

**A Theological Reflection for Refugee and Migrant Sunday**  
**Whitley College, Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> August 2005**  
**Merrill Kitchen**

We live in a world where millions of people wander the earth in search of a home and the voice of the wanderer has been echoing around our world since time immemorial. The scriptures of all three monotheistic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - recognise this reality and remember their words of affirmation, solace and hope. At the same time, however, we can choose to read these same scriptures in order to justify rejection, oppression and eternal condemnation of those who we deem to be outsiders. Our Christian Bible contains the stories of conquest and victory, displacement and victimisation, light and dark. We have words of praise and lament, hope and despair, honesty and deceit, release and condemnation. We acknowledge the words we read and reflect upon them as the word of God, but we tend to favour the writings of the victors and to forget that it was the hearts and hands of refugees, exiled from the centre of their being and with no choices in life, who scripted many of the precious insights of faith that continue to reveal God's presence and compassion, urgency and direction to us all. We contemporary Western readers with passports and credit cards in our pockets, tend to take for granted the choices we are privileged to have. We can elect to stay at home in the comfort of the lectionary or to stand outside and scream a lament. Do we choose to take the risk associated with Paul's challenge to be transformed (Romans 12:1) or do we take the easier option and hide ourselves in insulated credal packages that protect us from the 'other' ?

Where then is our starting point? If we begin with ourselves and our own story we will more than likely proclaim a 'god' made in our own image. Let us step back and begin with a big picture. Let's dare to think about God's intended creation as the essence of home, and open ourselves to rediscovering that the God who stands with the homeless and weeps at injustice has always been embedded in our tradition.

**1. Creation: The essence of home**

The creation stories of both Torah and Psalms reveal the common home of all humanity, the essence of which is light and dark, water and earth, wind and air – a balance that nurtures and sustains all organic life from plant to human beings. Walter Brueggeman describes this creative memory 'as a hospitable viable place for life, because of Yahweh's will and capacity

to evoke and sustain life.<sup>1</sup> The image evokes a concept of human responsibility centred on caring appropriately for the other, protecting the common home, allowing a place for everyone. But the image is just that - a product of faithful imagination. It portrays a sense of realised security and productivity, but in fact the written words emerge from a retained common memory of longing for home and identity at a time of exile and dislocation. In such a scenario, there will always be a loser and the theological reflections on grief and loss that emerge from Israel's experiences of rejection, along with the Church's hope for restoration and renewal, continue to resonate in religious narratives down through the ages. Perhaps Refugee Sunday is the time to revisit narratives that emerge from experiences of natural disaster as well as the memories of human conflict, terror and aggressive occupation. It may be a time to remember once again that blame has always been an excuse to avoid responsibility and to search again for God who is in the centre of suffering.

### *1.1 Human dislocation because of natural disaster*

In terms of natural disaster, the very energy that spewed forth the hot atomic gases and formed the universe continuously undergirds the life-giving cycles of the cosmic dance. The Hebrew memory keeps alive stories in which the divine energy of creative construction is also released in the destabilising energy of geological destruction. The harmonious interdependence of the created order is disturbed by the selectively destructive narratives of flood and drought, volcano and tsunami. The rescue of Noah and his family is in the context of the destruction of Noah's clan (Genesis 6:13-9:17). The rescue of Judah and his brothers is in the context of dislocation and slavery and the destruction of the 'other' (Exodus 2:23 – 14:25). Naomi's refuge from drought and subsequent Judean inheritance invites the sacrifice of another - Ruth's voluntary exile from Moab (Ruth 1:2-4:16).

### *1.2 Dislocation because of human interference*

Natural disaster is the lesser source of human destruction and displacement. As any human group develops and thrives, the competition for power and authority accelerates. One after the other, in the Hebrew tradition that gives us our First Testament, the usual inheritors of power, the elder sons, are overtaken by their younger brothers and their stories serve to maintain the defamation of the 'other'. Cain and the Canaanites, Ishmael and the Arabs, Esau and the Edomites. Judah is preferred over Reuben, and David is preferred over his older brothers. God is portrayed as racially selective, blessing the annihilation of the enemy, and giving priority to Abraham's patriarchal line through Judah. The title prophetess

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, dispute, advocacy*. Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1997, 146.

becomes subsumed into the more submissive image of 'wise woman' (2 Samuel 14:1-20), and a daughter is sacrificed in the name of martial victory (Judges 11:29-40).

The Second Testament is not immune from the consequences of human competition. Egypt is once again the place of refuge for the descendents of Judah as Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus flee the assassination attempts of Herod (Matthew 2:13-15). The invitation of Jesus to leave home voluntarily and form new communities reveals a subtext of human rejection and the need for refuge from one's biological family (Matthew 8:18-22). The first Palestinian followers of Jesus are warned by him to find refuge from the destructive politics of Rome (Matthew 24:15-22). And apostles are imprisoned while small church groups struggle against each other for pre-eminence in an anticipated royal kingdom that seems to have very little to do with the one that was described as being like a large tree that offered nests of refuge in its branches for birds freed from the borders of politics (Matthew 13:31-32).

