Another great challenge of our age is asylum seekers. The biblical injunction to care for the stranger in our midst is clear. The parable of the Good Samaritan is but one of many which deal with the matter of how we should respond to a vulnerable stranger in our midst. That is why the government’s proposal to excise the Australian mainland from the entire Australian migration zone and to rely almost exclusively on the so-called Pacific Solution should be the cause of great ethical concern to all the Christian churches. We should never forget that the reason we have a UN convention on the protection of refugees is in large part because of the horror of the Holocaust, when the West (including Australia) turned its back on the Jewish people of Germany and the other occupied countries of Europe who sought asylum during the ’30s.


Mary was thirty-two years old when I met her. She had fled her home and left any family that may have survived during the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Now, thirteen years later the government of the country in which she had made a home and a future for herself and her family—the only place that her four boys called home—was evicting her. She was being ‘compulsorily repatriated’ to her birth-land, but to what? Her birth family, home, and land no longer belonged to her.

Forced on to a truck in the middle of the night while her husband and boys were away caring for the cows, Mary was expatriated to a deserted ‘no-man’s’ land. She was handed two tarpaulins, a meager ration of rice and beans and a 20m² plot of dirt—“this is your home now” her guides called as they pulled away in their truck.

Seven months later, despite being in a refugee community of 200 people, Mary feels alone! Her husband and boys are ‘forced migrants’ too—but she doesn’t know where. The ‘host’ community has made it clear that she and her kind are not welcome—they have been refused access to the local water hole, the children have been barred from schools and because ‘you are not Rwandan’ they are refused health care and government food assistance.

Mary is geographically displaced, again! She is separated from family (and when she did find them she was denied the opportunity to reunite). She is a refugee but is excluded from, and disempowered by her own people. She feels completely helpless and desperately hopeless.

Mary is a long way from our doorstep here in Australia: there are no parallels between the experience of a refugee in a developing African country and a refugee in Australia—or at least that is what we would like to pretend. The fact is that many of the issues that Mary faced are common to asylum seekers and refugees world-wide.

Having escaped horrific and irreconcilable challenges at home, thousands of miles in inconceivable conditions, numerous transition camps and a journey that for some lasts years, a minority arrive in Australia, the ‘lucky country’, only to be detained in a ‘no-man’s’ land, refused access to some of the basic necessities and separated from and refused reunion with family. Asylum seekers will subject themselves to dehumanising experiences and the uncertainty of acceptance as refugees all with a deep longing to be safe and to be free. Helpless and hopeless they may be—but at least it is a chance at life with dignity.

“Our life is without hope, or purpose”, said Ali, an Afghan asylum seeker detained in an Australian detention centre, “The simplest thing that a person wants in his life is hope. Without hope, life is meaningless.” Without hope people protest and throw themselves of roofs and set themselves alight. Without hope people become irrational and desperate.

Without hope healing is almost impossible. Most asylum seekers are escaping traumatic and sometimes tortuous situations; they

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**THE HOPE DEFICIT**

Despite all the ghastliness that is around, human beings are made for goodness. The ones who ought to be held in high regard are not the ones who are militarily powerful, nor even economically prosperous. They are the ones who have a commitment to try and make the world a better place.

—Desmond Tutu
run from all that they know and love “owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group of political opinion”⁴. The therapies used to treat victims of abuse and traumas are based on the assumptions that hope for the future can firmly locate their experiences (of pain, rejection, dehumanization, exile…) in the past. However, if forced separation, marginalisation, disempowerment and indefinite uncertainty are standard then any attempt to build on personal hope and to obtain healing and wholeness, let alone restore dignity, is futile.

There is little (genuine) argument that asylum seekers face a plethora of injustices in their hope for a life with dignity and there should be no argument from Christians that we have a mandate to be on their side. The Scriptures contain an unambiguous call to action on behalf of the marginalised and specifically the ‘alien’. We, self confessed followers of Jesus—we Salvationists—are instructed to be actively engaged in a partnership to transform the lives of refugees (aliens) by caring for them as individuals and by working to reform society—its values and its habits.

