

## **A Christian Response to Contemporary Refugee Issues**

Another leaky boat washes up on the shore. Another group of refugees step out and claim asylum. But they don't look like us. They speak an alien language. It turns out that they follow a "different" (read "threatening") religion, and they seek a new life in "our" country. This is followed by (yet another) alarmist media story, another debate about appropriate responses. Words like "illegals", "wave", and "armada" are sprinkled about, like olives on a pizza.

Scenario all too familiar? It will be if you live in the West.

### *Background*

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of refugees in the world today (including those internally displaced in their home countries) currently stands at around 43 million. These include people fleeing persecution in circumstances outlined in the *1951 Refugee Convention*, and millions of others fleeing poverty, climate change, or simply looking for a better life. Whatever the reason, finding and achieving durable solutions for tens of millions of people on the move is a gargantuan challenge, beyond the will or capacity of any single government or agency.

The plight of refugees is a highly emotive and politicised issue. At one end of the continuum are those who see people smuggling as a national security crisis, to be confronted vigorously, by tough military responses if necessary. At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that anyone should be admitted if they are genuine refugees, or claim to be such, and turn up at our doorstep. Politicians, advocates and community leaders all have opinions and agendas; they are frequently at loggerheads. Selfish individualism permeates a lot of current thinking.

If you live in the West, you will be aware of how much space people smuggling and other forms of irregular people movement occupy in political thinking and strategizing. In Europe, North America and Australia, for the most part, communities take opposite (often trenchant) sides on the issue, even though overall numbers of those reaching the West are relatively small.

In many parts of Asia and Africa borders are more porous and people crossing them in search of security, food or fleeing persecution or war number in the millions and there is little that governments can do.

This is not the first time (nor will it be the last) that human tragedy or people movements have agitated settled communities. I once talked to a senior official in the Middle East who told me that his country had been "a land bridge for thousands of years", but that he was more interested in combatting illegal guns and drug smuggling. Another, who believed the doors of his country should be firmly shut, told me that, "They do not have our blood; they will never be one of us. I don't care where they go. They are not welcome back".

### *Is there a sustainable “Christian” position on refugee questions?*

Does the Christian community have an objective view about what should be done to or for refugees? After all, some argue, wasn't Jesus a refugee at one stage (his family fled for safety to Egypt when he was a toddler, after murderous threats from King Herod; see Matthew 2)? Should we get involved?

This is easier said than done. Given that many Christians uncritically adopt and echo prevailing public sentiments, without thinking too deeply about the substantive matters, faith communities in the West are divided along roughly the same fault lines as their secular neighbours and preferred political leaders. Comparatively little is being said publicly by church leaders. That is hardly a satisfactory reality.

Christians, as both citizens and the People of God need to influence the discourse around how to treat strangers who end up in our midst, rather than being caught up in the xenophobic rhetoric (“This is *our* country; they should all go back to where they came from.”) that all too often characterises the first line public responses.

What does the Bible have to say? How does it sit with the current “tide” of record numbers of refugees crossing national boundaries and seeking asylum?

Since the birth of the modern nation state, creation of borders, passports, political parties, state-based conflicts and domestic economies, national governments have increasingly asserted their right to determine who should be entitled to live within their geographical boundaries, and the conditions under which they do so. This approach resonates. After all, Christians are honour bound to recognise and submit to their governments.

But what about times when Christians ought to resist bad social policy? Or strive to change it. Is this one of those times? Christians ought to be at the forefront of addressing policies that are inimical to the poor, the dispossessed, the vulnerable, those without a voice. (It is too easy to become indifferent to poverty and injustice.)

### *Who is my neighbour?*

Jesus' parable about the Good Samaritan infers (among other things) that those who live among us should be treated by us as our neighbours, and that, as Christians, we owe it to them to extend the compassion of Christ to their circumstances. It is ironic, but true, that many people who form the mainstay of our communities are like the priest and Levi in Jesus' parable, who wanted nothing to do with the injured man; only a stranger was willing to extend the hand of friendship. I believe one of the points Jesus was making was that when it comes to other people, irrespective of their identity or status, the appropriate reaction for a Christian is to go above and beyond and practice love in action (love without action is no love at all). The fact that it was a Samaritan who extended generosity in this case underscores the Biblical principle that, as Christians, we should seek to “do good to all people” (Galatians 6:10). The grace of God teaches us to do justice to the downtrodden and abused.

Let us never become so comfortable and so biased that we distance ourselves from the right response. If the love of Christ compels us, motivates us (2 Corinthians 5:14), we need to get involved. Jesus would see a refugee in a boat as an individual made in the image of God, valuable to Him and in need of redemption.