## **2. Human relationship: The expression of home**

The human story depicted in the biblical narratives is propelled by the energy of tribal family groups with common identities. Borders are firmly in place and there is no place for 'wild birds.' The rhythm that celebrates life and death in these communities is punctuated continually by the threat of difference. Mutuality and interdependence has its boundaries as tribal identity is reinforced by defining the self over the other. The ethos of a shared existence within the boundaries of God's world is confronted over and over again as the land is claimed and named, fenced and protected by the name of the family. The boundaries are places of conflict instead of valleys of common water. Family honour takes precedence over individual human life and the tradition of an open tent that hosts the traveller becomes the trap before the grave. The elder brother turns his back when the prodigal returns, and the cousin walks by as his kin struggles to survive on the road. Instead of a cup of water that is offered it is a deceptive poison, a cup of curse. New homes are established by the conqueror over the remnants of the old. The previous occupants story is overtaken by the hypnotic urgent rhetoric of the new. History is rewritten and the sacred narratives reinterpreted. But unforgettable elements will always intrude. There will always be a father who welcomes his son and forgives past indiscretions, there is always a stranger who will care.

## **3. Starting over again**

The Jewish-Christian tradition has a blueprint for starting anew when the balance of life is favouring some over and against others. It is called 'Jubilee' in the Hebrew Tradition, and 'Resurrection' in the New Testament.

But in the meantime while we await the longed –for Jubilee along with the resurrection kingdom that it is to come – there is little option but to join in the mourning. A Refugee Sunday is not the time for platitudes and avoidance of reality by listening to texts of miracles, abundance of food and colourful bouquets scattered on grassy plains. It *is* time to be open to transformation by listening to the voices of migrants and refugees and to reflect on the laments of the dispossessed that echo down through the ages.

### I Am There

--Mahmoud Darwish<sup>2</sup>

*I come from there and remember,  
I was born like everyone is born, I have a mother  
and a house with many windows,  
I have brothers, friends and a prison.  
I have a wave that sea-gulls snatched away.  
I have a view of my own and an extra blade of grass.  
I have a moon past the peak of words.  
I have the godsent food of birds and an olive tree beyond the kent of time.  
I have traversed the land before swords turned bodies into banquets.  
I come from there, I return the sky to its mother when for its mother the  
sky cries, and I weep for a returning cloud to know me.  
I have learned the words of blood-stained courts in order to break the rules.  
I have learned and dismantled all the words to construct a single one:  
Home*

In conclusion, let us prayerfully reflect on some words from God that are routinely omitted from the revised Common Lectionary. Like the refugee, these words are present but not acknowledged. While we all turn our backs, however, the psalmist sees God present, and even complicit, in the midst of utter loss and desolation.<sup>3</sup> Listen to the word of God as it is found in **Psalm 88**:

O LORD, God of my salvation,  
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,

<sup>2</sup> Mahmoud Darwish was born in 1942 in the village of Birwa in the Galilee, in the northern region of what was then Palestine. In 1948, the Darwish family left their hometown after the area was declared part of the new state of Israel, and settled in a town called Dayru I-Assad. Over the ensuing years, he was subject to house arrests and imprisonments for political activism. His poetry is reflective of the struggles he encountered living under occupation during this time. In 1970, Darwish spent one year of study at a university in Moscow, and made the decision to not return to his homeland. He spent the next twenty-six years living in Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia and Paris and finally returned to his native land for a visit in 1996. His poems are mostly composed of plain words and a simple style. Yet with their simpleness, his words are profoundly felt. The following poem, "A Lover From Palestine", is an example.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Neil Wallace, *Words to God, words from God. The psalms in the prayer and preaching of the church.* Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2005, 59-62.

let my prayer come before you;  
incline your ear to my cry.

For my soul is full of troubles,  
and my life draws near to Sheol.  
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;  
I am like those who have no help,  
like those forsaken among the dead,  
like the slain that lie in the grave,  
like those whom you remember no more,  
for they are cut off from your hand.  
You have put me in the depths of the Pit,  
in the regions dark and deep.  
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,  
and you overwhelm me with all your waves.

You have caused my companions to shun me;  
you have made me a thing of horror to them.  
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;  
my eye grows dim through sorrow.  
Every day I call on you, O LORD;  
I spread out my hands to you.  
Do you work wonders for the dead?  
Do the shades rise up to praise you?  
Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,  
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?  
Are your wonders known in the darkness,  
or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

But I, O LORD, cry out to you;  
in the morning my prayer comes before you.  
O LORD, why do you cast me off?  
Why do you hide your face from me?  
Wretched and close to death from my youth up,  
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.  
Your wrath has swept over me;  
your dread assaults destroy me.  
They surround me like a flood all day long;  
from all sides they close in on me.  
You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;  
my companions are in darkness

This is the word of the Lord  
*Thanks be to God*

## **Bibliography**

Ateek, Naim *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1989.

Brueggemann, W *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, dispute, advocacy.* Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1997.

Darwish, Mahmoud *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise. Selected Poems.* (Trans. and ed. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché with Sinan Antoon and Amira El-Zein) University of California Press, 2000.

Harris, Maria *Proclaiming jubilee. A spirituality for the twenty-first century.* Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Schlabach, Gerald "Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What is the Most Basic Problem for Christian Social Ethics?" in *The Wisdom of the Cross* Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1999.

Wallace, Howard Neil *Words to God, words from God. The psalms in the prayer and preaching of the church.* Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2005