From its beginnings the Hebrew story was the story of a people in exile, of aliens resident in foreign lands suffering persecution and oppression. This history of exile and exodus, in particular the escape from slavery in Egypt, revealed to the Israelites the nature of their God and defined their relationship with God and other people. Throughout the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), God is identified as the God who cares for the exiled and the persecuted refugee. Hospitality to the stranger became one of the strongest moral forces in ancient Israel.

God’s people are reminded that in their interactions with strangers they should bear in mind how they felt when they too were aliens in a land (Ex 22:21; Lev 19:34). They should treat their own poor and marginalized “as you would an alien or a temporary resident” (Lev 25:35). (Imagine if we Australians treated our own as we do our ‘temporary residents’—I wonder how long that would last?) However, God does not just suggest a moral code—God says “Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien…” (Dt 27:19). The Hebrew Scriptures lay a strong foundation of justice for “the alien amongst us”, they call not for tolerance, not for passive acceptance but for an overt partnership in building a community that celebrates lives with dignity.

Jesus, his life and ministry, build on these foundations. A refugee in a foreign land, he and his family remember what it was like to escape their homeland “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted”. (Matt 2:13f) Jesus chooses to spend time and share meals with the most marginalized and oppressed people in society. And he calls on his followers to love their enemies, (Matt 5:44) give all they have to the poor and offer hospitality to strangers (Matt 25:35). Jesus taught that faithful obedience to God was marked by such deeds. In fact, it would be the way people responded to strangers and to the poor that would identify them as people of faith (Lk 10:25–37).

"Who is my neighbour?” the lawyer asks (Lk 10:29). In reply Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan where at the end Jesus turns the man’s question around and throws it back at him: “Which of the three… proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the brigands’ hands?” It’s no longer a question of obligation, or putting limits on how far one should go in loving one’s neighbour, but instead has become an invitation to act as the Samaritan did.

This man, even though he was a despised foreigner, an outsider, was ready to break social, ethnic and religious rules and conventions in order to assist a person in need. His actions bring us to the heart of our Christian faith, for the parable Jesus is telling us is not just about helping those in need but also about our own underlying attitudes and relationship with God: the God we try to love “with all our heart… soul, strength and mind” (Luke 10, 27) is the God who is moved with the same mercy and compassion for a
fellow human being as this Samaritan, a God whom, as Jesus shows us in the example of his life, is always ready to reach out to the socially excluded, the disempowered: the asylum seeker—whoever and wherever they may be.

There can be no question about the Christian response to asylum seekers and refugees. The Church, (The Salvation Army) is called to be a place of welcome—a place of hope. “Because God is the source and champion of justice, and because God is utterly reliable, there is always hope”—but it must be seen in and manifest through God’s people.

As disciples and as Salvationists we are called to be partners in the provision of care and comfort to those who come to this land as strangers, seeking safety, seeking hope—seeking a life with dignity.

Footnotes:

*Definitions to assist our understanding:

(1) Migrant: any person who by their own volition chooses to leave their homeland and move to another country or location.

(2) Forced Migrant or Asylum Seeker: any person that through fear of personal safety (see footnote 4) believes that they are forced to leave their homeland and seek safety in an alternate location. These individuals remain ‘officially’ asylum seekers until appraised otherwise by the authorities of the receiving state.

(3) Refugee: any person that has been appraised as requiring sanctuary according to the UN Convention (and individual state’s guidelines) and has been granted refugee status.

In practice, however, agencies, such as the UNHCR, frequently consider as refugees those displaced across borders as a result of complex emergencies without any formal determination of refugee status. In addition most people refer to all forced migrants, whether assessed or travelling as refugees.

2In 2010, 5,500 asylum seekers arrived in Australia. At that rate it would take 18 years to fill the MCG. Australia’s current (2009) annual program is to accept only 13,750 refugees, which is less than one tenth of 1% of the total number of global refugees. (www.rethinkrefugees.com.au)

3The Humanitarian Charter affirms the fundamental importance of: 1. The right to life with dignity; 2. The distinction between combatants and non-combatants; 3. The principle of non-refoulment. (Sphere Project 2004)

4The term refugee shall apply to a person who: owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.


5Marshall, C. The Little Book of Biblical Justice. p28