I am not enunciating here a single, categorical answer to the debate, which is complex, but will do my utmost, as a Christian in society, to urge leaders to act out of humanity in addressing the phenomenon.

### *Refugee arrivals are opportunities*

The settlement of refugees (those who make it) in countries that have a significant Christian influence creates realities that might be recognized as God-directed.

A Biblical world view is not restricted by national boundaries when it comes to sharing the practical goodness of God and the many material blessings he has extended to us. The ancient Israelites were commanded to be generous and to look after the “strangers” (immigrants) in their midst, because God cared for them (Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Leviticus 19:10, 33, 34, Psalm 146:9, Zechariah 7:10).

Throughout history, ethnic differences and social exclusivity have led to strangers being feared, rejected or ghettoised, or blamed for societies’ ills, taking jobs, living on welfare, consuming tax dollars, needing ongoing support, not fitting in, or spreading disease. We need to be very careful, as Christians, that we are not taken hostage by nationalistic or particularistic biases, but that we keep an open hand of welcome to all in need. The spirit of Christ will be a beacon in an intensely negative debate.

Let’s face it, most of us live in an amazing period, with access to unprecedented opportunities and resources. I will never fully understand why I was born into a tiny percentage of the world population that is so prosperous and has so much going for it. If we have freely received, we need to be prepared to give freely as well. Moreover, most of us (in Australia) enjoy peace and security, democratic freedoms, a high standard of education and good jobs, which we should never take for granted. God help us never to lose sight of the hundreds of millions of men, women and children who live in poverty, disadvantage and political uncertainty.

I have spent considerable time in countries where Christian missionaries are not welcome. In scores of other nations (some of which I have also visited), it is illegal, and often dangerous, to preach the Gospel. So, if missionary access is restricted, how neat of God and circumstances to bring thousands of people from those societies into our communities, where they can make genuine Christian friends and be exposed to the Gospel in life. The Koran specifically warns Muslims against making friends with (Christians), but in my view everyone needs friends and those barriers usually do not exist, for practical purposes. I have had the privilege of meeting refugees who have come to personal faith in Jesus Christ and linked into local churches after arriving in the West.

Never underestimate the potential to reach the unreachable when they arrive on our shores. Not every Muslim refugee comes with an agenda of introducing *sharia* law and turning the nation into a new caliphate; I would hazard a guess that none does. But they all need to hear the Gospel, in language they can understand.

Getting involved with refugees creates opportunities for learning about new beliefs and cultural mores, that can inform and enable us to reach our world better.

*How can we make a difference?*

As I read media reporting about refugees and try to pick my thinking between arguments at both ends of the scale, I cannot help an impression forming that many of those with strident opinions are not actually involved – they just want to voice their prejudices. If Christians are intended to be lights in the darkness, and advocates for God's love and justice, the plight of refugees will enable their witness to be very bright indeed. As long as they turn knowledge into action and get involved.

It is time for action. Here are some suggestions about where you can start.

Ask the Holy Spirit to keep your thinking in check, so that you can see refugees as He does (Matthew 9:36). Right acting begins with right thinking.

How about spending some time as a volunteer in a refugee camp? Or supporting government initiatives to do more for reception and settlement of refugees.

Establish contact with a refugee support or settlement group, either through your church or local community organisations. Ask God to develop compassion in your heart for those you meet. Determine to show genuine acceptance and friendship. That man you meet, who just came off a boat, or crossed a border in the back of a pick-up truck, is a person in his own right; he is someone's son, brother, husband or father, not just a nameless number, or a "queue jumper". Learn what you can about his (or her) country of origin, religious system and values. Pray and seek opportunities to offer Christian pastoral care (this will be easier to achieve if the encounter is via a Christian organization). To the extent that you are able, offer practical assistance. Getting involved in a volunteer group, to reach out to refugees, will convert the nameless human being in front of you into a person with a background, a story to tell, aspirations. Be part of building their future.

Inform your friends about what is going on in the world, what push factors exist that make people start the journey in the first place. Oppose prejudice, xenophobia and fear of the "other" wherever you find them. Within your social circle, be prepared to take prejudices head on and reflect the age-old standard, "What would Jesus do in this situation?" (He would not turn a blind eye and hope that "someone else will fix it".) As much as you do for refugees, you do for him (Matthew 25).

Why do I feel so strongly about this subject? Because I am a Christian, I have spent time in refugee camps in Africa and Asia, and I care.