

”Sigue el camino del pueblo hebreo, busca otra luna, tal vez mañana sonría la fortuna y si te toca llorar, es mejor frente al mar”

(Follow the path of the Hebrew people: search for a new moon, perhaps your luck will improve tomorrow. If you must cry, it is better to cry by the sea.)

Juan Manuel Serrat (Catalan troubadour)

Motion – an important part of the human condition

Humans have been in motion ever since time began. In spite of the fact that we consider permanent living sites to be a major step in our progress through history, humans have continued to move in order to find new worlds. New continents have been populated through large scale migrations; from Africa to Asia, from Asia to Europe and America. For ten thousand years people have wandered around the earth in their hunt for food, safety and freedom. No people now living in Sweden, not even the Sami, can state with truth that they have never migrated anywhere.

Our entire history concerns people and peoples in movement, starting ten thousand years ago and still continuing today. Finding new paths and longing for better lives are an essential element of the human identity. Being a migrant is being a human being.

God’s people – a people in motion

The Bible confirms it. From the first page of Chapter 1 of Genesis we are reading about people who are moving. The first eleven chapters consist of a mythical story containing great truths.

When we talk about myths in the Bible we do not mean false facts or lies, we mean non-historical descriptions that encompass great truths. Would you like to know about human nature? There is a lot of information in these texts – however if you are more interested in the beginnings of the universe and the human race, it may be better to study cosmology or the origin of the species.

In the first eleven chapters of the Bible, human characteristics such as sinfulness, love, envy, courage and many others are described. After the story of Adam and Eve we can recognise human beings as we understand them today – influenced by both good and evil during their time on earth.

Before the end of Chapter 4 we have already experienced two emigrations. Adam and Eva were forced to leave the Garden of Eden. Using words of the

Swedish Migration Board this was the deportation of citizens who had committed a crime.

After Cain murdered his brother he decided to move to another location. In this case the decision appears to be voluntary, or perhaps due to force of circumstance. The Bible speaks about the country of Nod, east of Eden. If Adam and Eva were the first deportees then Cain was the first immigrant.

Strangely enough we know almost nothing about the land of Nod. This is the only time it is mentioned in the Bible and it may possibly be a play on words as “nad” in Hebrew means vagabond, homeless. Perhaps, for Cain, it became a journey without end.

When we leave the first eleven chapters of the Bible we arrive at the story of Abraham. These are no longer central myths that illustrate truths; these are stories with origins in historical reality.

Abraham is called the Father of the Faith, and not only the Christian faith but also the Jewish and the Muslim faiths. If we were to interpret the story of Abraham using a modern, secular approach, we could say that he was one of the many who participated in a mass migration in the part of the Middle East known as the “Half Moon”.

He was, as were probably many others, convinced that God had called him to leave and travel to the new country. We do not know the circumstances that affected him but he heard a voice which commanded him to: “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show.” (Genesis 12:1).

How many people have heard a similar message and begun their travels? Thousands of people in our country come from exactly the same geographical area as the people in the Bible who, more than three thousand years ago, heard an inner voice that told them to leave everything and find a new place to build altars to their gods?

The entire Old Testament is founded on the problems associated with immigration and emigration. The Latin name of the book, *Exodus* literally means emigration. Our faith was formed on the road, in exile and when wandering in the desert. We are sons and daughters of a religion that came to maturity in the footsteps of a travelling people; a people in motion.

It appears that God himself is inclined to regard his people as wanderers. It is God who encourages Abraham, Moses and others to start travelling and to find God during their journey. Our God does not sit still; he is a God in motion who accompanies us through our life travels. Our own perception of the reality of life is that it is a journey, we must travel through it.

Not strange then that there are so many traditions and instructions telling us to take care and protect travellers. “Give us counsel, render a decision.

Make your shadow like night at high noon. Hide the fugitives, do not betray the refugees.” (Isaiah 16:3) “Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9)

In the New Testament, the situation is the same.

Jesus himself experienced the fate of the refugee as a child. In common with many Palestinians, Jesus grew up in a strange country, using a foreign language surrounded by a foreign culture.

Our Christian faith is a faith in motion. It was born in a corner of the Mediterranean Sea and fifty years later it had already travelled to the other side and even farther.

