

# Welcoming the stranger in an inhospitable climate

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 17 June 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Jon O'Brien

Leviticus 19: 9-10, 33-34; Mark 3: 1-6

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

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Thanks for the welcome and the opportunity to be part of your service this morning – and thanks to Jimmy and Naseer for doing those readings.

Advocating on behalf of people seeking asylum in our country can seem a long and winding road. I want to encourage you to keep going and get involved in an initiative leading up to the next Federal election.

As Margaret said I'm part of a small team that supports the Social Justice Forum. The Forum is made up of leaders in Uniting and the wider church and it sets social justice advocacy priorities for the Synod.

When I began my role in late 2013, the *Give Hope: Uniting for asylum seekers* campaign was already established. I knew a little about people seeking asylum or refugees, but it was a steep learning curve for me.

Around the same time, unexpectedly and somewhat indirectly, I became involved with a group of young men seeking asylum. This happened through my daughter and soccer.

At that time Uniting ran a program for unaccompanied minors. Some of the young men were from Afghanistan of Hazara background. They were part of a larger group of Hazara men aged from late teens to mid-twenties, who had started an informal football team. They needed a coach. My daughter Bronwyn aged 21, heard about this – and put her hand up. She had been playing football for about five years. Despite having no coaching experience whatsoever, Bronwyn put her hand up. And I went along as a support person. That started an 18 month journey with this group. Bronwyn, together with a Uniting worker who spoke Farsi, which is very important, trained and coached the team and got them into Merrylands Football Club and playing in the Granville District competition. They played a whole season in a proper competition.

Bronwyn's involvement with the guys went beyond football. She took them to hospital when they had injuries, and shared many meals and social occasions with them. She helped some with their visa applications. She grew and learned a lot about them, about the situation of people seeking asylum and about herself. And as team helper, my understanding of these young men grew and became more personal.

This experience affirms what we all know. That our awareness, attitudes and values are more likely to change when we have personal experience of a situation. This could be through direct relationship or hearing a speaker, but it could come through a book, film or other means. Some sort of personal contact.

These sorts of experiences may fan into flame compassion - and indignation at the situation of people seeking asylum in our country. The biblical call to care for the stranger in our midst has sounded for much longer, as we heard in the reading from Leviticus.

The British Rabbi and scholar, Lord Jonathan Sacks reminds us that the two great commandments of Jewish faith are known to Christians as the Great Commandment (to love the Lord your God with all your whole heart, soul and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself). Jesus said that the entire law and the prophets are summed up in these commandments.

But Lord Sacks suggests there is a 3rd important commandment in Judaism, one that is repeated some 36 times. It calls on Israel to love the stranger among them, reminding them they were strangers in Egypt. In the Leviticus passage, concern for the stranger, or alien, is expressed in having their basic needs met as well as directions on how they should be treated generally. The Israelites are told *"don't reap to the very edges of your field"* so that that stranger will have food. They are then commanded, *"You should do them no wrong"*. This could address not taking advantage of them as minority group or exploiting their lack of local knowledge or language, but it is a general prohibition against harming the stranger in any way. More positively the people are instructed, *"You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love them as yourself...."* The stranger is to have the same rights as the local people. They are not to be treated any differently, they are to be offered the same practical care and attention an Israelite would be entitled to. And in making these commands the writer appeals to empathy borne of common experience - *for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*, and its origin in the generous nature of their God.

What do these teachings on welcoming the stranger have to say about our nation's treatment of people seeking asylum?

It is clear that in the last two decades at least, our nation's treatment of people seeking asylum has fallen far short of the ideals and commands expressed in Leviticus. Report after report has shown that our practices of mandatory, indefinite detention, agonisingly slow assessment and provision of temporary rather than permanent protection, have caused real harm to people.

Our policies do not treat people seeking asylum as most citizens of this country are treated. As the Australian Human Rights Commission has pointed out, it is likely our practices have breached multiple human rights conventions. But regrettably, that argument does not appear to concern most Australians.

For years now the situation regarding people seeking asylum has appeared quite intractable and toxic. The refugee sector has been trying to find a way forward. In recent months a consensus has emerged among several groups, including our Give Hope campaign, to focus on three main calls where positive change may be more achievable. We need to keep working on everything, but these are three areas where we think there might be more possibility of movement.

It is important to note that these three advocacy priorities have been influenced directly by the views and input of people seeking asylum in Australia. The priorities are firstly:

*A fairer process for people seeking asylum. A fair process.*

There are around 20,000 people in the Australian community still waiting for their refugee claims to be assessed. The system they face is unfair in several ways:

The 'fast track' process (a somewhat ironic term) the 'fast track' process for assessing people's claims for protection discriminates against people who came to Australia by boat. Since 2014 these people have no right to meaningful, independent review of their case. Under the limited right of appeal they do have, they cannot introduce new evidence about their case or why it is unsafe to return home. The short time frames for filling out long and complex forms and the cuts to legal advice and support add to that unfairness.

