

Refugee Sunday

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 16 June, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Frances Paterson and Michael Dudley

Deuteronomy 10: 12-13, 17-19; Luke 7: 11-17;
Contemporary Reading: *Boat People*, a poem by Bruce Dawe

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYgLT0Wi5IA&t=525s>

FRANCES

I'm always impressed by Margaret's words, which last week included these:

"Justice seeking and compassionate sharing."

I found these to be particularly relevant to refugees and my interest in *Grandmothers Against Refugee Children in Detention*. Indeed, I wish they were to the fore for all Australians.

A recent survey found that Australians are evenly divided among those who think we have too many refugees, those who think we have just about the right number and those who think we should accept more.

I joined grandmothers as I feel that we (and despite my accent I put myself firmly in the Australian basket) treat refugees so badly.

Grandmothers Against Children in Detention Mission Statement reads:

- 1 To achieve freedom for all refugee children held by or on behalf of the Australian Government.
- 2 Our mission will not be complete and people will not stop until every child is removed from detention centres on the mainland of Australia and on Nauru.

The four demands of Grandmothers Australia wide are:

- 1 End detention in all its forms for refugee children and their families.
- 2 End refugee family separations.
- 3 Get all refugees off Nauru and Manus to safe settlement.
- 4 Ensure children and families seeking asylum are held for no longer than 24 hours to enable identity and health checks.

I would like to digress briefly. The government makes much of refugees destroying their passports. I have recently been visiting Villawood Detention Centre and learned that this is done deliberately to prevent punishment and retribution on their families in their home countries - which is not really the message that we get from the government.

Back to grandmothers. My very small, indeed tiny, part in grandmothers has been standing holding banners outside the QVB and at shopping centres, where we approach people, engage them in discussion - and ask them to sign a petition which we then send to the House of Representatives. Members are encouraged to write to their own M.P.'s and hopefully meet with them. That has had mixed success.

In one meeting, held in this church, a video link was set up with a woman in Darwin who was, by some means or other, au fait with the hospital system on Nauru.

In parliament, Mr Dutton described the hospital on Nauru in terms of its excellence and medical expertise. However, he failed to mention that this hospital is for government workers, while refugees go to a hospital where animals roam around, which we saw on the video. There is inadequate equipment and limited drugs are available.

We were able to send parcels to Nauru - things for the children: books, toys, you know - coloured pencils, that sort of thing. Also things like Panadol, Band-Aids and the most basic of medical supplies. If anything too much more than these were sent, the locals used to take them.

The ongoing secrecy demanded by the government forces those who work on Manus and Nauru to sign confidentiality statements. This only makes one wonder what is happening and why it needs to be concealed.

A key UN body has condemned as arbitrary and illegal Australia's indefinite incarceration of refugees and asylum seekers, who are held for up to 9 years without charge.

On each of the five times the UN has spoken about Australia's refugees, it was recommended that Australia release men and pay compensation and other reparations.

The head of the UN High Commission for Refugees has directly slammed the Australian Government. There had been a clear understanding that vulnerable refugees with close family ties to Australia would be allowed to settle here. However Australia then advised this agreement was not valid.

The UN found, in 2015, that Australia's treatment of asylum seekers violates the Convention Against Torture.

We are called Grandmothers against the detention of refugee children but our remit is far broader. We have been looking for a new name and at the A.G.M. on Thursday we were given a choice of possible new names. My choice will be Grandmothers for Refugee Children and Their Families.

The Medevac Bill states that: *a person needing urgent medical assistance can be sent to the mainland for treatment on the advice of 2 doctors.* However the minister can override that decision which may invalidate the whole thing.

The Guardian reports that one child has been transferred for treatment. Again, the government secrecy prevents any accuracy on the figures. However Scott Morrison has promised to repeal the Medevac Bill.

At this point in my thoughts, I would like to say I find no correlation between Mr Morrison's much vaunted Christianity and his un-Christian actions.

I would like to acknowledge the role played by members of this congregation who welcomed and cared for refugees. Thank you. There are many groups who work hard for Refugees, one of which: Mums for Refugees - is very active in providing food, furniture and life's necessities. Grandmothers is forming some sort of ongoing relationship with Mothers for Refugees.

One refugee woman was released with her 5 children. The only thing supplied by the government was a flat and an old couch. Mum's for Refugees, who gather used furniture and necessities came to the rescue, as they do so often.

The Asylum Seeker Refugee Centre has been active for 18 years. The Jesuits are also very involved and run free food stores. There's obviously a long list of people who act for refugees to the best of their ability.

Now, I'd like to end with a prayer.

As we bear refugees in our minds, I would like to end with a brief prayer echoing what was said last week.

The spirit of comfort bring hope.

Spirit of gentleness may we know your acceptance of us and freely accept and embrace others.

