

Migration, Immigration and Asylum as Major Themes in the Christian Scriptures

Migration and homelessness are major themes throughout Christian scripture, and can be traced from the earliest strands of both Jewish and Christian traditions. They consistently affirm that a 'right to respect' is fundamental to all human beings, as God has made and gifted them.

Whilst most people might pay lip service to such a statement, the reality is often very different. Under the pressure of real dilemmas, generated by rapid changes in social and cultural demographics, the 'right to respect' is all too frequently overshadowed by the immediate demands of the context.

There can be no doubt, however, that the divine injunction is to empathy and hospitality. Exodus 23:9 says, "*Do not ill-treat a foreigner; you know how it feels to be a foreigner, because you were foreigners in Egypt.*" In other words, we need to understand that foreigners are no different from ourselves; we must draw on the memory of our own feelings of fearfulness, loneliness and disorientation, and use these to understand and empathise with the stranger amongst us. Caring for aliens is a fundamental reflection of God's unconditional love for all human beings. People of faith are under obligation to live this profound truth in action.

God's imperative, then, is to care for the people we now describe as migrants, immigrants and asylum seekers. It is no surprise to find this in the earliest strands of the Jewish Torah. Leviticus 19:33 reads, "*Treat (a foreigner) as you would a fellow-Israelite, and love them as you love yourselves ...*" Israel always lived in close contact with other cultures. Conflict with their neighbours is the stuff of their history. The Old Testament narrative is shot through with violent and bloody power struggles, and exemplifies some of the worst in human behaviour one to another. In their neglect of the commands to 'love God' (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to 'love their neighbours as themselves' (Leviticus 19:18), we find a people styling themselves, on the one hand, as 'chosen of God' and, on the other, engaging in what today we would call ethnic cleansing – something which we now know to happen in any time or place under extreme conditions of fear and stress. This, it seems, is a terrifying symptom of the human condition.

The ancient Hebrews were no different from any other people in their struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable: the tension between a conviction about an obligation to hospitality, and a pressing need to stake out their own territory, even if that meant resorting to violence. It is so difficult to hold in creative tension an appreciation of God's compassionate love for all creation, and a very particular sense of God's offer of support in life's battles to create and maintain personal security. Soldiers throughout the centuries have desperately needed to believe that God is on their side, regardless of other convictions they might hold about God's universal love. It seems that the struggle to make sense of violence is another fundamental of the human condition – something which René Girard explores at great length in his careful analysis of violent human behaviour.¹

¹ Girard, René (1972) *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: John Hopkins

This is an important discussion, because, as Renate Jost suggests, it is all too easy for twenty-first century Christians to identify the 'God of Love' of the New Testament in simplistic opposition to the 'God of Vengeance' in the Old Testament.² As Jost points out, God *is* the God of Love throughout the history of God's peoples, and the 'God of Vengeance' is also present in both Old and New Testaments: notably, for example, in Romans, and Revelation.

A common human strategy for dealing with discomfort of holding together our experiences of love and vengeance is to construct³ minority 'scapegoats', who are held responsible for social dis-ease. Aliens have been prime targets throughout history. Wherever and whenever violence occurs, there are always victims: fearful, hurting people. The challenge for us is to see them from the perspective of the 'God of Love', and to respond not with further victimisation, but with open and generous hospitality.

We need to be clear in our minds about the integrity of God's justice and love. With gospel hindsight it must be possible to imagine a better way than an early resort to violence, and in recent times there have been many attempts to tell the integrity of the God's 'good news' with fresh insight. Twentieth century theologies of liberation, originating in oppressed communities around the world, from South America, Africa and Asia, have each presented us with more creative models of reconciliation and dialogue, based on mutual listening and respect. God, they tell us, *identifies* with the marginalised, the hungry migrant and the genuine asylum seeker – in fact with every hurting human. No longer can we simply dismiss the asylum-seeking casualties of war and oppression, or the immigrants whose cries for food and shelter are so clearly exposed in the media.

God's justice is focused most clearly when we turn our attention to the oppressors rather than the oppressed - on anyone who is greedy with material resources, or who steals from the poor (Amos 5:11-13). According to Jesus, the justice of God's judgement falls on those who would claim commitment to the way of faith, but who are unwilling to relate to the poor and to the strangers in the land (Luke 16: 19-31, Matthew 19:16-34, Luke 11:52). God's justice and love form a single vein throughout the Jewish and Christian stories. As latter-day pilgrims, we should have the advantage of the unique fresh reading of the Jewish Torah, as it comes to us through the Word made flesh (John 1: 4-5).

