

WELCOMING the STRANGER

REFUGEES IN AUSTRALIA: OUR RESPONSE AS CHRISTIANS

WHAT IS YOUR DREAM FOR US – AS AUSTRALIANS; AS CHRISTIANS?

As Australians, we've always taken pride in our open character, our sense of adventure, our willingness to help out, our egalitarian attitudes, our belief in a fair go for all, our concern for the underdog, our love of land.

As Christians, we believe that we are called to love God and neighbour, to regard every person as brother or sister, possessing the same rights we have to fullness of life.

And so, as we reflect on what sort of country we are today, we also need to ask what we want for the future – for our children, and for all of us who live on this beautiful but fragile planet.

This depends, as we know, on the sort of nation we are building today. And there are clearly challenges for us. Many thinking and compassionate Australians argue that in the past few years, we have lost our way as a welcoming, generous nation. That we are not the country we were! That our individualism, our fear of increasing population, of being over-run, our preoccupation with law and order, our intolerance of refugees and of our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, and our rape of the earth, indicate a narrowness that betrays the vision and pride in what we have held ourselves to be.

CAN IT BE TRUE that we have lost our way, our sense of adventure and risk-taking, our optimism in backing ourselves and our big heartedness? Can we continue to believe we are a just, sharing and inclusive society? How does the rest of the world see us? How do we see ourselves?

At a time when many in the world are less trusting of the unknown (God, human and the environment), will we also reduce our trust, or can we continue to call on what is best in us to respond with compassion.

HOW THEN IS OUR COMPASSION MEASURING UP?

As Australians and as Christians, we are called to welcome the stranger. As Christians, we struggle with the call to show compassion towards our refugee brothers and sisters. Our own story and origins complicate this struggle.

All of us (except for the Indigenous people) are boat people or the descendants of those who have come from other countries.

- How might it have been different for us if current policies had been in place for us or our ancestors?
- How would we feel if it were our family being rejected?
- How has our personal story influenced our attitude towards asylum seekers and refugees?
- How would it have been different for Joseph, Mary and their son, if Egypt in their time had enforced the current policies of the Australian Government?

TAKING JESUS SERIOUSLY

On the whole we don't take Jesus seriously – whether we call ourselves Christians or not. There are some remarkable exceptions, but by and large we don't love our enemies, we don't welcome the stranger, we don't turn the other cheek, we don't forgive seventy times seven, we don't share what we have with the poor, and we don't put all our hope and trust in God. We have our excuses. But it is precisely here and now that we need to take Jesus and our own prayer seriously.

From Albert Nolan

OUR AUSTRALIAN STORY

After World War II and the Vietnam War, Australia welcomed many thousands of refugees into this country. We have shown in the past that we can successfully manage the question of boat people.

The courage and leadership shown by our Governments in the 70s and 80s led to a bi-partisan and regional approach that saw many thousands of boat people arrive from Vietnam and thousands of refugees welcomed from Chile.

The Government showed real leadership in choosing to acknowledge this as a humanitarian rather than a political issue, and appealed to the best of our fundamental values as Australians.

And we know from the success stories in our own families and communities, and when we look at leaders in business, community, sport and all areas of life, that these refugees and children of refugees have helped our country become what it is today.

Refugees who have come with government support as well as those who have come on boats (because they could see no other option), have changed this land in incalculable ways.

So why now, have we become so unwelcoming? Why are both major parties and many Australians fearful of welcoming these newcomers? Why have we Australians allowed negative attitudes to grow, aggravated by the political rhetoric and the present reality of boat arrivals?

Perhaps if the politicians did not see this as an election issue, perhaps if the media encouraged truth-telling rather than sensationalism and lies, perhaps if we learned the stories and met the people who have fled for their very lives, we would be better able to promote the reality of the situation among our own families and friends.

CHURCH LEADERS APPEAL FOR COMPASSION

There is a desperate need for leadership and compassion from both sides of politics on this issue. If our attitude to refugees in recent months is any measure of our humanity, we will be found badly wanting.

Bishop Christopher Saunders, Chair, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council.

Australia at present exhibits a kind of national schizophrenia in that we had wonderful responses to the victims of tsunami waves and bushfires, and yet at the same time we don't know how to respond properly to people who arrive on our own doorsteps looking for help,

Archbishop Philip Wilson, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

We urge leaders not to use asylum seekers as political footballs in the lead-up to the coming election, but to help relieve ill-founded anxieties, and to demonstrate that we as a nation are more decent, compassionate and just than our leaders seem to believe.

