

Refugee week

This past week was Refugee Week in Australia and it seems to me that it has passed with hardly any fanfare at all. And I wonder why that should be. It could be that we are heartily sick of special days and weeks, but part of me wonders if we in Australia are not a little embarrassed by refugees. After all, we have been fed for a number of years now with the demonization of asylum seekers, most of whom, turn out to be legitimate refugees.

And as the election cycle cranks up “boat people”, “illegal aliens” loom yet again as a political football, with the major parties vying with each other for the toughest treatment of these desperate people who are often regarded as a threat to the very existence of our country. This hysteria about boat people, so the leader of the opposition says, will unfortunately be made a central “attack weapon” in the coming election.

And one of the most-heard criticism of the “boat people” is still that they are queue jumpers! There are no queues! The processing of refugee cases is complex, and to liken it waiting in a bus queue is ridiculous. So let’s look at the “queue.” Some of the Bhutanese living here in Launceston had been in the “queue” for seventeen years! Now I don’t know about you, but a seventeen year stay in a primitive refugee camp in Nepal is hardly a queue. The same circumstances exist all over Africa, and South East Asia, where fleeing refugees are told to spend years in squalid refugee camps as they wait for the rich western powers to determine their fate. If it were me I’d be on a leaky boat in an attempt to determine my own fate rather than wait for others to get around to it.

But let’s look at this “threat to national security.” In recent years Australia has seen the influx of a few thousand of the fifteen million refugees worldwide. In the main these people have been traumatised by the effects of brutal warfare. And their welcome to Australia is characterised by internment into detention centres. And whilst the popular wisdom is that this will “show these boat people” that they will not be rewarded for their efforts, it obviously does not work. And any way if that is our justification for detention centres then perhaps we should make them as bad as the situations they are fleeing.

As I See It, with a hardening of attitudes towards asylum seekers, fuelled in part by political posturing and media hype, it is incumbent on Christians to proclaim the message of Christ. Where is our compassion for these traumatised people? Will incarcerating them in detention centres described by Australian of the year, Prof. Patrick McGorry as “factories for producing mental illness and mental disorder,” do anything to improve their wellbeing?

And how about these questions from Scripture for us all :

“Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When was that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you,

Pilgrim Uniting Church

As I See It

and naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick and in prison and visited you?"

When indeed!

Tony would be more than happy to chat about the above article.

Rev Tony Duncan

27 June 2010

pilgrim.tony@tassie.net.au