Spirit of fire, inflame in us the passion for justice and cleansing of our prejudices.

Let us pray for all in need of comfort and healing and justice in our country and in our world.

In your many names we pray.

Amen.

Strangers, neighbours and solidarity: asylum-seekers and helping professionals resisting the policies of hostile hospitality

There are so many facets of the refugee experience. I will focus on just one - immigration detention, detained asylum-seekers, and their helping professionals.

We mark Refugee Week with our international human rights reputation in tatters because of our national refugee policy.

This is not about an abstract ethics of global relationships, as former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams reflects – it's about '*Who is my neighbour?*' My neighbour is not a catalogue of those we are obliged to love, as the enquiring lawyer in the Good Samaritan parable, would have it, but someone who decides to offer life to the other. The Samaritan is a neighbour because he saves life. We are most deeply neighbours to one another and to and in our world, when there are others who owe us life, and because we know that we owe them life. So to love your neighbour is to love the person who can save your life. It is the willingness to be a surprising stranger who brings life and to be surprised by strangers who bring life. And since you never quite know who that is and since it's likely to be the most improbable person around, your openness to neighbourliness has to be a profound, all-encompassing affair (Williams, 2018).

For human service professionals the service of humanity is their moral compass: respecting each person's dignity, acting equitably and impartially for all, fulfilling social responsibilities by improving health services, addressing social determinants of health, and not misusing professional knowledge and skills (Bloch and Pargiter, 2009). But their ethical precepts collide with radical shifts in the last 25 years in governments' discourse and practice around asylum. (e.g. Nuremberg Code (1947); Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association 2013; Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) Code of Ethics, 2018),

In a shared world, asylum-seekers are denied a share: nations predicate human rights upon citizenship, so millions are worldless, stateless, not considered "*rights bearers*" (Bauman, 2004). Western countries offer few asylum-seekers decent life; most are in low income countries. Rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and clinical depression are estimated between 15 and 30%, yet where refugees are, mental health services are sparse (Silove, Ventevogel and Rees, 2017; Steel et al, 2009). A dominant view in developed nations now is that unscheduled asylum-seekers are unwelcome, that they should be deported or detained in below-subsistence conditions (Maley 2016). Policies of '*hostile hospitality*' and '*benevolent violence*' (Lindberg 2018; Loewenstein 2014; Willmington 2018) aim to create a harsh environment so asylum-seekers will leave and others will be deterred.

Although Australia once had more generous policies, and refugees' lives and labour substantively shaped today's Australia, from 1992-3 Australia introduced mandatory and then indefinite detention for irregular maritime arrivals (IMAs), later buttressed by other policies.

Despite protracted resistance from community advocates professionals and their bodies, and unrelenting censure from numerous global organisations and groups, and from its own institutions, often in multiple reports to which Frances has alluded already, (there are actually dozens of UN reports about Australia's offshore policy just from 2012 onwards (UNHCR, 2018)) , Australian Governments withstand it all. The current bipartisan policy has never been seriously threatened.

Asylum-seekers are placed where they can't speak or represent themselves: in secrecy, non-accountability and invisibility (Sanggaran and Zion, 2016; Dudley 2016). Sometimes advocates, lawyers and government bodies represent them, but rarely do they speak in their own voice and in their own terms. Barbed wire and armed guards police the borders, and hostile hospitality "*tie[s] the undesirables to the ground*". They are also exiled and extruded: they are uncouneted, their inequalities erased. Asylum-seekers consequently have '*no useful function*', no realistic prospect that they will be assimilated and incorporated into the new social body (Barmaki, 2009): Australia tells those detained offshore that although their asylum claims may be valid, they will never live in Australia or become Australian citizens. As Bauman writes "*They do not change places; they lose a place on earth, they are catapulted into a nowhere...*" (Bauman 2002: 112, quoted by Barmaki, 2009)'.

The borders extend into asylum seekers everyday lives and bodies (Willmington 2018). They are male, militarised, disproportionately affect people of colour (Manne, 2017), and are inherently gendered. On Nauru sexual assault and rape of women is commonplace, yet no true investigation or protection occurs (The Senate (Australian Government), April 2017).

The social, physical and especially mental harms to adults and to children from indefinite detention are produced in many ways – surveillance, violence, privation, humiliation, monotony. Grief, terrifying ignorance about family and individual safety, learned helplessness. In short via dehumanisation, degradation, punishment (AHRC, Forgotten Children, Fourth Public Hearing, 2 July 2014; (Sanggaran et al, 2014; Sanggaran et al, 2016; <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2014/201/7/ethical-challenges-doctors-working-immigration-detention>, accessed 31/10/17'; Coffey et al, 2010; Newman and Steel, 2008). The continuing exposure to life-denying, invalidating environments extinguishes all hope and, for many, including people I've seen, mental death ensues (Steel et al, 2004a&b). Detention erodes mental health, but detainees' poor health also extends the period of detention (Bull et al, 2012). Writers and artists have published harrowing accounts (e.g. Boochani, 2018; Keneally and Scott, 2013; Keneally and Scott, 2017).

