



Syrian refugees strike at the platform of Budapest Keteti railway station. Refugee crisis. Budapest, Hungary, Central Europe. 4 September 2015

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

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The tidal wave of humanity arriving by boats, lorries and by foot into Europe seeking sanctuary from the devastation of war and famine is gut wrenching to watch from a distance. The political and cultural boundaries are shifting, while overwhelming need confounds us. Yet we are called to respond as the Good Samaritan did to the stranger that is on our path.

When we read Jesus arrived by boat to Gennesaret (*Mark 6:53-56*) he is confronted by an overwhelming throng of sick people who want healing from him. On the western side of Lake Galilee nearest to Jerusalem and closest to orthodoxy, there are a lot of sick people. However Mark records this great crowd confronting Jesus for help with the religious leaders confronting Jesus over his disciples' failure to follow the orthodox practice of handwashing (*Mark 7:1-8*). They are worried not out of concern for the hygiene of the sick but over the ritual handwashing in order to remain religiously pure. They are immobilised by the religious and cultural boundaries and miss seeing the need of the sick crowd who seek help.

"Handwashing" has many layers to it for people of faith and for people who carry responsibility in civic and political life. Are we worried over the real issues of our time or are we preoccupied with appearances only? Could our cultural

habits and thinking immobilise us from attending to the mission in our community or in our world?

Washing was on the Darwin TV news a few years ago. I was watching a Northern Territory Aboriginal priest washing visitors' heads at a billabong. Knowing there were crocodiles in that area I wondered what this "washing" of non Aboriginal people was really about. They were non Aboriginal outsiders who wanted to do research in Arnhemland. The priest was the first Aboriginal woman in her community to be ordained, which traditionally would have only been exercised by men. In this washing ritual she exercised a priestly leadership in helping outsiders to engage the spiritual in the place and a traditional responsibility to welcome people whom she did not know into her country. She conveyed her authority with dignity, gentleness and with an acute reading for what was needed in that occasion where two worlds collided.

Effective leadership will not readily have answers for complex moments but good leadership will help transcend the divisions of people by making a way for genuine shared understanding in order for the common good to be achieved. The recent Diocesan Convention and Leaders' Conference introduced people and clergy to the way we may speak

together on the matters that capture our vocation and ministry and set out how we may make a way forward into a healthy future.

Potent tradition anchored in Christ which includes ritual will do that too. However when orthodoxy (right believing) is preoccupied with social conformity while confronted by suffering then orthopraxis (right acting) will not offer transformative acts of mercy and justice. I am very pleased that parish communities are seeking to develop ritual that enables survivors of abuse to find expression in liturgy and give voice to their stories.

Mark's gospel records Jesus as a person of his Jewish faith, time and of his country, yet he is not captured by his tradition. The first half of Mark's Gospel takes place in Galilee with the Sea of Galilee at its centre. Jesus and his disciples in Mark 4:35 embark on the first of several journeys to the "other side" of this Sea. Everything east of the Jordan River is Gentile territory, symbolising everything alien and hostile to the Jewish population west of the Sea. The crossings in Mark's gospel emphasise that despite the "otherness" of these people, Jesus' ministry is to bring the liberating Good News to the "other side".

In Jesus' day outward conformity to the tradition had disconnected itself



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from the spirituality which was found in responsive hearts to the God of Abraham, Moses and Isaac. Prophets had emerged in the earlier history of Israel to remind them of God who seeks responsive hearts. The prophet Micah (*Micah 6:8*) said God isn't interested in extravagant religious ceremonies when there is no mercy, justice and humility. This is why Jesus said to the Pharisees and scribes, "You abandoned the commandment of God and hold to human tradition" (*Mark 7:8*). When the "form" of religion no longer mediates the spirit which brought it into being then ritual purity no longer provides wisdom or health. When what we believe is disconnected from how we live, we subvert the very thing we say we are upholding.

In traditional remote Aboriginal communities practices can emerge that uncouple ritual from the spirit by exercising destructive power over others. Usually in times when men have lost status and respect, ritual becomes the means for reasserting authority by calling upon curses, sorcery, punishment and expulsion when someone fails to follow tradition. On my many visits to Aboriginal communities I encountered great faith by local leaders but heard ongoing concern over dealing with curses in communities under stress.

In shaping a healthy future in Newcastle Diocese we have been on a journey to recognise the abuse within traditional leadership and to allow conversations which ensure integrity in our church and ministry. Such historic abuse wasn't because of tradition but because an environment within that tradition

allowed people to breach sexual boundaries and they were protected when they committed these heinous crimes against children.

St Augustine described sin as *incurvatus in se* – "a turning in on one's self". Rather than opening up to God and to the Spirit at work, people turn inwards and away from what brings life with God. Communities and cultures also may turn in on themselves to protect from all kinds of external threat, but inevitably such defensive posture may lead to greater decline because the culture hasn't allowed itself to be examined and tested for authenticity.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Sexual Abuse of Children has been the necessary God-inspired circuit breaker on institutional culture that has refused to be examined and remained resistant to those who have been the most vulnerable in our society. I hope its search will include the current treatment of asylum seeker children in detention centres.

Richard Rohr contemplative and activist said "We don't think ourselves into a new way of living; we live ourselves into a new way of thinking". It begins in the heart that either we desire to live life with God's love or we turn to self justification for the hates and harms we wish to perpetrate on those who are not like us - First Australians, migrants, asylum seekers and abuse survivors among them.

In Jesus' life we see someone who brings the Good News across his religious, social and cultural landscape. He is the one who can cross the boundaries while not destroying the identity of people or harming the

community, but liberating people to live as children of God. He had a responsive compassion to stand with people in their plight.

As a community of faith, may we continue to face the past and shape a healthy future by crossing the boundaries that close us off from the Spirit of God or draw us away from the deep work of life in Christ.

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