This is not to say, however, that the wisdom we learn from Jesus does not have its roots in ancient times. In the period of the Judges, when the tribes of Israel had no fixed territory of their own, there was already a controversy concerning the legitimacy

² Jost, Renate (1999) "God of Love/ God of Vengeance, or Samson's 'Prayer for vengeance'", in Brenner, Athalya (Edit) *Judges: a Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp 117-125

³ Steve Finamore notes that "scapegoats may be the Jews, the single parents, the social scroungers or the asylum seekers. The group may ... be devised by the authorities as an instrument of control". See Finamore (2000) *Violence, the Bible and the End of the World*, p.23, The Whitley Lecture. Oxford: Regents Park College.

of putting down roots whilst remaining true to God's pilgrim calling. The book of Jeremiah provides a unique glimpse of a radical clan. The Rechabites were nomadic, living without building houses, cultivating land or buying and planting vineyards (Jeremiah 35:6-7). These people lived as 'strangers in the land', perpetual migrants, without the security of territorial ownership or dominance. The story of the 'Holy Land' today would have been different indeed, if the life-style of the Rechabites had won the day.

How remarkable, then, that when God is revealed in human history, God's appearance takes the form of a vulnerable refugee baby! Jesus was born into an occupied land, under the control of a foreign empire, and became utterly dependent on the love and care of ordinary people. From the beginning of his life, Jesus was a refugee. The Gospels present Jesus as one whose authentic home lay not on earth but in heaven. His ministry modelled migrancy both in word and action. He was a peripatetic preacher, saying that "The Son of God has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). He travelled 'light' with regard to possessions. He was, however, fond of food and company, and often received hospitality in the homes of others - as did the missionary Christians of the Book of Acts. Today's disciples are still called to be people of 'The Way', which can lead, as it did for Jesus and many Christians since, to persecution and even martyrdom, and possible entombment in a *foreigner's* tomb.

In other words, to be a disciple is to live life with a proper consciousness of provisionality, equivalent to that of a stranger, or migrant. As Mary Jones, the Irish-American widow who spent her life travelling between disadvantaged communities in the United States championing the rights of the poor, famously said, "I abide where there is any fight against wrong My address is like my shoes – it travels with me".⁴ Our calling has to transcend any attachment to material possessions. If, by good fortune, they come our way, it would be churlish not to enjoy them in ways consistent with the spirit of God's Kingdom, but this will involve delight in the capacity to share God's love and goodness with others who are poor and vulnerable, the nomads of the moment. The Letter to the Hebrews implies that New Testament Christians, like Jesus before them, have no lasting home, save the home they have in God. In welcoming strangers into our homes, our country, our place of work, we might be entertaining 'angels unaware'. (Hebrews 13:2) To enter into a migrant experience, therefore, is not at all at odds with being a child of God; in fact, it is only a short breath away from recognising the face of Christ in the lives of the strangers in our land.

Today there are an estimated 9.2 million refugees across the world who have fled their homelands.⁵ They are all God's created children; they are all 'our neighbours' (Luke 10:29-37). The problem for today's 'priests and Levites' is, of course, the sheer number of people arriving on our shores; this is what poses the challenge for our society. How do we as Christians translate God's command to engage with the

⁴ Chittister, Joan (1966) *A Passion for Life: Fragments of the Face of God*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, P.85

⁵19 April 2006, London, UNHCR Press Release for "The State of the World's Refugees" (online edition)

strangers in our land, given all the complexities of competing human needs and finite resources?

It appears that the Bible is thoroughly affirming of homelessness as an honourable state. The history of Israel is told as a story of God's covenant community held together by obedience to Torah: Torah which includes guidelines about the treatment of migrant peoples. It also provides for special years of 'Jubilee', a safety net which allows for the re-adjustment of social imbalance and of wealth distribution every fifty years (Leviticus 25:9-10, 25:31).

Michael Barnes, exploring the theology of Paul in the Letter to the Romans, writes that: "*Paul's argument is not ... that Jewish faith has been abrogated, but that the traditional covenantal faith of Judaism is to be defined more exactly as faith in Jesus Christ*".⁶ This is what we see in the radical new communities of the young church, characterised by its commitment to the centrality of God's 'new covenant' in Christ with its imperative of inclusive hospitality.

