

A Spirituality Shaped by Refugees

Spirituality is about how that inner fire we all have takes shape. Or we might say it's about seeing and living our lives in the context of that 'something' bigger and deeper, letting it 'speak into' our life and shape it. In religious terms spirituality is sometimes beautifully described as 'responding to the touch of God'. That touch of God, if we are attentive to it, enflames us and sets our hearts on fire and as we let it direct our course we ourselves are taken on a journey into deep and lasting intimacy with God. That touch of God is also the voice of our conscience disturbing us and challenging us. Our spirituality is given shape in the very stuff of life - our big and small everyday concerns and endeavours - and not apart from them.

This week is Refugee Week. This was initiated in Australia in 1986 and is now a worldwide observance. Today there are about 65 million people living as refugees in our world, having been forced to flee their homes as a result of fear, persecution and violence. There are many ways of responding to these people and to this mass migration, the endless streams of anguished and fearful people. There are political perspectives and economic rationalisation. There are well-thought-out arguments and emotive arguments which go various ways. But how might the plight of millions of people seeking refuge in our world lead us into a spirituality that is everything that our Christian tradition speaks of.

Let's begin with the word. Scripture has much to say about refugees. We find many texts making it very clear that we are to care for refugees, the 'strangers and foreigners' in our midst as they are referred to. "Do not mistreat foreigners who are living in your land ... love them as you love yourselves," is the Law we find in the Book of Leviticus, and similar counsel is given elsewhere. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we are told to give the foreigners food and clothing (Deuteronomy 10:18-19) and the prophet Zechariah tells us to see "that justice is done, you must show kindness and mercy to one another. Do not oppress foreigners who live among you." (Zechariah 7:9). In the Book of Numbers, we find these words: "I am the Lord and I consider all people the same, whether they are Israelites or foreigners." (Numbers 15:16). Through these texts we are invited into a range of responses from providing basic needs to showing kindness, mercy and love and acting justly. We learn too that all of us are inherently the same. Our humanity is the great leveller! Jesus added something more to these teachings when he said that whatever we do to anyone we do to him. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me," he said (Matthew 25).

These words about how to treat the stranger and the foreigner are at the heart of our social justice teachings. But they do more than set our moral compass. They invite a transformation. They guide us into a way of being. And this is something which has been expressed in our Christian tradition from the earliest centuries. The Rule of St Benedict was written in 516CE by Benedict of Nursia for monks living a communal life under an abbot. Its wisdom and lessons, however, are for all people, not just for those in monastic communities as it contains basic religious and spiritual principles. This little work has something rather profound to say to us today. Faced with the sheer numbers of our world population and the

enormity of the stream of desperate people seeking refuge it can be too easy to distance ourselves and look at them as just so many numbers, statistics. Benedict's words about hospitality, welcome and care invite us instead to see the face of each refugee. He says: "Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received; our very awe of the rich guarantees them special respect." (Chapter 53). And elsewhere he writes: "Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ ... let all kindness be shown them."

A spirituality shaped around such counsel is as much a journey into the self as it is a welcome to those in need. At the heart of the welcome, and alongside the food and drink and the shelter, is an attitude of heart that opens us to others: "Hospitality implies *attentiveness* to the other and to the needs of others, even anticipating their needs," writes Jesuit priest, Gerald Fagin. He goes on to say: "Often our lack of hospitality is simply the failure to notice and acknowledge others and their needs—the needs of the larger world and the needs of those closest to us. Jesus models that attentiveness. He noticed the sick, the excluded, the hungry, those that others passed by. God continues to be attentive. As we contemplate the ministry of Jesus, we are called to heighten our awareness of others so that we can carry on the ministry of Jesus." (*Putting on the Heart of Christ* by Gerald M. Fagin SJ). So hospitality is about transformation - transformation of the lives of others and transformation of us. Perhaps if we were able to become truly attentive to the needs of others much of our dilemma and indeed our rationalization would fall away. How could it stand in the face of the kind of attentiveness we see in Jesus?

Jesus' attentiveness was an 'outward flow' which knew nothing of self-preservation. It invites us to move from asking .and indeed fretting over, 'what they want of us' into something more God-like, humble and real. Gary Smith is a Jesuit who works with refugees in Africa. He tells this story about one particular encounter he had with an old woman, one of the long-suffering mothers in the community and how it caught him by surprise:

"One day, such a mother, Mary Kenyi, came to me. Her old body was covered in a threadbare dress. She often came by, asking for a few beans or some grain and sometimes for a blanket. She has nothing, not even a son or daughter to care for her in her old age. All of her children were killed in the Sudan civil war, along with her husband. I saw her, a long walking stick in hand, coming toward me as I was conversing with a staff member outside our compound. I thought to myself, *perhaps with an edge of irritation*, I wonder what she will be asking for today? She carried a small plastic bag and handed it to me, giving me a smile that would capture the heart of the most heartless. In the bag was a gift for me. Three eggs." (From *They Come Back Singing: Finding God with the Refugees*).

Well, haven't we all been taken by surprise like that! This journey into attentiveness of others' needs really calls us to let go of that often fear-filled clinging to what we see as our self-preservation. It is a spirituality which is at home with the warp and woof of life, generous in the space it gives to others, and trusting in an abundant goodness which is for all of us.

Andy Otto is a spiritual writer for the Ignatian Spirituality website and his words capture the heart of this spirituality and the transformation asked of us:

“Imagine making a reservation at a five-star restaurant. When you show up, the owner comes out and says to you, “Come and dine! But there will be no cost for you!” I think most of us would love receiving a free meal, but we may be suspicious of the owner. Perhaps it’s a ploy to get us to return. But what if we learn that the owner’s generosity is out of genuine goodness and that there are no strings attached?

At the Easter Vigil we heard God’s generous invitation in Isaiah: “You who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” (55:1). God offers us a model of hospitality we are called to offer others ... Joyce Meyer once said that being Christian means generosity without expecting something in return. If someone asks you to help him move you say yes not to save up a favour from that person for the future, but because you’re Christian! You give and keep no ledger of favours given or owed.

But how can we, as believers, respond affirmatively to God’s invitation to dine without cost if we ourselves do not offer the same generosity to our fellow creatures? God offers a model of generous giving not for some distant reward, but so that God’s love can flow out joyfully to others through our human relationships. You and I are a part of a divine plan of generous hospitality.”

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