Asylum Seekers and Refugees
Some Biblical and Theological Reflections

Karl Möller

The issue of people seeking refuge in other countries, including our own, isn’t a new one. But recent events have pushed it well into the limelight, and many expect it to be one of the most pressing concerns of the twenty-first century. I’ve been asked to help us think about a Christian perspective, which I’m very happy to do. As time is limited, however, there’s only so much that we can cover, but I’d like to offer some biblical and theological reflections, beginning with the Old Testament, before moving on to the teaching of Jesus and some thoughts on hospitality. There’s much more that we could explore, but I hope my contribution can serve as a helpful starting point for our discussion.

I

Migrants are everywhere in the Old Testament, which is ‘the story of people forced from and longing for a home’.1 Abraham, having obeyed God’s call and migrated to Canaan, soon moved on again when famine struck, forcing him to flee to Egypt (Gen. 12). Isaac faced the same problem (Gen. 26:1), becoming an ‘internally displaced person’, which in today’s language describes a refugee within their own national borders. Jacob was forced to seek asylum in Mesopotamia, having cheated Esau out of his blessing (Gen. 27). One commentator applies the terms used by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to the patriarchs, noting that:

Abraham begins as a voluntary migrant, but then lives in Egypt as an environmentally induced, externally displaced person. Isaac is born to immigrant parents, and he subsequently becomes an environmentally induced, internally displaced person. Finally, Jacob is a third generation migrant who involuntarily migrates to seek asylum for fear of physical harm.2

The God we meet in these stories is a migrants’ God, who journeys with the displaced, is present in their vulnerabilities, and can be found in strange places, as Jacob discovered to his great relief: ‘Surely the LORD is in this place’, he says, ‘and I didn’t know it’ (Gen. 28:16). The stories of the patriarchs offer us ‘a narrative of nomads, wanderers, strangers and

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exiles that are blessed by God and [that] bless others in the midst of the mess of pain, unfaithfulness, oppression, injustice and alienation'.

We could trace displaced persons through much of the Old Testament. Just think of the Israelites in Egypt or the texts that talk about the trauma of exile. The book of Lamentations and many passages from the Prophets reflect experiences similar to those of today's asylum seekers and refugees. Jeremiah 9:19-22 may serve as an example:

The sound of sobbing is heard from Zion:  
'We're devastated!  
We're so ashamed!  
We have to leave the land  
and abandon our homes!'  
...  
Death has climbed through our windows;  
it has entered our fortresses  
to eliminate children from the streets,  
the youth from the squares.  
Declare what the Lord says:  
Dead bodies will lie  
like dung on the fields,  
like bundles of grain after the harvest,  
with no one to pick them up.  
(Jer. 9:19-22)

But how we are to think about and respond to the plight of asylum seekers and refugees today? The Old Testament offers us a helpful framework, one of gift, thanksgiving and generosity. The starting point is gift, the understanding that everything we have, the earth, the land and everything that comes from it, is God's gift to us. In this view, there's a generous God at the heart of reality, a God who provides abundantly. It's a perspective that refutes our 'myth of scarcity', that there's never enough, a rather curious myth given our affluent society.

Awareness of the giftedness of everything then leads to thanksgiving. This is at the heart of Israel's festivals, which provide a seasonal rhythm of thanksgiving. Year on year that rhythm reminded the Israelites that everything they had, came from God. And year on year, the festivals prompted them to give thanks to God for all they had received.

Sadly, we've lost the awareness that everything is gift and have replaced it with the myth of the 'self-made' man or woman. We've developed a grasping attitude to life. We're never satisfied, we need – and are encouraged – to consume more and more, and we deny others even their basic means of survival. And yet, our very lives are pure gift, something

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we haven't earned or secured by our own efforts, a gift to which the only proper response is thanksgiving. The dynamic of gift and thanksgiving is sorely needed today, if we are to receive God’s gifts gladly and gratefully – and to share them with those most in need. If only we could believe in a generous God at the heart of reality, then perhaps we might also learn to share God’s good gifts.

Which takes us to the third aspect of the Old Testament’s theology of giftedness. Awareness of the gift doesn’t stop at thanksgiving. It sparks generosity, hospitality, inclusion, and justice that extends to vulnerable outsiders.

