

Faith and public policy

Francis Sullivan April 17, 2025

Easter is as good a time as any to be reminded that Christianity has a contribution in the formulation of public policy.

An emphasis on values and virtues will go a long way in ensuring that our social fabric remains strong. Helping shape the public conscience is never redundant. Our challenge is to place mercy and truth at the head of the queue when considering the promotion of social order and security.

From its outset, Christianity has attempted to engage the prevailing culture with a deep humanism based on compassion and justice. It has fumbled these attempts at times, but overall it has left the dual markers of the preservation of human dignity and the promotion of the common good as the litmus test for a decent society. The upshot has been the promotion of more inclusive and co-operative communities that have had an eye to the downtrodden and disadvantaged.

Today's Christians would do well to reclaim the "Jesus movement" of its origins as the pathway for these disruptive and unsettled times. Following the message of Jesus is less about church attendance and more about building communities of compassion and justice. It is concerned with deeply humanistic bonds that make solidarity the touchstone of human relations, even international relations.

It is finding a language of companionship when others seek to fuel division through culture wars and identity politics. It is fostering inclusion, rather than building barriers of entry based on race, ethnicity or gender. It is standing alongside those marginalised and rendered powerless by fear campaigns and scapegoating. It is constructing coalitions of like-minded aspiration to improve the lot of everyone, not just the beneficiaries of an ideology.

And here's the thing, it is forever a work in progress. A case in point is the plight of refugees.

Every Palm Sunday, crowds gather across Australia to stand up for refugees. This year, the numbers who assembled outside the ACT Parliament seemed bigger than the year before. That, in itself, is a healthy recognition that even if the political class want the refugee issue out of sight and mind, ordinary Australians are motivated by something deeper and more transcendent than political expediency. They came from all walks of life, backgrounds and beliefs. They came with a passion for change; a hunger to set things right for refugees. They marched through the city streets chanting "refugees are welcome here" as patrons

went about their shopping and basked in the unseasonal Canberra sunshine in cafés and bars. They shared a determination to advocate for those who can't, for those who are too easily forgotten, for those for whom the Easter message was written.

The treatment of refugees by our country is still a disgrace. In a world where the attitude of the US president is making meanness the determinant of public policy, the plight of people seeking asylum looks grim. Political pragmatists will keep consigning refugee policy to the "too hard basket". Politicians of the "near left" will see no electoral gains in overt support for refugees. So it falls to a different form of leadership based on mercy, not expediency.

The human spirit instinctively recognises mercy as the essence of itself. To act unmercifully renders us to be less than our better selves. Today we need to raise our eyes beyond the interests of our families and close friends and stretch the boundaries of social responsibility to those isolated from any social and familial support.

This starts with an admission that it has been convenient for us to have the refugee issue "out of sight and mind". The discomfort of our collective inaction is too stark to face, so it has been far easier to turn a blind eye or find consolation in believing that refugee issues are too intractable to solve harmoniously. Once acknowledged, then we need to remove the yoke of prejudice and racism placed on the shoulders of asylum-seekers. This will take moral courage. And that fortitude is grounded in a certainty that what is in the interests of human decency is in the interests of us all.

And alongside mercy comes truth.

The treatment of asylum-seekers and those arriving by boat has been shrouded in secrecy. The costs of detention and the human costs for those on temporary visas are hidden from public view. The disproportionate amount of resources spent to keep a lid on the "refugee issue" is a scandal. On the other hand, the economic value of the contribution of recent overseas arrivals, especially in regional communities, needs more emphasis. A more transparent public conversation based on facts is sorely needed to ameliorate misinformation and "fake news" campaigns.

Lastly, mercy and truth in action leads to community. The tolerance and open-heartedness of Australians for asylum-seekers needs road testing. The tabloid press has jawboned politicians into believing that refugees take jobs from Australians and are a drain on the social security system. Again, transparency and "fact checking" may well tell a different, more generous, story.

Some public policy issues require a resolve beyond the electoral cycle. Some have a moral heft that compels persistence. All have an obligation to seek justice. Our refugee policy awaits the response of our better angels. The Easter message tells us that we can rise to meet this challenge.

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