

Biblical Hospitality and Asylum Seekers

Over the past few years, one of our key public issues in Australia has been the treatment of asylum seekers. This issue raises such complex questions about the nature of political hospitality that it might seem overwhelming. Moreover, our Baptist tradition was forged in the separation of church and state, so we might be tempted to leave these bigger issues of hospitality to the state.

This would be unhelpful for at least two reasons: first, the historic Baptist opposition to dominant, state churches does not imply that our discipleship has had no political commitments. On the contrary, asserting the freedom of religion was a political act. Martin Luther King Jr belonged squarely in the Baptist tradition when he insisted that black Americans should not be treated as second-class citizens. For similar reasons, Australian Baptists rightly joined the groundswell in the 1960s that finally welcomed Aboriginal people back into their own country as citizens with a full range of citizenship rights.

So why should Christians be championing the cause of asylum seekers today? In short, this issue goes to the heart of our identity and calling as the people of God.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus started life as a refugee child, fleeing with his family to Egypt. Even his father's name, Joseph, reminds us that Jesus was not the first Jew to be a refugee in Egypt. All the tribal ancestors of Israel took refuge there. We read that scripture was fulfilled when Jesus went there as a child, because "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Matthew 2.15). The quote is from Hosea 11.1: "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son". That is, Matthew sees a spiritual analogy between the life of Jesus and the life of Israel: both are marked by the refugee experience.

And this experience is also embodied in the laws of Israel. So, for example, Leviticus 19.34 says:

The immigrant who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the immigrant as yourself, for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (cf. Exodus 22.21)

Similarly, the later prophets came to recognize the treatment of asylum seekers as a litmus test of faith (e.g., Jeremiah 7.5-7).

In the Old Testament, the 'immigrant', 'alien', 'refugee' or 'sojourner' (all possible translations of *ger*) is a foreigner who has left his or her country to settle elsewhere. Perhaps the most common reasons for movement are famine and war.

Some things never change: the United Nations *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (1951), for example, arose as a response to international displacements following World War II, and since Australia is a signatory to this Convention, we recognize the legal right to seek asylum.

When people arrive in a host country, there are always complex questions about the extent of their assimilation. Not surprisingly, then, Old Testament laws sometimes set assimilating strangers apart from 'the foreigner' (the *nokri* or *ben nekar*) who is not given full rights of participation (e.g., Exodus 12.43 excludes such people from the Passover). This distinction is surprisingly overturned, however, in Isaiah 56.3,6 where

the 'foreigner' (*ben nekar*) can offer acceptable sacrifices to God and is welcomed into the covenant community.

References to strangers in the New Testament are few but significant. Being 'strangers' (*paroikoi*) becomes a central metaphor for Christian identity in some books, building on the theological idea in Leviticus that all Israelites were in some sense 'sojourners' (Leviticus 25.23, cf. 1 Peter 1.1 and Ephesians 2.19).

Perhaps against our expectations, we may even find Christ present in the stranger. This is precisely the point that is made in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25: the hungry and thirsty stranger (*xenos* in vs. 38 and 44) may actually be the Lord, and not even the people in the parable called 'the righteous' have been able to discern this. In other words, no-one has the power to tell whether the needy stranger may in fact be Christ.

Ezekiel 47 is also a challenge to our political imagination: it takes us beyond random acts of kindness and demands that refugees be given a 'fair go' in the provision of land, that is, basic resources that provide the foundation of economic security:

So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the LORD God. (Ezekiel 47.21-23)

In international comparisons (taking account of national wealth and population sizes), the welcome that Australia offers to asylum seekers is not very impressive. On the other hand, especially under the able leadership of Meewon Yang, the Baptist Churches in Victoria have done some great work with refugee communities, and we now have a large number of churches whose members began their life in Australia as refugees. It is exactly this kind of work for which we should be known in the wider community. It's in our biblical genes.

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For general information, see www.refugeecouncil.org. From a Christian perspective, M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).