Sr Anne Derwin rsj, Catholic Religious Australia

We call on the Government to deal calmly with hysterical claims from the Opposition that our national security is threatened by vulnerable people seeking asylum.

John Falzon, Australian St Vincent de Paul

THE SIMPLE FACTS

1. 90% of boat people are found to be genuine refugees – people in real fear for their lives, people who have no other way of escaping their countries (because there is no queue there, and their only other option, as they see it, is torture and death).
2. Compared with other countries, and compared with the numbers of those we welcome into Australia as humanitarian refugees, the numbers of boat people are very small.
3. Australia hosts only 0.013 percent of the total global refugee population.
4. Numbers of boat people fleeing to Australia have increased, not because of Australian Government policy but because of violence in the countries from which they come.
5. Australia is in a sound position (with the assistance of our natural resources and the hard work of earlier refugees and migrants) to cope with those seeking our help.
6. Our mandatory detention policy is still too restrictive and lacking in compassion – with many families and children traumatised by their experiences in detention centres.

SOLUTIONS BEING OFFERED BY MAJOR PARTIES

Labor Policy

- Set up a regional processing Centre – perhaps in Timor Leste
- Send all unauthorised arrivals to the centre for processing under UNHCR guidelines
- Lift processing ban on Sri Lankans
- Increase penalties for people smugglers
- Fund 8 new patrol boats.

Coalition Policy

- Restore temporary protection visas and the Pacific solution
- Turn boats back when circumstances permit
- Refuse entry to people who destroy papers
- Give minister greater oversight in refugee decisions
- Buy 2 new patrol drones
- Introduce schemes for sponsoring refugees.

WHATEVER
YOU DO TO
THE LEAST OF
MY
BROTHERS
AND
SISTERS...





Grahame English: The Lantern, Columban Mission Institute

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The following questions were developed by Australian Young Christian Workers (YCW). You may find them helpful for personal or community reflection. They are based on the YCW method of SEE JUDGE ACT.

SEE

- What has been your own or your friends' experience of meeting asylum seekers and refugees?
- From your own knowledge/experience, what do you believe has led refugees and asylum-seekers to come to Australia?
- What do you think life is like for them here – some of the good things, some of the challenges?
- What do you think about the proposals of the two major parties for the treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers in this country?

JUDGE

Read the following passage from the Hebrew Scripture:

For the LORD your God is the great God, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. God defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the strangers to your land. And you are to love those who are strangers to your land, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:17-19

Now read this scene about Jesus' childhood from Matthew's Gospel.

After wise men left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.

Matthew 3:13 – 15

- What strikes you from these passages?
- Matthew's Gospel portrays Jesus as a refugee. What does this say to other people in our world who are refugees? What does it say to us?
- What do you believe needs to change when it comes to Australia's treatment of asylum seekers and refugees?

ACT

- What action can you take in the current situation
 - ~ as an individual?
 - ~ as a group?
- Who can help you?
- How can you further inform yourself in this area?

There are only two feelings.

Love and fear.

There are only two languages.

Love and fear.

There are only two activities.

Love and fear.

There are only two motives,

two procedures,

two frameworks,

two results.

Love and fear.

Love and fear.

Michael Leunig



FOR ACTION

INVOLVE your community:

- talk to your families and friends about the truth of the refugee situation
- get to know some refugee stories
- support the actions of Church and community leaders who are working on major concerns

WRITE LETTERS to Christian politicians, asking them to:

- treat asylum seekers and refugees as human beings In need of compassion
- promote bi-partisan policy as earlier Governments did so that the asylum seeker question becomes a human rather than a political question
- speed up the processing in the detention centres
- build a culture of support for protection of refugees
- break the link between the off-shore and the on-shore Protection Visa Program
- seek a true regional solution, which is not simply a way for Australia to abdicate responsibility for asylum seekers

RELEVANT WEBSITES

Refugee Council of Australia
www.refugeecouncil.org.au

National Council of Churches
www.ncca.org.au

Jesuit Refugee Services
www.jre.org.au

Amnesty International
www.amnesty.org.au

Dept of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
www.immi.gov.au

Congregational Leaders of Religious Institutes
www.clrinsw.org.au

Australian Catholic Social Justice Council
www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au

REFLECTION

Perhaps the following prayer, written by a refugee, expresses something of what is the deepest dream of us all.

