

Weekly Reflection
Pentecost 14B, 2021
Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Migrant & Refugee Sunday

The dark side of mobility

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xen·o·phile: somebody who likes foreigners: somebody who likes the people, customs, and culture of other countries, or things from abroad



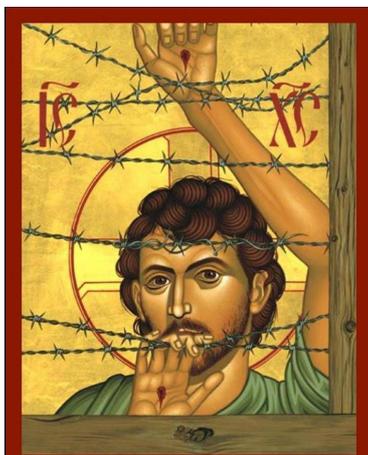
1. The dark side of mobility

This Sunday is Migrant and Refugee Sunday. According to the United Nations Human Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) there are “82.4 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2020 as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order.” Due to ongoing displacement there are “almost 92 million refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced, stateless, recent returnees and host communities.” There are 26 million refugees globally. In 2020, Australia granted asylum to 57,451, a 1.8% decline from 2019.

Throughout human history, the refugee has been an enigmatic being. A being not fully human, a being out of place, the object of suspicion, envy, projection and derision. Characterised over time as foreigner, sojourner, peregrine, stranger, alien, queue jumper, they are isolated at the borders of nations and life. Only granted entry into and by religious and social constructs, constructions of rights and realities. Only then to be obliterated once welcomed into a foreign system, assimilated, pressured to jettison identity and past!

As Julia Kristeva, psychoanalyst and social critic, has written in her book, *Strangers to Ourselves*,

While in the most savage human groups the foreigner was an enemy to be destroyed, the foreigner has become, within the scope of religious and ethical constructs, a different human being who, provided [the foreigner] espouses them [the constructs], may be assimilated into the fraternities of the “wise”, the “just”, or the “native”. (Kristeva, 2)



This Sunday we enter into solidarity with over 26 million refugees in the world who represent the dark side of mobility. Today we remember these people, uprooted from their homes by war, persecution, violence and the ambivalence of nations. The plight and suffering of refugees today is unimaginable. Refugees can stay in camps between 5 to 17 years. My parents were displaced persons for

more than 5 years in post WW2 Europe in Salzburg, Austria, before they were granted a place in Australia.

Asylum seekers in Australia have also undergone great suffering. Father Jim Carty, a Marist Father, wrote a book entitled *Humanus Nullius*, inferring that refugees are human beings belonging to no one, abandoned.

2. There is nothing closer to a human being than another human being

Our text for this week, Mark 7, offers insights for our response to refugees and strangers.

Just before our text for this week, Mark has just shared the story of the feeding of the hungry crowd in the wilderness. In that story, Jesus looked at the crowd differently to his followers, the early Church of Mark's time. They were concerned that it was getting late and that Jesus should send them away to get their own food. This was a pragmatic ethics. Sensible, rational even. Unconsciously, the disciples made them into strangers, foreigners.

In marked contrast, Jesus' compassion was evoked! He saw them as family, people in relationship with him, human beings of primary concern. The church of the first four centuries struggled with the issue of hospitality to the stranger. With radical Christian clarity, Augustine challenged the alienation of the foreigner with the declaration of the universality of love for the other, any other: "there is nothing closer to a human being than another human being". This universality of love for neighbour is radical because it overrode the primacy of "otherness from blood and ethnic or national origin" (Kristeva, 84). What transformed the otherness of the stranger, for Augustine, was love for every human being expressed in the image of Christly love.

The tragedy was, as Julia Kristeva notes, "the absolute aspect of this religious bond soon collided with human needs as well as with the demands of States and soon afterwards those of nations." (Kristeva, 85)

Even more, at times the church of this period placed limits on generosity. Only Christian foreigners received hospitality in certain places. And, when dogmatism raised its dissenting head, only pilgrims and wandering aliens of certain doctrinal persuasions would receive *caritas*. Kristeva again:

"Christian cosmopolitanism bore in its womb the ostracism that excluded the other belief and ended up with the Inquisition" (Kristeva, 87).

Returning to our story in Mark 7. An extreme Jewish group who held social, religious and political power challenges Jesus for allowing his disciples to eat without washing their hands. And Jesus engages them in robust debate.

This is a radical foundational story for the inclusiveness of all people in the community of Christ. And it is permission giving to us all to engage in agonistic (not antagonistic), robust conversation with all forms of power that denies the well being of all people.

Jesus' teaching and practice announces that no external ritual has the power to segregate people.

Nothing can create a stranger or alien. The contamination of another human being, or a group, or a culture, or a religion, arises from within humans and groups, in the shape of thoughts and ideologies, of religious and ethical constructs. It is these that divide and devalue others, creating and sub-ordinating people into aliens and strangers.

As Ched Myers summarises this passage:



This story serves not only to legitimise the community's practice of integration with gentiles, who otherwise would have been excluded by the rules of ritual purity, but also serves to persuade poorer Jews that the very system that purports to 'protect' their ethnic/national identity is the system that exploits them" (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 223).

3. Conclusion

How will our life be marked by Christly love of the universality of love for the other, particularly for the foreigner, the refugee?

How and whom will we challenge about the *Humanus nullius factor*, the making of refugees non-persons, with no rights, no nothing, abandoned at the borders?

Will we critically reflect on what shapes our conscious and unconscious values for the other? And the unconscious values of the institutions of society, religious, social, political?

Kristeva and Jesus in our story in Mark, invite us to radically examine our self and our internalised religious and social-ethical constructs, and the social-ethical constructs of our organisations, beginning with the realisation that what is most fearful to us in the stranger may be the very quality we do not want to recognise in ourselves or in our institutions.

Out of this radical self-reflexiveness a more realistic fair-treatment for others may emerge.