So what has happened with the passage of years? Early Christian emphases on the divinity of Christ tended to underplay Jesus' humanity and, with it, his human needs: for food and for shelter. Christopher Rowland suggests that the young church, whilst seeking to become integrated into its surrounding cultures, downplayed the embarrassing fact that Jesus was a Jew executed on a Roman gallows, a man in direct conflict with the state authorities. The fate of the radical new Christian movement was further sealed when the Roman Emperor Constantine, "... managed to envelop the Christian religion within the fabric of the late Roman Empire without any substantial shift in its power or ideology".⁷ Western Christianity was overwhelmed by Greek, rather than Jewish, theological influences and, consequently, much of today's European Christianity has been socialised into a culture of individualism, rather than a culture of 'faith in community'. It is too easy to reduce privatised faith to another 'commodity', something which can be chosen or rejected at will, and easily relegated to formal religion reserved for Sundays.⁸ In excess, there is little ethical imperative to welcome the stranger, and the *Missio Dei* is reduced to the induction of other privatised believers.

In order to revisit what it might mean to live in closer covenant community, we can turn to important insights emerging from recent African theologians. Desmond Tutu and Alan Böesak both refer to the rich heritage of *ubuntu* (Zulu), or *urimunhu* (Xhosa), a profound concept, which describes the way in which all humans are bound together. In Tutu this concept appears in the saying, "*Moto ke motho ka betho babang*", meaning, '*I am human only because you are human.*' *Your humanity affirms my humanity. Without that, there is no wholeness*".⁹ It is not surprising that African Christians are often drawn to the stories of the Old Testament, which emphasise so strongly relational identity, something which resonates so closely with

⁶ Barnes, Michael (2002) *Theology and the Dialogues of Religions*, Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University, p.47

⁷ Rowland, Christopher (1988) *Radical Christianity*, Oxford: Blackwell, Polity, p.14

⁸ John Hull

⁹ Böesak, Allan (1984) *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, Maryknoll: New York, p.51

the concept of *ubuntu*. In Abraham's household, for example, strangers were treated with great respect (Genesis 18:1-8). By contrast, many eighteenth and nineteenth century missionaries, schooled in Western understandings of Christian faith¹⁰, imported their individualism into Africa, undermining the rich web of traditionally African inter-dependence. In this sense, the imposed social ethic of the new religion was arguably less Christian than the one which had preceded the arrival of the missionaries.

In our churches attitudes to migrants and asylum seekers vary enormously. Some congregations find themselves blessed by the 'strangers' amongst them. When visitors are given space to enrich and educate the host congregation, this further banishes the false 'myths' and fears which are fuelled so strongly by the media. Christians cannot overlook the plight of these strangers simply on the basis of economic self-interest. Our calling is to work for a radically different kind of community. We are called to challenge the structural injustices in national systems for handling asylum claims, and to question ignorant and arbitrary solutions to people's distress – the double distress of asylum seekers who have already experienced oppression in their own lands.

Many UK churches are now actively engaged in easing the practical difficulties of people who have come to our shores in challenging circumstances: seeking asylum or simply looking for work and a new beginning.¹¹ We cannot be naïve about the complexity of the issues involved in responding positively to strangers. People are complex, and the motives of immigrants can be as varied as any other human group. Undoubtedly some will not have the same respect for the laws of the host country as others. We are not called to be 'doormats' at the service of all-comers. Our calling is to seek justice, and to prioritise compassion. We seek to ease human suffering wherever and whenever possible, whilst remaining "wise as serpents and gentle as doves" (Matthew 10:16). We can offer assistance where there are legal hurdles to be jumped and hidden deprivations to be overcome. With our support, vulnerable people can be protected from becoming the 'scapegoats' for our society's frustrations and potential unrest.

It is common for Christians doing creative and valuable work in this field to express feelings of isolation, in church as well as in the wider society. One reason for writing this reflection and other related *Joint Public Issues Team* resources, is to encourage their work, and to strengthen the foundations of ecumenical networking and other partnerships. As African Christians would tell us: we become more fully human only when the strangers in our land receive the hospitality which sustains their humanity in the eyes of God.

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¹⁰ The earliest Dutch Reformed missionaries in South Africa, brought a distortion of Calvinism, for example. See Nicholson, Ronald (1990) *A Black Future? Jesus and Salvation in South Africa*, London: SCM, pp105-116

¹¹ See stories of good practice, on JPIT website – link***