

Easter manifesto

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...when he saw the multitudes he was moved to compassion for them, because they were distressed and scattered like sheep without a shepherd.

Being *moved to compassion* can sound almost like an act of largesse on the part of a powerful monarch. The Greek of Matthew's Gospel, however, expresses this phrase with an earthy and painful sense of compulsion, a kind of *tugging at the guts* or *churning of the stomach*.

Like the first time I visited Villawood Detention Centre and met children and their parents living behind razor-wire.

Or like how I feel listening to the stories of the Stolen Generations or of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Or like how many of us feel every time we read about yet another brutal bombing of the people of Gaza while the powers of the world seem to turn a blind eye.

Perhaps we often miss the point of the scriptural metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep. It's not so much about *power over* as it is about *suffering with*. Let us not forget that shepherds were amongst the most marginalised members of society at the time of Jesus. Sadly, the centuries have mangled the metaphor. For too long the charitable model of welfare has been built on the obscene notion that people should actually be treated like sheep and that all they really need is a strong and wise shepherd to tell them what to do. This model, which moves easily between paternalism and punishment, comfortably accommodates such injustices as controlling the meagre incomes of people on statutory benefits and other forms of disempowerment "for their own good."

Oscar Romero, the late Archbishop of San Salvador, murdered by US-trained paramilitary during Mass in 1980, said of the Beatitudes that they *turn everything upside down*. This spirit provides us with a radical way of unlearning our acceptance of "guidance" from above and learning with new hearts the promise of liberation from below. Rather than looking to the skies for a sign, the story of Jesus presents us with an absolutely provocative challenge to listen closely to the signs of the times; the still, small sound of humanity in history. The people in the passage from Matthew are described as being distressed and scattered. We know that this sense of alienation, this crushing of the spirit, is central to marginalisation. People feel that they are devalued, left on the scrap-heap, and, worst of all, atomised, on their own, left to bear the blame, and therefore the burden, of their own exclusion. Rather than viewing people experiencing exclusion as sheep in need of a firm hand and strong voice of command, we are invited to learn that it is the people who call us. If we want to be attentive to Christ Crucified we need look no further than the faces of the people who are left out and pushed out. Christ speaks to us through the marginalised. In a deeply Incarnational echo of his *Come, follow me*, they say: *Come with us*, be our companions.

I often like to quote the beautiful and wise words of the poet, Bertolt Brecht, in this regard:

"the compassion of the oppressed for the oppressed is indispensable. It is the world's one hope."

It is no surprise that a society built on the foundations of the market should place a high value on individualism. We are taught to make an idol of individual effort, individual responsibility, individual

reward and individual consumption. We are taught to accept that an individual should pay for what they use and that those who do not have the means to pay should be denied the right to use. We are taught that there is a kind of natural justice about the current order of things, as if it were ordained that there should be some who are extremely rich and many who are very poor and that the poor are completely free to leave their poverty behind if only they “pick up their beds and walk”, to (mis)use the language of the scriptures, or if only they get off their backsides and do something useful, to use the broadly accepted vernacular.

The Easter motif of suffering and resurrection comes alive in the flesh and blood of all movements of social justice and social change, when people who have been treated as if *they* are nothing, proclaim by their collective dreaming that *we* are everything. This sense of power from below; power not as its own end but for the sake of creating a new society, was articulated poignantly by Romero:

“...a people disorganised becomes a mass that can be toyed with, but a people that organises itself and fights for its values and for justice is a people that demands respect.”

The God of the scriptures is a God who takes sides, a God who is unequivocally on the side of the excluded.

On the night before he died Jesus spoke to us not as servants but as friends (John 15:15). We have the right and the duty to organise ourselves as companions building a society in which people matter more than the walls that are built to divide them, lock them out, or lock them up and in which no one is treated as an inferior.

This is why it is a sin to be disorganised.

For those of us who hunger for justice it is a sin to be disorganised.

Especially when, as Pablo Neruda reminds us, so much misery is so well organised!

*“Rise up with me against the organisation of misery
...stand up with me
and let us go off together
to fight face to face
against the devil’s webs,
against the system that distributes hunger,
against organised misery.”*