Author would like to pray for peaceful and love to our common God with Australian people by this chance:

God,

Let me become your instrument;

at a place of animosity
to transmit the love,
at a place of offending,
to give the forgiveness,

at a place of divided,
to bring about the united,

at a place of misgiving,
to excite the confidence,

at a place of mistake
to exalt the truth,

at a place of disappointment,
to arouse the desire,

at a place of grief,
to spread the happy,

at a place of darkness,
to radiate the brightness.



CHALLENGING AUSTRALIA to WELCOME the STRANGER

DEEPENING OUR REFLECTION

The time has come for a vision of Australia guided by a new principle that encompasses not only what Australia can do for itself but also what Australia can do for the world.

Kevin Rudd, in *Monthly*, 2006.

**So what can Australia do now for the world's refugees?
Honour our obligations. Create policies that fit the facts**

SOME RELEVANT FACTS

- 1. We are obliged to accept and protect refugees.** We have signed and ratified the international treaties which establish their rights. We breach our obligations to refugees by
 - * preventing boats carrying them from entering Australian waters;
 - * delaying the processing of their claims for protection, e.g. Sri Lankans, Afghans;
 - * keeping them in mandatory detention for long periods, e.g. years.
 - * denying them access to judicial review under Australian law, on Christmas Island.
- 2. Many negative attitudes to refugees** are based on ignorance of the facts and uninformed assumptions fuelled by sections of the media and political -fear campaigns about border control, people smugglers and population growth.
- 3. Asylum seekers are not enemies** against whom we need to protect our borders.
 - * They are very vulnerable people seeking a safe place to live.
 - * 90% of people arriving by boat have been declared genuine refugees.
- 4. The increased numbers seeking our protection** are the result of continuing violent oppression in home countries. For example:
 - **Afghanistan:** Security worsens daily. Taliban are forcibly recruiting young men. Hence an exodus to escape this. Amnesty International, June 2010.
 - **Sri Lanka :** 11,000 Tamil people arbitrarily detained in rehabilitation camps, with torture widely reported. Civilians (notably young Tamil men, journalists, Muslims, unionists, human rights defenders, ethnic minorities) are at constant risk of arrest, abduction, forced disappearance, killings.

Amnesty International, June 2010.

- .5. Population increase in 2008-2009**

* Natural factors: births minus deaths	157,800
* Permanent migration	171,320
* Temporary migration	27,480
* Total humanitarian intake	13,507

Of these 13,507 places= in the annual quota, only **6000** were assigned to refugees.

- 6. Is there a queue overseas? No.** Wherever UNHCR registers people as refugees, Australian Government officials choose whom to accept or reject. **Those who have been waiting longest there have no priority claims on our protection.**

CREATING POLICIES TO FIT THE FACTS

We know bad policy has ruined many lives. For the future, let us avoid the mistakes of the past and find better ways to honour Australia's obligations as an international citizen.

- 1. Focus policy on our obligation to protect refugees rather than on the people smugglers.**
The Refugee Convention prohibits penalising asylum seekers because of the way they arrive or because they have no documents.
- 2. Receive the small number of refugees seeking our protection** wherever they land on our shores, including Christmas and other islands.
- 3. Process their claims promptly**, as promised (thirty days), with right of appeal to the judicial system under Australian law.
- 4. Publicly reject the fallacy that asylum seekers are illegal immigrants.** Under international law they are exercising a legal right. If they were migrants they would have no need to seek protection.
- 5. Outlaw discrimination against any specific group or individual** from a particular country, ethnic group or other identification. The suspension of process, while their homeland situations remained unchanged, discriminated against Afghans and Sri Lankans, prolonging their trauma.
- 6. Shoulder Australia's burden of responsibilities** without deflecting them onto impoverished neighbouring countries.
- 7. Avoid any policy, local or regional, which would warehouse refugees** in detention centres for long periods, increasing their suffering and denying them a future.
- 8. Increase funding and services for resettlement of refugees**, to support their insertion into the Australian community and enable them to contribute their knowledge and skills to the common good.
- 9. House asylum seekers** where all essential services and community support are readily available, to reduce the traumas of detention and isolation, hasten the processing of claims and greatly reduce the costs of meeting our obligations.
- 10.** The excision of islands from the migration zone is a legal fiction enabling us to deny that asylum seekers have landed on our shores and so have a claim on our protection.
Cancel this dishonourable, self-serving strategy.
- 11.** A regional approach to meeting the needs of refugees cannot succeed without reliable long- term cooperation by countries seriously committed to the project. **If this is not forthcoming, Australia's obligations remain unchanged and must be honoured.**