



Mercy Advocacy

Changing Structures - Is it only writing letters?

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When we are experiencing the joy of Easter, how do we bring it together with the harshness of the task of working for justice alongside people whose lives are consumed by cycles of violence, who are wrongly imprisoned or accused. The prophet Isaiah may help us to stand willingly with them and begin again:

*God has anointed me
To proclaim liberty to captives,
Release to prisoners.*

*To announce a year of favour
To comfort those who mourn,
To give them the oil of gladness
And share a mantle of joy
God has anointed me.*

Maybe another perspective on justice is seeking to share a mantle of joy. That sounds poetic. Then why this constant harping on changing structures or writing to politicians asking questions? A brief look at what we mean by structures may help. On the most basic level in the lives of a group of people structures are approved patterns of behaviour. The more they are surrounded by law or enforcement of any kind, the more powerful they become. To offend against these patterns, whether the group is small or an entire nation, means to become marginalised. Structures are often obvious in their organization for shared useful purposes, for example safety procedures, trade regulations etc. But even simple ones, merely patterns of given behaviour, are so deeply entrenched in us, become so powerful, that they can help us hide ourselves from reality.

Some of the wisdom of the past may help sharpen our eyes. Phillip Berrigan, speaking of American society in the 1970's, said: "The poor show us who we are, the prophets tell us who we could be. So we hide the poor and kill the prophets." But it was a shock at that time to hear Fr Morgan Howe, when speaking of structures in a society, say that freeways in Brisbane (new in the 1970's) 'hide the poor from us. We no longer need to see them.' The freeways were huge physical structures but on a deeper level Morgan Howe was questioning their effect on a society.

Asking questions of structures is important. *Who wins? Who loses? Who benefits? Who is left out?* And to get answers we investigate so that we stand with those on the edges and listen to their voices. And add our voices with theirs. That is the task of action for advocacy. We ask questions of ourselves and of our society. It is why we speak in general conversations with family, friends, colleagues, staff. It is why we write letters, attend meetings, send emails, visit MP's of all parties - protesting publicly as group where we can.

In the Advocacy reading this time we explore the structure of a queue. What does a queue mean for refugees? It is such a basic term, a given in our society. What is it based on? Our Australian concern for justice, to give everyone a fair go? A very simple structure, yet it has been used to turn us against people, to judge people who come by boat as queue-jumpers.

Refugees have lived through violence and great suffering. They have experienced fear which drove them to flee the familiarity of their home, their own people and country. Subsequently, in third world countries, they have known the terrible uncertainty of waiting in the unknown. Seeking life, many of them have finally had the courage to risk their very lives at sea. And if they arrive safely, under the excuse of our 'fair go' we have added punishment to their pain – incarceration, isolation, a five-year wait for hope, and denial of the basic human right to work.

Preaching the good news of God's universal love inevitably means condemning all structures leading to injustice, privilege, oppression or narrow patriotism. We can make our way in uncovering structures of injustice and oppression, we can struggle through our own narrow nationalism, but it is hard to recognize our own participation, particularly our privilege. Asking questions helps.

For our lives, our liberty are bound up with theirs. They have survived much and must depend on us for a little while more. Did we "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep"? (*Romans 12:15*) Did we attempt to share the mantle of joy? Where did we stand?