More recently the government has changed the eligibility criteria for the Status Resolution Support Services. The SRSS provides limited financial assistance, casework support and access to trauma counselling for people seeking asylum. The eligibility changes mean that many people currently not working will lose part, or all, of those supports. There are very few exemptions. The Refugee Council of Australia estimates that up to 7500 people, including many children, will be left unable to pay for housing, medical care and food. In other words, we're willing to make people destitute in our country.

We are asking that the federal government repeal the fast track process, restore a fair and transparent assessment process with legal support, and the right to independent review. We must also ensure that those seeking asylum have the income, housing and health support - just to live decently while the assessment process takes place.

Secondly we are advocating for,

*Permanent rather than temporary protection*

After August 2012, all people seeking asylum who arrived in Australia by boat were placed on Bridging Visas while they were waiting to have their claims assessed. Those found to be refugees were placed on Temporary Protection Visas, which lasts for 3 years, or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas, which last for 5 years.

The temporary nature of both visas means that these people live in a perpetual state of uncertainty. And there are other problems:

- Those under temporary protection are denied the right to reunite with their families. Some have partners or children who they have not seen for years. Some came here (like the people in our football team) as unaccompanied minors and are forced to live not knowing whether they will see parents, or their brothers and sisters again. (Imagine what that is like – to face that prospect of separation from the people you love.)
- Despite being genuine refugees, those under temporary protection have to re-make their case for protection every few years, and face the possibility of being returned to the situation they fled.

- Temporary status makes it harder for people to rebuild their lives when their future is uncertain, though many are trying their best to do just that. It is not surprising that research shows higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression among those with temporary rather than permanent protection.

We are asking the Federal Government to reinstate permanent protection for those found to be refugees.

Thirdly, we are calling for:

*A larger and more responsive humanitarian program*

At the end of 2017, there were 65.6 million forcibly displaced people across the world, including 22.5 million refugees. Most of those people want to return to their homes, but some are unable to do so. Australia has had a well-regarded resettlement program, but the available places are limited. Due to our isolation we have far fewer people seeking asylum than many European countries. The vast bulk of refugees are hosted by poorer countries adjoining areas of conflict.

The Uniting Church believes our nation can do better. There is a consensus among concerned groups that our Humanitarian program should be increased from its current level of about 13,750 places to 20,000 places annually, and then progressively to 30,000 places. Other initiatives, such as private and community based sponsorship of refugee places should be explored.

We often read in the gospels that Jesus was moved with compassion by the sight of human need and then acted to relieve that need. He was moved with pity at the man suffering leprosy and healed him. He had compassion on the widow from Nain and raised her son from the dead. He was moved by the hungry crowd and fed them.

But compassion was not the only emotion Jesus felt when confronted with human need. The gospels also describe him as indignant and angry at systems and rules that alienated or otherwise harmed people. That is the case in his healing the man with the withered hand which we heard in our gospel reading.

Both compassion and indignant anger at wrong are valid expressions of love for our neighbour. They will motivate us, as they did Jesus, not only to meet the need or address the hurt we see, but to change the unfair systems or policies that create the situation.

How do we respond in a concrete way to this biblical call to welcome the stranger, rather than harming them?

Many concerned groups are calling on their supporters and the wider community to make their concerns known to their local Federal members of parliament. That is the single most important thing we are asking you to do.

Our Synod's Moderator, the Rev Simon Hansford recently emailed congregations and reminded them that the Uniting Church has a long history of defending the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum. This congregation has been at the forefront of that defence.

The Moderator urged Uniting Church members, in the lead up to the next Federal election, to visit their local MP's and talk about their concerns. That is what political insiders have told refugee advocates is necessary for change to happen. More MP's will need to hear from ordinary people – not just professional advocates, but from ordinary people - about why they are concerned for people seeking asylum and their conviction that we can do so much better.

So I want to encourage you to do keep doing that, or to start doing that if you are not already. If you can organise groups of people from other faiths or members of the wider community to visit your local MP, so much the better. Our Social Justice Forum team is available to support you in setting up and organising a group to visit. And for those unable to visit their MP's, or if you just can't imagine doing that, then write them a personal letter – because that still has a real impact. Our politicians tell us that getting a personal letter still influences them.

The prospects for positive change may seem bleak at times, but we need to be persistent and to work cooperatively with others of goodwill. Such bottom up influence is not only useful, but necessary for enduring change to occur.

A few weeks ago I heard an ABC interview with Gareth Evans, the past Australian Foreign Minister. He was being interviewed before an Amnesty talk he was giving about the United Nations doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect. It was a doctrine he helped to introduce, to address mass human rights violations and atrocities.

The interviewer, Linda Mottram, pointed out that in many cases the doctrine had not been applied at all. Gareth Evans acknowledged the truth of that, although he said it had been applied preventatively at times. Then he said this:

*“But what is the alternative? Do we just throw up our hands and go back to the bad old days when this was regarded as nobody's business, when sovereignty was a license to kill- of course we can't. And that's why those of us who care, and most people round the world do, those of us who care just have to hang in there and work hard, bottom up advocacy through civilian action towards our governments, to say 'You've got to care and you've got to respond effectively when these situations erupt.'”*

May we all continue to act in that spirit of persistence and determination to welcome the stranger in our own lives and the life of our nation.

Amen