

Theological Imaginings: Mercy and the Displacement of Persons

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The New Year headline was stark: Australia's First Climate Refugees. (SMH: Jan 3, 2020)

Australia began its 2020 summer watching unprecedented bushfires, fuelled by climate change and drought, consume millions of hectares of vegetation, untold numbers of native wildlife, homes and properties, animals and human lives. We watched TV in horror as towering clouds generated by the fires obliterated the sun and turned the sky an eerie orange and then pitch black by mid-morning.

Thousands of residents and holiday-makers grabbed their families, pets and whatever they had time to gather and fled from this advancing enemy to the beaches where they huddled and waited for rescue. There was no way out other than by sea. Some locals took to the water in small boats, others waited, anxious and desperate for the army to take them to safety – asylum seekers in their own nation. Eventually all were rescued.

What followed was an outpouring of compassion, support and generosity from people all over the nation and overseas. The bravery of the fire-fighters, the tireless volunteers providing food, drink and clothing to those left without, offers of accommodation, the donations that rolled in from home and abroad, showed the best of our humanity.

As I watched the boats arrive to take people to safety I had an image of other boats in Australian waters. These carried asylum-seekers, also fleeing danger through war, torture, persecution and hunger. Their numbers were relatively small considering the more than 70 million displaced persons around the world. They sought asylum from us, a wealthy peaceful nation that formerly was known internationally for its generous humanity.

Over the past 30 years that has changed. Successive Australian Governments crafted a uniquely cruel asylum seeker policy. Those who arrive by boat to our shores face harsh deterrence measures – mandatory and indefinite detention, sometimes for years, in offshore detention camps in Nauru and Manus Island, out of sight and contact so that we do not observe their anguish and despair. Even those found to be refugees receive temporary protection visas and are not allowed ever to settle in Australia. We then expect other countries to deal with our responsibilities by agreeing to our requests for placements. The Navy turns back any boats found to be on the way to Australia. A poll taken in 2014 showed 70% of Australians approved of these policies. Our indifference to this tragedy is unacceptable in any human let alone Christian sense.

Why such different responses to these two scenarios? Australians generally are not cruel and vindictive people. Perhaps we saw the bushfire victims as 'us' while the boat people are 'other'. In the latter's case we have failed to look deeply into their eyes and hear their stories and imagine the simple human reality of suffering. Their dignity as human beings is the same as ours.

There is a story in Scripture that may offer some insight into this reality and that paradoxically may offer us challenge and consolation. It is the account in the gospel of Matthew of the Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus seeking a cure for her ill daughter. Liberation theologians draw on the interpretation of Scripture that happens when it is read from underneath, that is, from the perspective of the oppressed and powerless. I am choosing to interpret this passage from the underneath aspect of this woman – alone, alien, desperate. It is not an easy task for a First World Christian like myself, for as Robert McAfee Brown states in his book *Unexpected News*: ‘we tend to read the Bible from the vantage point of our privilege and comfort and screen out those parts that threaten us.... the basic viewpoint of the biblical writers is that of the victims, those cruelly used by society, the poor and oppressed.’^[1]

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman

*Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.
A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out,
‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!
My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.’
Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him,
‘Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.’
He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.’
The woman came and knelt before him. ‘Lord, help me!’ she said.
He replied, ‘It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.’
‘Yes it is, Lord,’ she said.
‘Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.’
Then Jesus said to her,
‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’
And her daughter was healed at that moment*

The players in this drama are Jesus, the disciples and the woman. She, a foreigner, a woman alone, a Gentile despised by the Jews, dares to approach a rabbi in public and ask for help for her possessed child. Firstly, Jesus ignores her, then a somewhat typical reaction is given by the disciples who are offended by her, find her a nuisance and ask Jesus to get rid of her. The woman continues to plead her cause and enters a dialogue with Jesus that is extraordinary. Jesus’ initial rejection and his reference to ‘dogs’ only serves to make her response to him more determined.

The portrait here of Jesus is shocking to us. His words are cruel and harsh. Often commentators have tried to portray this as a contrived attempt by Jesus to test her faith since it offends our usual idealized picture of a compassionate Jesus. I suggest rather, that it reveals Jesus in his full humanity – human in every way that we are (Heb:4:15). We don’t know why he spoke this way. Perhaps the weather was bad, or he was unwell or was tired of always being asked for help – all very familiar experiences for us.

The woman’s direct and strong importuning, which Matthew calls ‘faith’ brings about a change in Jesus. Perhaps he finally looked into her eyes, heard her desperation. A transformation began as his heart opened in compassion and he granted her request.

This story sets forth who Jesus is as the Christ, the anointed one who reveals in painful human interactions what God is like. And that awareness and transformation in the very human Jesus came as a result of the actions of one of the poorest of the poor, the outcast, the ‘other’. Through this profound encounter both Jesus and she were liberated.

This story can be a challenge to us comfortable Christians whenever we miss the gospel meaning of ‘what you do to the least of the brothers and sisters you do to me’ (Mat25:40). However it also can be for us a consolation to realise that our human tendency to avoid or compromise the demands of the gospel to be good news to the poor is something that the Incarnate Jesus also experienced and yet moved beyond. It seems he came gradually to understand fully his mission to ‘bring good news to the poor’ (Luke4:16-30).

Perhaps if, like him in this gospel interpretation, we looked into the eyes of Australia’s asylum-seeker boat people in detention camps and listened deeply to their stories of suffering we may find the same transformation of our hearts and actions that led Jesus to compassion and mercy for the Canaanite woman. True discipleship involves nothing less. Such an encounter in whatever way we act on it, could lead us to be again a compassionate, generous nation. That, indeed, would be ‘good news.’

References

- [i] McAfee Brown, R. *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*. WJK Press, Louisville, 1984, p.14.
- Delio, Ilia. *The Emergent Christ*. Orbis, NY. 2011.
- Nolan, Albert. *Hope in an Age of Despair*. Orbis, NY. 2009.
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Discussion / Reflection points

- If you let the oppressed go free, share your bread, pour yourself out for the hungry, satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light break forth like the dawn, your healing spring up (Is.58).
- My children our love is not to be just words or mere talk but something real and active (1Jn.3:18).
- The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. “contemplation deepens the more we feel the working of God’s grace within our hearts, and the better we learn to encounter God in creatures outside ourselves”. St Bonaventure. (*Laudato Si’* #233)

1. How do you interpret Jesus in the Gospel passage used in this paper?

2. ‘If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.’ *Lilla Watson. Gangulu Aboriginal Woman, Queensland.*

How do you understand this ‘mutual liberation’ in regard to Australians and the current policies on asylum seekers?

3. ‘Stateless’ is an excellent series, produced in 2020 by ABC TV, based on a true story in an Australian detention centre. Available on ABC IView. A good if virtual way to encounter the ‘other’.