

Declare Peace on Refugees

Palm Sunday 13 April 2014
Hyde Park North, Sydney

WE ARE VICTIMISING ASYLUM SEEKERS

We all know what scapegoating is.¹ You blame someone else for your troubles, you victimise something or someone, hopefully get rid of it, and so get things your own way and come to some sort of peace for a while. Individuals do it, and so do groups, large and small. Even nations. Scapegoating a very old practice and can be found in all societies, ancient and modern. It's the stuff of literature.

Australia is conducting a major scapegoating episode. By locking asylum seekers up, refusing them entry, pushing them off onto other countries, we are making them victims, sacrificed on the altar of a narrow interpretation of 'National Security' and 'Sovereignty'.

But the trouble with scapegoating is that its cover has been blown. It just doesn't work any more because it is increasingly obvious that victims are innocent. Most people worldwide can recognise the self-serving trickery of setting up scapegoats. Since it has been realised that the quintessential victim, Jesus, was innocent, the world has been growing conscious of the inherent innocence of all victims.

The people now on Manus Island and Nauru are the victims of Australia. It's no use just talking about "Government" when we know that the political parties we vote in to govern, have opted for the easier, voter-friendly approach. We keep voting for these people; in fact, the majority of Australians agree with the current hard-line stand.

There have to be other ways of dealing with the problems of people smugglers, deaths at sea, relationships in the region. It doesn't matter how hard the asylum seeker problem is. It doesn't matter how huge are the problems that have to be solved. That's life. Life is difficult.

What does matter is that innocent human beings are being locked up for indeterminate periods of time as a deterrent to others. And we put the onus on them to solve it all by returning to the danger from which they escaped. This cannot be allowed to continue.

It is simply morally wrong to victimise the innocent, to treat as criminals persons who claim to be in fear for their safety. It is morally wrong, no matter how successful it may be.

Australia's victimisation of asylum seekers is reducing us, as a people. We are rank hypocrites. We treat these people as criminals whereas they have broken no laws, while all the time *we* are the ones who thumb our collective nose at the Refugee Convention, and thumb our nose at basic human decency.

We in Australia should be acutely aware that it is possible for any person, group, church or nation to stray from its basic principles and moral foundations. Our nation's structures are built on the Judeo-Christian ethic of the fundamental dignity of human beings. It has often been breached, but remains basic to our structures. It is being attacked by the severity with which asylum seekers are treated. It is being eroded by the refusal of Australia to abide by international agreements.

¹ There are numerous books by René Girard and James Alison where they develop insights into scapegoating and victimization.

So on the one hand we have the fact of the gradual awakening of humanity to the innocence of victims, and on the other we have Australia actually using people who have committed no crime as victims. The only way these two opposites can be held together is by a process of self-deception, simple deceit, by pretending that it is right to imprison the innocent, that locking up children is necessary for a greater good, to trumpet 'the saving of people from drowning' as the reason, when everyone knows that that is only a by-product.

Stupidly, we then imagine that by some miracle our character as a generally fair-minded and generous people will not be affected by the cruel, underhanded violence we are inflicting on weak and vulnerable others. We need to be very concerned about what our behaviour is doing to our identity.

You and I are part of the conscience of Australia. We must continue to stand and speak for these people, who have done no wrong. We must think, and read, and teach. We must respond with ingenuity and courage to Australian Governments and their media drivers. We must not lose heart.

However, the worst thing we can do is to perpetuate the cycle of victimisation. That means, we can't afford to make the same errors politicians make by turning around and victimising *them*. Don't victimise the victimisers. Otherwise we reduce the situation to one of feeding an endless cycle of pathetic point-scoring.

We must engage with decision-makers and opponents, in season and out of season, in civilised and respectful terms. There are good people in Government, on all political sides. What we must do is focus on facts, on humanity, on truth, transparency and goodness. That sort of strength is a match for the deepest moral darkness and can pierce the thickest of parliamentary hot air.

The asylum seeker question is not fundamentally about borders, security, media power, the next election or political trickery. It's about human beings, the rights of people everywhere to seek safety, and human dignity, including ours. It's about our human obligation and capacity to put ourselves in others' shoes, and as Pope Francis has said,² to be able to weep. We weep for asylum seekers. And we weep for Australia and what it risks becoming.

Susan Connelly RSJ
13.04.2014

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"...let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty in the world, in ourselves, and even in those who anonymously make socio-economic decisions that open the way to tragedies like this. "Who has wept?" Who in today's world has wept?" Pope Francis, 08.07.2013
[http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/07/08/pope_on_lampedusa: "the_globalization_of_indifference"/en1-708541](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/07/08/pope_on_lampedusa:)