The harms are beyond debate (Young and Gordon (2016); Dudley et al, 2012). Previously the Australian government disputed them (McNeill, 2003; Steel et al, 2004). Now in Senate hearings it quietly concedes that indefinite detention reliably causes harms. But it believes detention, especially offshore, helps stop boats. At very least the injuries inflicted are inflicted with '*reckless indifference*' (Jureidini and Burnside, 2011). But since the policy is deliberate, informed and determined, responsible clinical scholarship has repeatedly likened this to torture [Appendix: UN definition of Torture] (Briskman et al, 2010; Young, quoted in Marr and Laughland, 2014; Young, 2015; Isaacs, 2016; Essex, 2014). Harm is the policy's purpose, not just a foreseen, accepted consequence. It breaks people's health, costs a fortune, compromises professional ethics, and via suffering strongly coerces asylum-seekers to abandon their claims and leave (Dr Peter Young, quoted in Marr and Laughland, 2014; Briskman et al, 2010). You can't reduce the harm because you then reduce the functioning of the system (Young, quoted in Marr and Laughland, 2014).

Immigration leaders have declared their sincere belief that to save lives, harshness and cruelty are necessary, that harm should be allowed for a higher purpose; consciously knowing that this is harm that you would never allow to be inflicted on your own child (Bradley, 2016). <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-11/bradley-asylum-policies-and-the-problem-of-a-higher-purpose/7158430>; Manne, 2019. 'Harming for higher purposes' may seem counterintuitive but there are contemporary (Guantanamo Bay) and historical (Nazi) models (Dudley, 2016)

This background justification is through anti-terrorism rhetoric that converts vulnerable people violently robbed of their rights into a security threat - 'queue jumpers', 'illegals', *people who throw their children overboard*, 'lifestyle seekers', 'economic migrants', *illiterate, innumerate*). Also, through eliminating moral obligation by excommunicating them, (Barmaki, 2009); through talking up deterrence in response to asylum-seeker 'deviancy' (Pickering and Lambert, 2002); and through crusades to stop maritime people-smuggling and asylum-seekers drowning – shifting into professed humanitarian concern. (Australian engagements with SIEVs (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessels) expose the hypocrisy of this). Fear plays better than benevolence, the rule of law is transcended in the name of the public good (Correa-Velez and Gifford 2007; O'Donohue, 2015; Agamben 2005, 278), and compassion is branded 'un-Australian' (Immigration Minister Dutton, SBS News, 23 June 2018).

Mentally ill and traumatised persons are disparaged as wilfully self-harming for political motivations or as having personality dysfunction, or extremist, using lip-sewing or self-immolating to force acceptance (Pickering and Lambert, 2002; McIlroy, 2016); many however have died or been severely injured from despair and desperation. Asylum-seekers also feed discourse about being 'undeserving' welfare recipients (Vanthuyne et al, 2013). Management processes that subcontract detention operations to multinationals and to offshore client states, suppress accountability (Senate report, 2017).

For over 25 years, human service professionals have confronted the policy discourses, human rights violations and direct mental impacts, as they have worked with child and adult refugees and asylum-seekers, with courts, inquiries (Mares, 2016), professional bodies, assessing, intervening, researching and publicly advocating (see for example, Silove et al, 1993, 1997; Mares and Jureidini, 2004; Steel et al, 2004; Coffey et al, 2010, Steel et al, 2011 – see Dudley et al, 2012; STARTTS, 2013 - <https://www.startts.org.au/about-us/history/startts-25th-anniversary/>; Mollica et al, 1992***; Essed and Wessenbeek, Dutch immigration Essed, p 54, 59-60).. National health institutional bodies have united to oppose immigration detention (groups that are not normally aligned). (Professional Alliance for the Health of Asylum Seekers & Their Children, 2002; Briskman et al, 2010; <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/asylum-seekers-and-refugees/publications/children-immigration-detention-statements-health>, accessed 30/10/17); RANZCP, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Public and professional advocacy for asylum-seekers is primed by response to refugee distress, and response to values violations and human rights abuses by governments (Mares and Newman, 2007; Surawski et al, 2008); by envisioning public goods; by having an alternative value system and models to the dominant one (Staub 2003; Glover 1999). It has achieved some qualified success – e.g. by challenging the Border Force Act, by refusing to return children to immigration detention - and entails certain risks e.g. those of vicarious traumatising. (Steel et al, 2004; Brooker et al, 2016)

On the other hand, those who work in immigration detention have hoped for success via education, advocacy and mild subversion (Young et al, 2014; Sanggaran et al (2014)), but these have not worked. The regime threatens any advocacy, and interferes with health professional recommendations. At least a dozen people have died. In practice, the Australian government remains adamant that clinicians are not the primary decision makers about the health needs of detainees. Employee clinicians face dire choices (Sanggaran et al, 2014; Young, 2015; Marr and Loughland, 2014; Dudley 2016).