‘Don’t oppress an immigrant’, says Exodus 23:9. That, by the way, is the Common English Bible’s translation of Hebrew ger, often translated 'sojourner' or ‘resident alien’. ‘Don’t oppress an immigrant. You know what it’s like to be one, because you were immigrants in Egypt’. Make sure they have enough to eat, so when you harvest your crops, always leave something behind (Lev. 19:10; 23:22).

When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God (Lev. 19:33-34).

In fact, the Israelites are to love immigrants, because God loves them and provides them with food and clothing (Deut. 10:18-19). As we can see, these texts clearly express Israel’s obligation towards vulnerable outsiders. According to Deuteronomy 14:28-29, they’re also to benefit from the tithe:

Every third year you must bring the tenth part of your produce from that year and leave it at your city gates. Then the Levites, who have no designated inheritance like you do, along with the immigrants, orphans, and widows who live in your cities, will come and feast until they are full. Do this so that the LORD your God might bless you in everything you do.

What’s remarkable is that those ‘on benefits’, as it were, aren’t just given a mere ‘living allowance’, a rather curious term, if one thinks about it, but are invited to ‘come and feast until they’re full’.

While still in the wilderness, the people are told that, upon entering the Promised Land, they’re to make the following declaration:

‘My father was a starving Aramean. He went down to Egypt, living as an immigrant there … God saw our misery, our trouble, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt … and gave us this land – a land full of milk and honey.’ … celebrate all the good things the LORD your God has done for you and your family – each one of you along with the Levites and the immigrants who are among you. When you have finished paying the entire tenth part of your produce in the third year … you will give it to the Levites, the immigrants, the orphans, and the widows so they can eat in your cities until they are full (Deut. 26:5-12).

Here we have deep awareness of an immigrant past, remembered as a tough time, involving starvation, misery, trouble and oppression – much like the fate of asylum seekers and refugees today. The text also celebrates God’s help and provision, including the immigrants in those celebrations. Again, they’re to be given from the tithe so they can
eat until they're full. The entire framework of gift, thanksgiving and generosity is clearly expressed in these verses.

II

But we must move on to the teaching of Jesus who, throughout his life, reached out to those in desperate need, people needing food, healing and shelter, many of them people who'd been rejected by ‘respectable’ society. And, daunting though that may be, Jesus expects his followers to live in the same way. ‘Just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone’, he says, ‘so also you must be complete’ (Matt. 5:48).

Negative reactions to people seeking sanctuary among us are often based on deep fears – about our own safety and security, about job losses, about additional strains being put upon an already floundering economy. While such fears are only too human, as Christians we can’t evade Jesus’ challenge to love those who cross our path (Matt. 22:34-40), to give generously to people in need, and to learn to trust God to provide for our own needs. ‘Don’t worry what you’ll eat, drink or wear’, says Jesus. ‘Look at the birds in the sky or the lilies in the field. God provides for them all. Won’t he do much more for you? He knows your needs. You desire God’s kingdom and righteousness, and you'll be given everything else as well’ (Matt. 6:25-34).

Challenging though this is, we can’t afford not to heed Jesus’ words. As a society, we’ve long stopped paying attention to them, and the consequences are all too evident in how we treat people coming to us for shelter. Being a society that prides itself on its humanism, we’re failing large numbers of people, treating them in often shockingly inhumane and dehumanising ways. There’re many reasons for this, but our incessant worrying about our own needs clearly has much to answer for. If we desire to follow Jesus, then learning to trust God and to live in a way that allows others to survive and thrive alongside us has become crucially important.

But our fears aren’t the only problem. ‘Stop collecting treasures on earth’, Jesus says; they might not last long anyway. Also, bear in mind that you ‘can’t serve God and wealth’ (Matt. 6:19, 24). And to the young man, who’d observed all the commandments and wants to follow him, Jesus says, ‘OK, sell what you’ve got, give the money to the poor, then follow me’. You know the outcome: the man, who happened to be rich, couldn’t follow such a radical call (Matt. 19:21-22). Francis Spufford, in a summary that cuts right to the heart of Jesus’ message, highlights his call to ‘reckless generosity’:

Behave as if nothing you gave away could ever make you poorer, because you can never run out of what you give. Behave as if this one day we’re in now were the whole of time, and you didn’t have to hold anything back, or to plot and scheme about tomorrow. Don’t try to grip

