

## REFUGEE WEEK - A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Mon 20 June 2016



Refugee Week is being commemorated from 19 to 25 June 2016. It is timely to reflect on how Australian government policies towards refugees and asylum seekers measure up to the God's standards.

While care is always needed when quoting verses from the Bible, I believe that there is a continuing theme throughout the Old and New Testaments which cannot be ignored. For example:

- Leviticus 19:33,34 states "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God."
- Luke 10 contains the parable of the Good Samaritan in which Jesus challenges us to go out of our way to help those in need, even if they are from different lands, cultures and religions.
- In Matthew 22 Jesus says that the two great commandments are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves.
- In Matthew 25 Jesus says: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'"

So what is our response to the aliens, the strangers, the needy, the hungry and the other desperate people who, in fear of their lives, seek our help?

Under current policies, if Australian forces can intercept these desperate people before they reach Australia, we turn back their boats. This is not only unsafe but condemns them to a life of misery, poverty and fear in an Asian country which cannot look after them.

If asylum seekers can manage to get to Australia they are locked up indefinitely on Manus Island or Nauru. The conditions of these centres has been condemned by the UNHCR, the UN Committee Against Torture, Amnesty International, staff of Save the Children and the Salvation Army and the Australian Human Rights Commission. Such views are not isolated as doctors, nurses, psychologists and other allied health professionals working in the detention centres have reached identical conclusions.

Here are just a few quotes from inmates of our detention centres which show the hopelessness and despair to which we have driven them.

- “In Burma the government shoots us. Here, they kill us mentally.”
- “In our country the Taliban will slash our throats ... It will take maybe ten or fifteen minutes for us to die. [Australia is] killing us by pain, taking our soul and our life slowly.”
- “I wish I was dead in the ocean. At least I would die once in my life, not every second in these detentions.”
- “I want to kill myself. I don’t know why we’re here.”
- And we have the recent tragic cases in Nauru where Omid Masoumali died and Hodan Yasin remains in a critical condition after she set herself on fire.

The federal government may have largely managed to “stop the boats” coming to Australia, but we have most certainly not stopped the suffering. We have just transferred it away from our shores where we can pretend it isn’t our problem and ignore it.

Government policies towards refugees and asylum seekers remind me more of Pontius Pilate than of Jesus. We force refugees to go back to where they came from, or we condemn them to the cruelty of Manus Island or Nauru, and then we wash our hands of all responsibility.

I will conclude with another verse from the Bible, this time 1 John 3:17. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has this world’s goods, sees a brother or sister in need, and yet refuses help?”

By **Charles Body**