What is the way forward for involved professionals, the concerned public, and people of faith?

To realise that we are not alone, that there is a wider refugee movement in civil society (Mares and Newman, 2007; Pedersen et al, 2008; Surawski et al, 2008), to recognise that globally, there are many successful examples of resistance and alternative policies; and many lenses to assist our understanding of this complex moral and spiritual challenge.

Behind heated public debates there is a pressing need to rediscover who is a refugee, within the wider history of human exile, to hear anew the stories of families and individuals and their perilous journeys to safety. To salute their resilience (Maley, 2016; Hollis, 2019).

Australia needs a principled, pragmatic refugee policy that overturns the wrongs of our reception and processing, creates additional safe pathways, offers regional and global leadership, and invests in refugees, as Prof Jane McAdam announced in a series of points this week from the Kaldor Centre (Remeikis, 2019; UNSW Law, 2019).

We cannot rely on politicians to sort this: this needs other community drivers.

But we also need to dig deeper about how we got here: Australia's formative colonial vulnerability to xenophobia (which in recent years has been exploited by all parties); and decades of public moral indifference to the massacres and devastation of Indigenous peoples, the stealing of their children and the sometimes genocidal practices. The innumerable ways in which we restrict the universe of moral obligation to our own kind.

Some fortunately escape the hellhole of indefinite detention and survive. My friend Ngareta Rossell and I know an Iraqi family of six [de-identified] whose relatives were murdered and who remained detained for joining a protest in a remote detention centre about the time taken for their refugee applications to be processed when they were in Port Hedland. Police with helmets and batons ripped Selma, Hassan's wife's scarf off, and Ali their son had his nose broken. The younger boy, Khalid was sent to a psychiatric unit in a Perth hospital. Eight year old Memar and six year old Zahar were sent to Villawood on their own for quite some time. Their parents were taken to Roebourne Prison. By the time I met them, the family had been reunited. The two older boys, were angry teenagers. Riots, beatings, lips sewing, and hunger strikes, were all they had known since they arrived. Khalid was self-harming and was recurrently placed from hospital back in immigration detention. The two younger children, were unnaturally quiet. Six year old Zahra was crying and climbing on to her father's lap. She had been crying ever since the young Asian woman jumped to her death from a second floor balcony landing close to where she was playing. Yet in spite of it all the family exhibited a collective stoicism admired by detainees and advocates alike.

During one of their many Court Appeals the government barrister was asked by the Judge how long they intended to keep this family locked up?

'Would it be until hell froze over?' the Judge inquired? The barrister replied that, the Migration Act required the family to be, "detained indefinitely". Or practicably removed.

The family lived in the vain hope that something would happen, that hell might unfreeze. Their collective energy gradually failed and the Immigration Department, Detecting a weakness, moved in offering to facilitate their removal.

Ali, the spunky teenager was the first to go. He requested and got exit papers and a temporary visa for Syria, a country in which Iraqis were forbidden to remain permanently. In a final act of defiance, aged 18 he married his 17 year old Australian girlfriend in a rollicking ceremony in the Villawood Compound leaving his bride of one day behind him. The next day Hassan made his decision. No more Court cases. No more false expectations. They would all go to Syria. With war looming in neighbouring Iraq the situation was fluid and very dangerous. But better to take your chances with the million other refugees than to keep your family locked up indefinitely here.

The family reached Syria with the funds raised for them in Australia, bought new papers and our neighbour, New Zealand, taking a different approach, accepted the whole family as refugees. Khalid re-trained as a hairdresser and now has a string of hairdressing saloons that employs both his father and his brother. Memar, unfortunately, was killed in an industrial accident. Zahra is an almost graduated medical science student. Similarly many people from SIEV-X that NZ took are now all doctors and teachers.

Following Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflection on the ethics of this, the church shows who and what Jesus is when it stands in for and stands with any and every human person, keeps open the promise of solidarity without advance restriction. Standing where Jesus stands and taking responsibility with him for representing the world. This does not mean that each of us has an infinite responsibility. We are, of course, not God. But this is going to come alive for us in ways that we cannot predict or neatly formulate. We also need, in relation to this matter, to develop or recover an ethic of responsibility, of common concern based on our common humanity, and of hospitality (Sacks, 2002), whether from religious or secular perspectives.

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