The people who are in motion in the New Testament are regarded as possible angels; messengers from God who come to us. The actual theology that Paul systematises with the word of Jesus as its basis tells us about the welcoming of the traveller, the one who up until this moment was experienced as a stranger, or at best a guest. “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.” (Ephesians 2:19)

Christianity is the religion of travellers, pilgrims and migrants. Our “Abrahamic” God challenged our forefathers to look for “new moons”. A new moon that softly lights the way to your home. A place for you to live, a place to bless the land with sons and daughters. Land on which to build an altar to the being that led you there.

Current situation: a new interpretation of reality is necessary

The concept “refugee” is not new. However the word was ascribed the meaning it has today at the beginning of the 1950s. In 1951 the Refugee Convention (Geneva Convention) was established. In those days it was easy to discuss refugees as there was a clearly-defined picture of who a refugee was. A refugee was a man from Eastern Europe who had escaped from Communism. The situation was fairly similar up until the 1970s when the picture of a refugee expanded to include a man from South America who had been involved in politics and had been forced to leave an oppressive dictatorship behind in countries such as Chile.

However this picture changed radically in the 1990s. It was no longer a case of a few thousand, politically committed individuals trying to escape from dictatorships – now it was tens of thousands of women, children and men escaping from the wars of the Middle East or from European countries torn apart by mass murder and the disintegration of states. The refugee was no longer a politically committed man, now the refugee was perhaps a raped woman, with young children.

After the major upheavals in the world political situation of the 1990s (the fall of communism, the new map of Europe, the end of the Cold War, the development of militant terrorism), came the new economic and technological revolution. A revolution which did not replace the conditions of the 1990s but which provided new preconditions with opportunities for global communications in “real time”, cheap air travel and a liberal economy that affected the entire world.

In the mid-90s it became clear that, in addition to political refugees, there was also a growing group of so-called “economic refugees”. I write this term in quotation marks because I believe that the economy is a highly political concern. Countries’ politics and economies can never be separated from each other. The poverty that destroys the lives of more than one billion people in the world today is not a political issue only, or an economic issue only, it is both. This separation into political and economic refugees is no longer relevant.

In this time of globalisation other forms of migration can also be observed such as migration with “no papers”. This concerns people afflicted by poverty or threatening poverty and who choose to live in an irregular situation in another country rather than staying legally in their own country. During the course of my job as a diocesan curate I have met many people from the Latin American middle class, some with university level education, who choose to live illegally in Sweden, working as cleaners. When I wonder why they have made this choice they say that they have a greater chance of improving their lives as cleaners in the rich world than as civil servants in Latin America.

Millions of people travel across the Mexican desert or the Straits of Gibraltar in order to reach the rich countries whose message of a better life has been transferred to them through global TV. The “no papers” group are not only to be found in USA or Spain, they travel on and can be increasingly found in more remote places such as Sweden.

Many of them, especially girls and young women dreaming of a better life, become victims of trafficking which is a trade in human beings that combines two profitable businesses; people smuggling and prostitution. Young women or children become victims of the sex trade and end up in the hands of ruthless “businessmen”.

Another type of refugee who does not fit into the 1950s definition in the internal refugee. These are people who, due to violence and conflict and many times with poverty as another contributory factor, flee from one part of a country to another. In order to apply for asylum it is assumed that a person, fearing for their life, has left the country where he/she lives and travelled to another country where they consider themselves to be safer and more secure. There are millions of people in the world in countries such as Colombia who suffer due to war and persecution and who have no opportunity to make it to another country to apply for “traditional” asylum.

Politics, poverty, prostitution, states in dissolution and lives without rights mean that the concept refugee has become too narrow for our new reality. The refugee concept is dissolving. We have to save it by not closing our eyes to the new situations we see in the world. We are surrounded by vulnerable people in motion. Vulnerable because they, partially or totally, lack the opportunities that you and I enjoy in the rich world – even if they are in our midst and travel on the same tube train or tram as we do.

They are in motion because they have followed the law that is buried deep in our souls; they are looking for new moons – not because of romance (well in a few cases) but because of their need and longing for a better life with freedom, security and justice. They are not all aware of this, but that makes no difference.

We, on the other hand, must be aware that this is the situation. Thirty years ago we discovered the poor with the help of Latin American liberation theology. Of course we did know previously that there were poor people in the world – but liberation theology showed us the poor as *locus teologicum* i.e. the poor as the place where we can reflect and theologise reality. With the help of the poor, theologians from the rich part of the world were able to build a theology that reflected the social conflicts in their societies. Moltmann, Duchkrow, Frostin etc. could be named as the theologians who accepted the Latin American inheritance.