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6 This is the Common English Bible’s interpretation of ‘be perfect (complete), therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect (complete)’. 
your life with tight, anxious hands. Unclench those fingers. Let it go. If someone asks for your help, give them more than they've asked for. ... [Actual virtue] comes from behaving, so far as you can, like God Himself, who makes and makes and loves and loves and is never the less for it. God ... wants your reckless generosity. Try to keep what you have, and you'll lose even that. Give it away, and you'll get back more than you bargain for; more than bargaining could ever get you.7

Because Jesus calls us to love and generosity that know no bounds, Giles Fraser is justified when he challenges us to 'let the refugees in, every last one', as he says in his Guardian column. Given the Bible's insistence on 'the absolute priority of our obligation to refugees', Fraser concludes, there is 'no respectable Christian argument for fortress Europe'.8

One of the clearest calls to the unreserved welcoming of strangers is found in Jesus' words about the judgement of the nations (Matt. 25:31-46). All nations are gathered before the Son of Man, who separates those invited into God's realm – because they've offered Jesus food and drink when in need, welcome when a stranger, clothes when naked, care when sick and company when in prison – from those who haven't done any of those things and are therefore excluded from God's realm. Both groups are puzzled and want to know when they did or didn't do these things for Jesus. His answer is well-known: what you did, or didn't do, for the least of my brothers or sisters, you did, or didn't do, for me.

It's in the people seeking sanctuary in our midst that we encounter Christ today. It's in offering a true welcome and generous hospitality that we're welcoming Christ. When, however, we refuse to extend such hospitality, we're shutting our doors in the face of Christ himself. In the words of one commentator, how we welcome the stranger 'is a matter of life and death, not only for the migrant but for us all'.9 In Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God, reckless love and generosity aren't optional; they're essential.

III

'I was a stranger and you welcomed me', says Jesus, and 'what you've done to the least of my brothers and sisters, you've done for me'. Hospitality clearly is an important Christian practice. But what does it mean to welcome the stranger in our midst? And what might it do to us and the other when we welcome them and show them hospitality?

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Oliver O’Donovan once said of the ‘act of recognition and welcome’ that it ‘leaps across the divide between communities and finds on the other side another community which offers the distinctive friendship of hospitality’. O’Donovan here describes hospitality as a way of showing the other recognition, which is what’s lacking when refugees are seen as a flood that needs to be stemmed or a swarm of people crossing the Mediterranean. Hospitality means recognising the other as a human being just like us, with similar potential, gifts, joys, hopes, needs, fears and weaknesses.

Miroslav Volf thinks of hospitality as the ‘will to embrace’, pointing out that this will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity. The will to embrace precedes any ‘truth’ about others …. This will ... transcends the moral mapping of the social world into ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Volf emphasises that our recognition of the stranger must not be tainted by any prior judgements about them, that there must be no division of the world into ‘good’ (for which read ‘us’) and ‘evil’ (i.e. ‘them’). Sadly, as the public debate shows, such judgements are quick to hand and are encouraged by many politicians and media. Volf challenges this, insisting that the will to embrace must come before any so-called ‘truth’ about the other.

O’Donovan also hints at this, turning our expectations upside down by speaking of the community on the other side offering ‘the distinctive friendship of hospitality’. We quite like to see it as an opportunity for us to be generous, but O’Donovan wisely stops us in our tracks. He does exactly what Jesus did in praising the Samaritan man as a model of what it means to love one’s neighbour. When we extend hospitality to others, says O’Donovan, rather than to celebrate our own generosity, we may find friendship that’s being offered to us.

Over against the fears and apprehensions that take up so much space in the public debate, it’s important to say that there’s much evidence that ‘strangers may actually enhance our well-being rather than diminish it’. Why always assume that we only stand to lose by welcoming people in? It may be useful to return to the Bible here, which offers some intriguing examples of hosts benefitting, in surprising and life-giving ways, from welcoming their guests.

Abraham hosts three men and receives an amazing gift, the promise that in a year’s time he and Sarah would finally have their long-awaited heir (Gen. 18). And in welcoming these strangers, Abraham comes face to face with God. Rahab, by harbouring the Israeliite

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spies at great risk to her own safety, ends up saving her life (and those of the spies) when she’s spared in the destruction of Jericho (Josh. 2; 6). The widow of Zarephath, who’s about to starve when Elijah comes knocking on her door, also saves the lives of herself, her son and Elijah, having fed the prophet on literally her last provisions (1 Kgs 17). And two men, having met a stranger on the road to Emmaus, find that, when they invite him in, they’re in the presence of the resurrected Christ (Luke 24).

