 85)

Even more, at times the church of this period placed limits on generosity. Only Christian foreigners received hospitality in certain places. And, when dogmatism raised its dissenting head, only pilgrims and wandering aliens of certain doctrinal persuasions would receive *caritas*. Kristeva again: "Christian cosmopolitanism bore in its womb the ostracism that excluded the other belief and ended up with the Inquisition" (Kristeva, 87).

Returning to our story in Mark 7. An extreme Jewish group challenges Jesus for allowing his disciples to eat without washing their hands. This is a radical foundational story for the inclusiveness of all people in the community of Christ. Jesus' teaching and practice announces that no external ritual has the power to segregate people. Nothing can create a stranger or alien. The contamination of another human being, or a group, or a culture, or a religion, arises from within humans and groups, in the shape of thoughts and ideologies, of religious and ethical constructs. It is these that divide and devalue others, creating and sub-ordinating people into aliens and strangers.

As Ched Myers summarises this passage:

This story serves not only to legitimise the community's practice of integration with gentiles, who otherwise would have been excluded by the rules of ritual purity, but also serves to persuade poorer Jews that the very system that purports to 'protect' their ethnic/national identity is the system that exploits them" (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 223).

3. Australia can also treat refugees unfairly!

Returning to our story about the asylum seeker Ibrahim.

Ibrahim was a moderate Palestinian Muslim, who feared for the life of his wife and five children. He arrived in Australia in 2001 to seek asylum and to bring his family over. He was immediately incarcerated for the next three and a half years, first in Woomera and then in Baxter as a stateless unauthorised entry into Australia.

The government and sections of the press referred to those arriving without documentation as "illegal" which is inaccurate and demonises the majority whose claims for refugee status

were subsequently accepted by the Immigration Department. “Unauthorised” yes, “illegal” no, as stated in the UN Convention on Refugees.

The High Court, in response to a case brought against the Government for indefinite detention without charge, ruled in favour of the lead claimant under the ancient but still valid Habeas corpus right. The writ of habeas corpus has historically been an important instrument for the safeguarding of individual freedom against arbitrary state action. Ibrahim along with four others was released immediately but reluctantly by the Government.

The Government was determined to make matters difficult for Ibrahim and his friends. They were released with a small card ... but without funds, compelled to report to an Immigration office twice a week in person and phone in on the other three working days, were not permitted to work, refused access to Medicare and Centrelink. They were de facto *Humani nullius* - non persons, with no rights, no nothing.

Ibrahim made his way to Sydney where a group of community based NGOs worked together to provide housing, a limited living allowance, advocacy and support for him and others in the same situation. For the next three years Ibrahim lived this life of nothing. His mental state deteriorated even more, his anguish for his family increased daily, his isolation total, his sense of self worth rock bottom.

Zachary Steel a senior lecturer in psychiatry at the University of NSW speaking about the impact of detention on the mental health of the detainees said: “People are fairly resilient, but those who spent more than six months in detention, that was the threshold, then they crumbled and three years later they were still disturbed, with no major improvement.” The trauma (PTS) ... was more severe and longer lasting than the trauma that caused them to flee their homeland.

Finally, in January 2007 nearly seven years after arriving in Australia the former Minister for Immigration Amanda Vanstone in one of her last acts before moving on agreed to consider granting Ibrahim a Humanitarian visa 202 upon certain conditions being fulfilled. One condition was Assurance of Support-AOS, a condition which is contrary to the regulations related to 202 visas but apparently not contrary to the unchallengeable and total discretion of the minister.

The AOS requires the client to place a bond (in Ibrahim’s case \$3,500.00), to assume a debt to the Commonwealth for time spent in detention (in Ibrahim’s case \$68,000.00) and be prevented from accessing any Centrelink benefits for two years. He has complied with all these conditions.

There were two further conditions attached. Both normal conditions. He needed a Police clearance ... He also needed a security clearance - some proof from the countries in which he had lived that he had not committed any crime. Big problems there. Gaza is in shutdown. Without the clearance the visa would not be granted. However in difficult or impossible cases the clearance can be waived.

The months passed, the waiting became intolerable, the despair profound, his mental health in tatters. Some well-intentioned but ill advised advice was given to Ibrahim to see if he could contact his wife and children in Gaza to obtain some proof that he had a clear record. This has resulted in apparent tragedy. The wife is not registered in Gaza so by going to some authority there, to request a clearance she put herself and family at risk. Very soon after she

and her family disappeared. Ibrahim has not been able to contact them since and neighbours have not seen them.

Finally he received his Visa. ... He now has the right to work but it will be extremely difficult for him to find. And what about his family? If they are still alive how will he be able to sponsor them?

(Fr Jim Carty, *Humanus Nullius*)

4. Conclusion

How will your life be marked by Christly love of the universality of love for the other, particularly for the foreigner, the refugee?

How will you challenge *Humanus nullius*, the making of refugees non-persons, with no rights, no nothing?

Will you critically reflect on what shapes both your conscious and unconscious values for the other?

Kristeva and Jesus in our story in Mark, invite us to radically examine our self and our internalised religious and social-ethical constructs, beginning with the realisation that what is most fearful to us in the stranger may be the very quality we do not want to recognise in ourselves. Out of this self-reflexiveness, a more realistic fair-treatment for others may emerge.

NEXT WEEK: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*

Next week we will be looking at the story of the Syrophenician woman, one of the most disturbing encounters Jesus had, in Mark 7: 24 -30.

This woman is believed to be a woman of colour, and Jesus does not allow her to eat food at the table! She seems to be facing discrimination for her race and ethnicity!

We will look at this text through the movie, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, with Sidney Poitier, Katharine Hepburn Spencer Tracy. The witness will include an interactive segment where your ideas and comparisons between the two texts, Mark's and the movie, will be invited.

So watch the movie, read the text and bring your comments next Sunday!