For us in the rich part of the world, the poor are elsewhere. Or so we thought. As late as the 1980s we believed that “our poor people” were on the other side of the world. Through the Marxist analysis – which initially utilised liberation theology as a socio-economic tool for analysis of information – we could see that the poor who lived (and still live) in the southern part of the world were a consequence of the assets that we had taken from them through unfair terms of trade, slavery and brute force capitalism.

I do not mean that this understanding is necessarily out of date or untrue, however I would like to point out that today the poor are no longer only on the other side of the earth – they have also moved here to our part of the world. As a product of globalisation, globalisation that shows the world on TV how we live with these assets we took in this unjust manner, that facilitates communication with different parts of the world and, last but not least, provides greater opportunities for travel all over the globe.

A large percentage of these people want more freedom – just like we have, want more food – just like us, want democracy – just like us, want to be able to afford to move around – just like us... The list of everything we have and they do not have and would like to have is very long.

Irrespective of whether we use a Marxist or liberal tool for our analysis, we know that they are not responsible for the injustices of the world and the imbalance between the haves and have-nots. We understand that it is this

longing for justice, freedom and welfare among the poor that sets them in motion. It is this longing that has brought them here.

Even if we have been aware of the issues of justice in the world, we find ourselves in another situation today. The poor are in our midst. The vulnerable human being in motion is now our neighbour; the person talking about human rights in the square in our village; the one cleaning our workplace; the prostitute in our town, working to put food on their children's table.

They travel with us, shop in the same stores and demand, of course, the same rights. Injustice in the world is no longer something primarily experienced through a missionary's slide show – it is also there when we see the cleaner enter our office.

We have to renew our thoughts on working with people of different ethnicity or with refugees. Today this concerns a much broader group that includes many different “categories” that we could not even imagine some years ago.

In English-speaking countries there is a concept used that is interesting and valuable – “uprooted people”. We must also find a new concept like this in Swedish otherwise we run the risk of getting stuck in our old words and concepts. We ought to think more broadly and renew our vocabulary – not in order to sound more cultivated but in order to open up our manner of observing reality.

Our manner of regarding reality must be inclusive. Currently all these groups of people are included in our assignment, even if we are often not very comfortable with these new situations. These are groups who need our humanity, sympathy, empathy and mercy. This is no longer a case of some UNHCR refugees on a quota basis, this is a considerable number of people with different needs who have come here looking for help or who have landed up here after having travelled truly horrific paths.

New migration patterns - mixed flows

“The latter half of the 1990s has brought a trend towards so-called mixed flows. Economic and social misery, environmental disasters, oppression and persecution of other types that those stated in the Geneva Convention have increasingly caused migration. It is obvious that Europe – and the rest of the world – is facing a new situation both as concerns asylum seekers and other forms of migration flows. (...) It is estimated that between 20 and 30 percent of migration to Europe consists of illegal immigrants. At the end of the last century it was estimated that there were around three million illegal immigrants in Europe. Some of this illegal immigration, and as concerns asylum seekers, occurs within the framework of trade in people – trafficking – which is the fastest growing field of operations within global organised crime.

More than 700 000 people are the victims of trafficking every year, either for sexual exploitation or to work as slaves.”

EU Equal Theme Asylum – homepage

“The dream of a better life can make people leave their homelands, their families, friends and traditions. Some of them who come to Sweden in order to achieve these goals come from Belarus. Many asylum seekers – or those who live here with no residence permit – work hard in cleaning companies and on building sites. Sometimes according to the book, sometimes as unregistered labour”

/2005-03-29/ Radio documentary in Channel P1’s programme entitled *Konflikt* on asylum seekers on the unregistered labour market

All activities with vulnerable people in motion or in flight reflect our manner of dealing with our fellow human beings. Their lives form an unavoidable presence which proves the level of our mercy. “People in exile also shoulder the stranger’s universal role throughout history – being the others” says Ana Martínez, an Argentinean/Swedish author. If we welcome the person who we experience as “the other” – the one who is different – we are practising how to welcome God who is the ultimate other, the one who is totally different to us but who also wants to meet humanity. Meeting the stranger trains us in how to meet God. As Christians we should not hesitate to take up such a challenge.

Rev. Daniel Calero Davyt