

We're all Boat People: Hospitality to Refugees from Hostility

Gordon Preece

Director of Ethos and Minister at Spotswood Anglican

(published in the Witness November 2011)

During a political race to the bottom about Australia's shameless treatment of asylum seekers, we need to connect their stories, the stories behind the statistics, with the stories of our nation's origins, and the stories of Scripture, of a refugee people, and a refugee King. Both biblically (all creation, Israel and Jesus) and historically in Australia - 'we're all boat people'. Because of this common origin and identity we ought to identify with boat people in their insecurity. We should develop more hospitable policies and practices towards refugees. Many Baptist churches have thankfully taken a lead in this.

Biblical Boat People

In the light of Noah's Ark we are all boat people. We are refugees from a fratricidal tide of violence in the world – from Cain killing brother Abel - to the earth was 'filled with violence' (Gen 6:11, 13). So God 'ended' this violent world, except blameless Noah's family and multiplying creatures. Noah's violent world is like ours - a world of boat people fleeing for refuge.

God's rainbow covenant with Noah, applies to all creation and humanity. The minimal morality of this covenant became the basis of the multicultural church of Jews and Gentiles at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). It is a standard of 'relative Natural Law' (Troeltsch), adapted to a world of sin and violence, applying to all; a basis for a minimally humane and international human rights law, including the right of refuge, transcending narrow national sovereignty.

Australian Boat People

When we want to retreat from a world of tragedy and terror into our island fortress, to the attitudes of White Australia, we should remember that not only are we all biblically refugees from a violent and chaotic world and God's just judgement on it, but also historically in Australia. Many of us were picked by the best judges in England, as they say. Earlier, 30,000 year old rock paintings in the Kimberleys show boat people arriving here. Post war immigrants arrived largely by ship.

An Australian movie, *No Worries*, makes this point that all Australians are boat people. It is about a farming couple, Ben and Ella Bell, and their 11 year old, Matilda. Hard hit by the early '90s recession, drought, and dust storms, they finally sell up and move to Sydney - Marickville, little Vietnam, to be colloquial, with all its racial tensions. One of Matilda's Anglo-Aussie classmates is caught by the teacher graffiti-ing 'Boat People Go Home' on a wall. The teacher says 'what's your name son. He says 'O'Flannery, Sir'. Sir says: 'your great-grandfather was Irish wasn't he, came out in the mid 19th century? How do you think he got out here?' Embarrassed silence. Sir asks the class - 'by boat Sir.' And the point's made - we're all boat people.

Israel's Laws of Hospitality

In the great Leviticus 19 passage that gave us the love commandment, we're told specifically: 'when refugees settle in your land with you, you are not to harm them.

Refugees who live with you must be treated just as if they were native-born like yourselves, and you are to love them as you love yourselves, for you were refugees in Egypt. I am the Lord your God' (Lev 19:33-34).

Many Melbourne Baptists have put this command into practice. At Spotswood Anglican we've been inspired and encouraged by Westgate Baptist's example of hospitality to many refugee groups to take in the Lautu Baptist Church. There was initial hesitancy from some, but I knew that if they met them face to face, their natural hospitality would be won over by the charm of these Chin people. They came to a service and sang a song of seeking refuge from God in time of exile. We heard tiny Lydia's story of having to flee her country to save her life. They wore beautiful traditionally woven multi-coloured suits. Sunday best has real meaning for them. It's a harbinger of heaven, of home. The children produced an apt banner together, 'Blessed are the Persecuted'. They all joined us for a traditional Aussie lunch of snags on bread. Since then they have met regularly in the afternoons, but deliberately close enough for hospitable overlap between them and many of us. They put on a magnificent lunch for us from giant cooking bowls. Tomorrow they will sing and dance at the Spotswood festival. Hopefully the wider community will get a glimpse of how God has feted us through the LaoTu Baptist refugees, as we've learnt to welcome them as God has welcomed us in Christ.

The Lautu Baptists now have a couple of plots in our community garden. Last Sunday, while Lydia, their wonderful tiny youth-worker was proudly showing me their plots full of Burmese spices, she told me and two others of our congregation that her grandmother had just died back in Burma and her 98 yr old grandfather is distraught. We prayed with her over her veggie plot that her grandfather would soon be joined by her parents to lay his wife, their mother and her grandmother, in her burial plot. It was a magic moment to be able to weep with those who weep for a home and place and people they can't yet return to, and to help them as best they can, to make a home here in exile. We hope to help their young people settle here through shared youth Alpha and a youth group starting soon, Our oldies don't understand the structural issues re refugees, they're relatively conservative, but if not forced too fast, they are basically hospitable, and will be won over by the personal - face to face relations.