

THE CRUCIFIED PEOPLE

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LAST SUNDAY, I went out to meet up with a few young refugees and asylum seekers whom I worked with when volunteering with Catholic Care of the Archdiocese of Melbourne a few years ago. They invited me to stay for lunch at the visit. Sitting at the table and having conversation with them were such delights. These young people (the youngest was only ten years old), regardless of their traumatic experiences on the sea, showed the finest characters that I have ever experienced in people. The ten-year-old boy, as I was told, was separated from his older brother who left the country with him, and was accidentally tossed into the sea when being transferred to another boat. Until now he is still scared of water because of the experience. The others confided to me how difficult and challenging it has been to live in another country, another culture, and to speak another language. Above all, these young boys and girls are living away from their families which they need so much at their young ages. How hard it is to grow up in such circumstances.

I was a migrant myself from Vietnam. Even though arriving in Australia with my parents and one of my brothers and having the rest of the family living here for nearly ten years prior to that, I still found settling in another country and culture quite challenging in many ways.

The day after the Sunday I caught up with my refugee friends, I heard on media that the Turnbull Government was proposing a lifetime ban on asylum seekers and refugees coming by boats from entering Australia, for any purpose (announced on 31st October). Disappointment and anger are short of describing the feeling. So many people expressed their frustration, shock and dismay over the Federal Government's injustice,

indecenty and racist mentality in the name of border protection, national security, and stopping the boats¹. Asylum seekers and refugees, unfortunately, have been the victims of power struggles within Australian politics in which political strategies and policies and their effectiveness have come first ahead of the faces of people fleeing their war-torn countries and life-threatening situations to find some security and a new life.

Looking into the eyes of these people, I feel a deep sorrow for their abandonment, hopelessness and vulnerability which are beyond words and imagination. At the same time, I feel ashamed and appalled at what our political leaders and policy makers are doing to these poor, traumatized and marginalized people. They have been seen not as human beings whom we are supposed to encounter, look them in the eyes, and know their stories. They have been seen as threats, statistics, numbers, burdens, and moreover, scapegoats for the Australian Government to sacrifice and send their 'strong messages' to people smugglers. The scapegoating system which was mainly responsible for Jesus' death two thousand years ago is still pretty much in operation today, in our society. Of course, it is only recognized under the mask of the national security system.

The gospel of John describes the reason for Jesus' death as follows:

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary (Lazarus's sister) and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.'

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death (Jn 11:45-53, NRSV translation).

What is critical in this passage is Caiaphas' advice to the council. It is better for one person to be sacrificed than to have the whole nation destroyed (this is repeated in the passion narrative in the same Gospel, ensuring we would not miss the point - see Jn 18:14). Today, it is better for the boat people to suffer than to have others drown at sea. This used to be the rhetoric of the politicians in stopping the boats in the first place; this seemed to convince a lot of people. However, when we hear nothing of the boats coming, the Government uses another rhetoric, that is of sending 'a strong message' to people smugglers, whoever they are, on the proposal of the new lifetime ban. This seems to affirm the minds of those wanting to exclude rather than include, to preserve the status quo rather than to be open to unknown migrants.

Behind all this, there seems to be a scapegoating mentality which treats vulnerable people as sacrificial victims for the sins they did not commit. No one would flee their own countries, families and cultures for minor reasons, considering the enormous dangers they put themselves in. We need to ask why they would risk their lives to seek another place to live, not what we would have to sacrifice in accepting them in their desperation. The second question shows how eccentric we are as a people and nation in the face of global crises of war (to which we significantly contributed), immigration (which we are handling irresponsibly within our reach) and poverty (which we feel indifferent about).

¹ See *The Age*, 1 November 2016 Issue, 14-15.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* 40th



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Revisiting the death of Jesus urges Christians to see the face of God in the faces of the scapegoated brothers and sisters, who are in the detention camps, whether offshore and within the country, who are homeless, cultureless and stateless everywhere in the world today. In his most important book, *The Crucified God*, Jürgen Moltmann writes:

Christian identity can be understood only as an act of identification with the crucified Christ, to the extent to which one has accepted the proclamation that in them God has identified [Godself] with the godless and those abandoned by God, to whom one belongs oneself.²

The crucifixion of Jesus is not a mere reality of the past; it is very present in our world today, our country, and our own minds and hearts. The hopes of countless people are crucified. The lives of children, women and men are crucified in detention centers. We are crucifying our conscience voices, whether external or internal.

Thanks be to God that we, Christians, have inherited the image of a crucified God in our traditions, right in the center of our faith. God, through God's beloved Son, identifies God's own self with the scapegoated, the crucified in society, not the powerful and the winners. God is there in the camps and on the boats.

Can we, as Christians, see the face of God in the faces of those desperate for a new life? Can we see the face of a compassionate God in the eyes of those hoping for our mercy when we look closely into their eyes? Can we, as a nation and country, have courage to look these people in the eyes and see them as fellow human beings, not scapegoats to be crucified?

anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, Kindle Edition, 2015), location 474 (page 20).