

Why is the issue of refugees such an intractable issue in our world? Can a small group of Brigidines scattered across the world make a difference? What's it got to do with being a disciple of Jesus?

Our personal identity has various and coloured strands. And so does our communal identity, including that of Brigidine and Christian.

My own ancestry is from the Highlands of Scotland and the West coast of Ireland. The stories of the clearances and Bonnie Prince Charlie that my mother's Aunty Mary told us filled me as a child with a huge sense of indignation. This was fuelled by being taught British history (with an Irish slant) by Mother Bernard O'Mahoney. She related stories of the Black and Tans very vividly.

For us as Brigidines, the hagiography surrounding St Brigid and learning more over time about the reasons for the beginning of the Brigidines in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland have all had some impact on our sense of identity. In Australia, we have stories like the Eureka Stockade in 1854 Ballarat, where the diggers under the improvised Eureka flag vowed "We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties". Our Irish connections give most of us a sense of satisfaction in the music of Boolavogue and the poetry such as 'The Croppies' from Seamus Heaney.

There's something in the dna of the Christian that responds to all people being treated decently and getting a 'fair go'! And for most of us this has been reinforced by our own history. Jesus was none too subtle about the injustices and awful systems in place in his relatively small world. He told stories to jolt the conventional thinking of his listeners, to take them beyond the stereotypes they were used to hearing. So he tells an everyday story about a traveller being ambushed but brings to it the surprise element that the rescuer is the enemy who goes totally beyond what could be expected in offering assistance.

Jesus' vision was for the coming of the Kingdom of God where situations of inequality are transformed and a new order is restored.

As Brigidines we have spent a lot of time and psychic energy pondering issues of justice. I often meet people who say "Brigidines have always been on about justice!" This is of course a quest that never ends and, no matter our age or number, we can but keep trying. Justice always includes empathy (the capacity to stand in the shoes of another) and solidarity (the capacity to walk with another).

So to the reality of our world where over 70 million people are displaced from their homes; two thirds of all Syrians have had to flee for their lives, and places like Afghanistan and Somalia have years and years of bloodshed and mayhem. 5.3 Palestinians are still displaced 70 years later from Israel.

We in Australia feel a great sense of shame that our country has led the way in very draconian ways of treating people seeking asylum here. In fact, of course, we are not being overrun by anyone – in fact 80% of the world refugees are in developing countries such as Jordan, Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh.

We have come to define asylum seekers as a problem of security rather than a humanitarian challenge and in fact as a country we are a leader in repelling asylum seekers. Public discussions rarely highlight rights and responsibilities and justice or the dignity of each person – no matter who they are. There is a kind of strange dislocation between what we know of the history of the trouble spots of the world and the people who flee those places. Indeed, in Australia we get a discourse that usually seems to see our country as an island quarantined from any responsibility.

We have seen the slow normalisation of things that should never be seen as normal. We have laws of indefinite detention for people who have come to Australia by boat (there was no other means of coming) and denying any income support to most whose application for refugee status are being processed.

We have detained people in Australia but worse we have detained them in off shore camps on Nauru and Manus Island (Papua New Guinea). As I write this, 4 refugees from Manus Island and 24 from Nauru are flying to the USA via South Korea. The 24 Nauru refugees include Pakistanis, Rohingyas, Sudanese, Somalis and 1 Tamil. They are destined for different cities and states in America, including Chicago, Philadelphia, Texas and California. They are finally being resettled almost seven years after seeking asylum in Australia. It has taken three and a half years since the USA deal was first announced, in November 2016 for this group of refugees to finally be resettled. And there are people still waiting. How can we send people where there is virtually no risk of contracting covid 19 to a country where the risk of infection is still high and the chance of getting a job practically non-existent? And why are they not here in Australia, rebuilding their lives

At the present time, refugees are among the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. This is true even in an affluent country like Australia. As a Congregation we have been

involved in all the places we live in doing something to help. For this we can feel proud. There is much more to do before the fight for equality and justice is over. We can help asylum seekers and refugees practically with housing, food, education and friendship. If we can't do this personally, we can do so by helping those who directly offer such assistance. We can try to change the narrative by challenging the myths that refugees are dangerous, that they take our jobs and our money, that they pose a threat to our way of life.



***I was a stranger and you made me  
welcome...***

**Current assistance offered by BASP to  
asylum seekers: May 2020**

Assisted with housing (providing a house or  
a room, or paying rent) 246 people

Giving emergency relief money to people:  
\$95,000 to approximately 300 people

This is beyond our capacity to continue  
long term but there is no current alternative  
support for those we are helping. We give a  
big thank you to Brigidines and all others  
who make donations to the Project.

And lastly, it is good to discuss the issue of  
refugees, but we must do this in human terms.  
We can talk numbers but behind every number  
is a human face ...a real person with hopes and  
dreams, people who are basically just like us.  
And that should be the issue.

**And we can and do make a difference as we  
do our bit to flesh out the dream of Jesus for  
a decent world for everyone.**