Welcoming others may bring unexpected blessings. Hospitality always involves a mutual giving and receiving, and the biblical stories invite us to consider that it may be the host who receives the greatest blessing. The stranger may end up enriching our lives in ways we wouldn’t have thought possible.

Of course, the flipside, that in welcoming strangers we’re offering something to them, is also true. For Christine Pohl, hospitality means that ‘the stranger is welcomed into ... a place of respect and acceptance and friendship’ and is ‘included in a life-giving and life-sustaining network of relations’.\(^{13}\) Respect, acceptance, friendship – all these flow from recognising the other as a human being, someone who needs a network of relations in order to survive. Hospitality is important because human relationships, with everything they entail – love, concern, care as well as material, practical, emotional and spiritual support – are what quite literally gives and sustains life.

Hospitality means ‘inviting the stranger into our private space, whether that be the space of our own home or the space of our personal awareness and concern’.\(^{14}\) That’s why references to asylum seekers and refugees as mere ciphers are so damaging. They are human beings just like us, but that awareness is often denied to us by the language used in public discourse. It’s easy to see why the picture of a little drowned boy made the impact it did. Here we ‘met’ two individuals, the boy and his father, people we could care about. We allowed them, at least briefly, into the space of our personal awareness.

But hospitality goes much further. It invites the other into our country, town, street and private space, our home. It leads to personal encounter, which deepens awareness and concern. In being welcoming, we open a space within ourselves, in our hearts, minds and souls, a space the other is allowed to inhabit. Hospitality means making ‘room for others within the borders of my selfhood’.\(^{15}\) It’s not about charity and doing the good deed; it’s about a profound change of heart.


Sometimes, there may be real costs involved. Peter Rollins illustrates this with a story that requires careful reflection. It’s about a priest who’s known for offering welcome to everyone without restraint, seeing every stranger as a manifestation of Christ.

One evening, the priest is visited by a terrifying demon who asks to be welcomed. This is a story that requires careful reflection. It’s about a priest who’s known for offering welcome to everyone without restraint, seeing every stranger as a manifestation of Christ. The priest does without hesitation, only to find that the demon soon begins to destroy the sanctuary. Later, the priest is getting ready to go home, the demon asks for shelter overnight. ‘Come’, the priest says, ‘I’ll prepare a meal’. And so the demon comes, eats, mocks the priest and wrecks some further damage. Eventually, he has one last question: ‘Will you also welcome me into your heart?’ ‘Sure’, the priest replies, ‘what I have is yours’. That, however, stops the demon in his tracks because, in giving everything, the priest had held on to what the demon had meant to take. Despite his best efforts, the demon couldn’t rob the priest of his kindness, hospitality, love and compassion.

The story works on several levels, and we mustn’t misunderstand or misapply it. It’s true-to-life in that not everyone knocking on our doors turns out to be friendly. From experience, we know that most people are, regardless of their origins. But there’s always some risk involved when we open our doors to others. Yet, the story insists, that’s no reason to shut the door in the stranger’s face. Rollins notes that, ‘through our trying to show hospitality to the demon at our door, the demon may well be transformed by the grace that is shown’.

Christ came to transform this world through love, and he expects his followers to do the same. ‘Love your enemies’, he says, ‘and pray for those who harass you’ (Matt. 5:44). Even if we were to get hurt, that, from a Christian perspective, again would be no reason for ‘fortress Europe’.

But it’s worth quoting Rollins again, who suggests that, in the encounter with the other, even the one who’s causing us trouble, hurt and grief, ‘we may come to realize that [it’s] not really a demon at all, but just a broken, damaged person like ourselves’. In the story, the ‘demon’ doesn’t introduce himself as such; that’s how he’s perceived. Sadly, there’s a real danger that asylum seekers and refugees aren’t just dehumanised but effectively demonised. Some have expressed a deep concern that the fears evoked by strangers seeking sanctuary in our midst are exploited by politicians and media, which then leads to the demonization of the most vulnerable.

As Christians, I believe that we must take a stand against that. We’re called to welcome the stranger, to recognise their humanity, to challenge the beliefs and practices of our society. And when, at last, we open our door to the other, we shall find ourselves face to face with Christ, whether we recognise it or not.

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17 Ibid., p. 29.
18 Ibid.
19 See e.g. Houston, *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself*, p. 98.