

A Scriptural Reflection on Migrants: Solidarity, Hope and Hospitality

THE VULNERABILITY related to human migration today is an important concern of people of faith. Given the scope of biblical history, it is not surprising that this theme also emerges often in the pages of Scripture. Indeed, the two great “crises” of the Old Testament, the exodus and the exile, focus on this theme. Joseph’s family moves to Egypt to escape a famine, but as time passes their vulnerability in a foreign land is underlined by their enslavement. The exodus is God’s way of intervening so as to draw the people of Israel back to their home and their land.

Much of the Law of Moses, drawing on this exodus experience of freedom from slavery in a foreign land, is rooted in an awareness of such vulnerability. Time and again the people of Israel are reminded that they may not do wrong to aliens amongst them, “for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21). Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are full of such statutes.

The issues of migration and vulnerability are even more central to the exile in Babylon that becomes such a crucible for re-defining Israel as a religious community. The lament of those Jews taken into captivity strikes a very contemporary note: “By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion... How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:1-4). And the great songs of joy that accompany the return from exile to Jerusalem bear witness to the pain of being driven from one’s home and familiar places.

A third, and perhaps most striking image, is of the holy family hastily fleeing to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod (Matthew 2:14). From the emotional highpoint of the visit to the Magi, we can only imagine the sheer crisis into which Joseph, Mary and Jesus were thrown by becoming refugees. But this sojourn in Egypt is a powerful narrative of the connection between God-in-Christ and the vulnerability of so many of the world’s migrant people, exiles and refugees.

Three important insights related to solidarity, hope and hospitality emerge as we allow these central biblical stories to throw light onto this contemporary human experience of suffering. The first is the awareness that the Bible engages with this kind of human suffering, and that the revelation of God’s word is found in the midst of it. God does not abandon those whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by such forced migration, but journeys with them, and He is found in the midst of their vulnerability.

Second, though it seems hard to express it, the biblical witness reminds us that we cannot lose hope. From the depths of despair, of “weeping when we remembered Zion,” Isaiah sounds the trumpet of hope as he announces the return: “those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:3 1). Perhaps hope remains the last and yet most powerful weapon that the Christian faith can share in such times.

Finally, as the Law of Moses saw so clearly, there is an ethical command rooted in the experience of such vulnerability. The solidarity of God in the midst of such suffering, together with the hope rooted in the Gospel, must find concrete expression in the hospitality extended by the people of faith towards the aliens amongst us: “For by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2)

Professor S. de Gruch,
Director of Theology Program
University of Natal, South Africa



Today's migration makes up the vastest movement of people of all times. In these last decades, the phenomenon, now involving about two hundred million individuals, has turned into a structural reality of contemporary society. It is becoming an increasingly complex problem from the social, cultural, political, religious, economic and pastoral points of view. Some causes of today's migration phenomenon are globalization, demographic changes especially in the countries that were industrialized first, increase in inequality between North and South, the proliferation of conflicts and civil wars. Emigration causes grave difficulties for individuals, particularly women and children, as well as for families. Such a phenomenon raises the ethical problem of establishing a new international economic order with a more equitable distribution of the goods of the earth, in which the international community is considered a family of peoples whose relations are governed by International Law.

The Love of Christ towards Migrants,

Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2004

Discussion

What part of the Scriptures speaks to you about migrants and refugees? What does the passage call up for you?

Why is it appropriate to keep migrants in our thoughts and prayers during this time of the year?

Why do you think that there are several passages in the both the Old and New Testaments that relate to migration, flight, the situation of being strangers in the land?

Why are these themes so much a part of the Christian faith?

How does the quote above, from a Vatican council, relate to the reflection on Solidarity, Hope and Hospitality?

What are some of the main reasons the Pontifical Council perceives as the causes of the current situation, which represents the largest migration in human history?

Why is Catholic Social Teaching concerned with the root causes of social problems such as migration?

What questions do we need to continue asking to be faithful to the call for justice and peace for all, including the millions of migrants around the world?

LITANY OF THE DISPLACED:

God of all people,
We bring before you all who work for the fullness of justice,
All who long for the widening of welcome
To which your Gospel calls us.

RESPONSE: Open hearts, open arms, open doors in welcome!

Displaced God.
Born in flight to parents anxious and weary,
Born anew in those who flee oppression,
leaving home and loved ones behind,
And staking their lives on the hope of abundant life,
we pray:

RESPONSE: Open hearts, open arms, open doors in welcome!

Journeying God,
Turned away over and over again
By our world's collective fear of the stranger, we pray:

RESPONSE: Open hearts, open arms, open doors in welcome!

Uprooted God,
Suspended in the endless uncertainty
that is the daily life of the migrant,
we pray:

RESPONSE: Open hearts, open arms, open doors in welcome!

Waiting God,
Waiting today with all who suffer separation
from home and the familiar,
Waiting for safe return,
Waiting for war's end,
Waiting for justice to be restored, we pray:

RESPONSE: Open hearts, open arms, open doors in welcome!

God of all people,
Stir us to holy anger over the wounds of our world.
Move us to action for justice
Until the fullness of welcome is fulfilled in our midst
And the problems that cause migration--the poverty, the fear, and the suffering--
Are confronted by all people of good will
And transformed by the power of compassion.
Amen!

Adapted from Chris Koellhoffer, IHM



Suggestions for Action

1. Volunteer to assist migrants in your community. Contact your local churches or ecumenical organizations, Catholic Charities, and local social service agencies to see what you can do to help refugees.
2. Invite migrants living in your area to share their stories with your group. Start a study group to learn more about migration and its causes
3. Check with the organizations below for more information on their advocacy suggestions to help ensure just policies for migrants.

Further Resources

Jesuit Refugee Service
USA National Office
1616 P Street, NW Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036-1405
Tel: 202-462-0400
<http://www.jesref.org/>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Department of Migration and Refugee Services
3211 4th Street, NE
Washington, DC 20017
Tel: 202-541-3000
<http://www.usccb/mrs/index.htm>

National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
310 8th Street, Suite 303
Oakland, CA 94607
Tel: 510-465-1984
<http://www.nnirr.org>

Refugees International
1705 N Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202-828-0110
<http://www.refintl.org>

