

Reflective Prayer: Mercy and the Displacement of Persons

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Context for the Reflective Prayer

On Easter Sunday, Pope Francis reminded us that Jesus "has truly risen." In the midst of this dramatic situation of Covid-19, which has "displaced" so much in our lives and in our world, we may have difficulty seeing, feeling and hearing the effects of this resurrection. This context reminds us of something we already know and which we too often forget: that it is the crucified one who is the risen one. The word of God comes to aid our fragile memory.

When I was reflecting on what to offer for the prayer for mercy and the displacement of peoples, I was reminded of two things. **Firstly**, that displacement, exile and strangers are motifs that are part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Many of our biblical stories present interconnecting themes of exile, displacement, border crossings and encounters with strangers/ "others." A few examples: In Genesis 1:1 we see the Spirit's migration over the unformed creation with the Spirit of God moving over the water. In Genesis 12:10 Abram and Sarah become migrants when they are asked by God to leave all they know for a promise of a new life. They become outsiders or strangers in the lands of Egypt. In Ex. 12:41 we see the mass migration of people seeking to escape from oppression and the promise of a new land and a better future. In Lk. 1:26-27, Jesus is "born on the road" and in Mt. 2:13-14 "An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream" asking him to flee with his family to Egypt. Jesus is also present as an itinerant preacher who has "no place to rest his head" (Lk. 9:58, Mt. 8:20). Alongside themes of displacement the biblical world is full of passages outlining duty and care for the stranger: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you: you shall love the alien as you love yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lev:19:33-34). Other examples include Exod. 22:21, Lev.23:22, Deut.10:18 and Jer.22:3. Displacement became part of the Jewish identity and influenced Jesus in his message and ministry as will be evident in the reflections below.

Secondly, I am an Irish Sister of Mercy, and my country was devastated by famine between 1845-1849. This resulted in the displacement of thousands of people. Between 1845 and 1855, 1.5 million people left Ireland for good. In 1846, 100,000 left. Departures peaked in 1847, when 250,000 left and over the next 5 years it averaged 200,000 per year. Some of these people died on 'coffin ships' while travelling to other lands. Others were lucky to survive and landed in places like Australia, New Zealand, Newfoundland, and the USA where they were able to rebuild their lives. Displacement of peoples and immigration has formed part of the Irish narrative for many years right up to the 21st Century. The expansion of Catherine's vision followed in the footsteps of many of these immigrants, forming new foundations in these lands in response to the many needs of the people.

Currently, Ireland is receiving people who have been displaced around our world because of famine, war, or persecution. It is a new reality for us. We are now being challenged to welcome refugees, asylum seekers and migrants and while welcoming the stranger is a first

step, the challenge comes when then they wish to remain among us. Ireland is changing and is finding that embracing the 'stranger' brings many new challenges for us. Such challenges are replicated in many other parts of our world.

Therefore, for this reflection on mercy and displacement of peoples I am offering two biblical texts for your reflection and discussion.

Preparation suggestions.

- ▶ Create a sacred space: a candle, bible and a map of the world, or a picture of refugees.
- ▶ You might like to invite one or more people to share this reflection with you so that you can share your answer to questions proposed at the end of each text, observing social distance or through zoom).

Opening: Song Suggestions:

Eritrean Refugees Unicen: Singing Hymns en route to Italy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZqoOMBytz8>.

Or

Hello Bonjour

Song by Gabriel Ríos, Michael Franti, and Spearhead

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raV4FBqw6q4>

Lyrics: <https://www.rockol.com/uk/lyrics-7120650/michael-franti-spearhead-hello-bonjour-feat-gabriel-rios>

Opening prayer

Sophia, Spirit, breath of God, blow open our minds and hearts. Free us from our resistance, help us to be attentive to the stirrings arising in our hearts. We are mindful that we enter into pondering these texts in solidarity with all of those who are displaced in our world today. May we be open to hearing your word anew. Amen.

The Canaanite Woman and Breaking Down Borders: Matthew 15:21-28 NRSV

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.



Image: www.LumoProject.com

Reflective Questions

- ▶ Who is 'in place' and who is 'displaced' in this story: Jesus? The woman? The daughter?
- ▶ What might be the cause of the woman's shouting?
- ▶ What about the disciples? What is their attitude toward the woman?
- ▶ What strikes you about the conversation Jesus has with this woman?
- ▶ Why does he respond to her in this way?
- ▶ The woman is identified with 'the dogs' yet she refuses to be put down and claims her agency. What can you learn from this?
- ▶ What do you think enabled Jesus to change his mind?
- ▶ The Syro-Phoenician Woman encourages us to see the "stranger/displaced person" as a potential life-bringer. Is this your experience?

Identifying & Reaching out with a merciful heart: the parable of the Good Samaritan Luke 10:25-37 NRSV



²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ^[a] "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, ^[b] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Image: Ferdinand Hodler (1885) Public domain

Reflective Questions

- ▶ Who is 'in place' or 'displaced' in this parable?
- ▶ Samaritans and New Testament Jews lived in tension, fear and suspicion of one another because of their ethnic and religious differences. Is fear of reaching out justified in such contexts?

- ▶ Whose response do you identify with in the parable? What guides your actions: political or religious ideology or love of neighbour?
- ▶ Welcoming a 'displaced person/s' or 'stranger/s' in our midst can initially evoke hospitality in the hope that they will move on or assimilate. What are the consequences and challenges for you when they chose to remain among you but not to assimilate?
- ▶ The Samaritan showed mercy by giving all he had to a person who was displaced, who society and culture told him 'to hate and exclude'. We are being asked "to likewise." How can you do this in your context?

Prayer

Companion of the Companionless,
let my day not go by without remembering
the 70 million people forced from homelands
due to poverty, crime, and political conflict.

Home of the Homeless,
gather the shawl of your compassion
around those who have nowhere to abide,
nowhere to call home, nowhere to work.

Nurturer of the Impoverished,
turn the attention of political leaders
toward systems that cause oppression;
urge them to open their doors to refugees.

Comforter of the Injured,
The prophet Hosea describes your love
As that of a parent lifting a child to her cheek.
Lift, now, the demoralized and beaten-down.

Refuge of the Lost,
Protect those who are tossed upon the seas.
Be near to those thirsting in the deserts
And romancing dangerous city streets.

Hope for the Hopeless,
lift up the heavy hearts of families
who have lived for years in camps;
do not let their hope slip away.

Justice Bringer,
bother us. Keep after us. Open our eyes.
Widen our hearts. Change our judgements.
Urge us. Chase us. Badger us, until we act
on behalf of the 70 million people
whose tears fall on foreign soil.

Amen.

(Taken from Joyce Rupp 'Prayers of Boundless Compassion' Sorin Books Notre Dame 2018.)

In the words of Jean- Pierre Ruiz: God is calling us to *"imagine into being a world of solidarity in justice. In that world, barriers of brick and barbed wire no longer keep people apart; the walls of xenophobic words that make people strangers to each other come crumbling down, and the differences between us lead not to intolerance and distrust but to graced growth in shared understanding that makes for authentic human flourishing."*

(from Readings from the Edges: The Bible and People on the Move)

The future is in our hands



Created by Syrian youth and artist Joel Bergner in Syrian Refugee camp. Used with permission

As St. Paul says in Galatians 3: 28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." We are all citizens of the world:

Concluding prayer

Jesus you continue to rise among us. Help us to create reasons for hope. As Pope Francis reminds us "this is not the time for indifference, it is not the time for selfishness, it is not the time for division." May we continue to take risks, break down borders, look for signs of light, life and hope, showing others where to find them. May our fear of death not triumph. May we, wherever we are, continue to bear witness to the risen one among us. Amen

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