

The Hope of Christmas

EUREKA STREET

Nauru children: Why did we wait so long?

Andrew Hamilton, 03 November 2018

(excerpts)

Christmas, and particularly the first Christmas, raises questions about Australian refugee policy. It makes us ask why adults are left to languish on Manus Island, Nauru and in Australian detention centres. It also makes us ask why the government had so strongly resisted transferring to Australia children so clearly at risk.

To distant observers the hesitation and delay are hard to understand. They ask how it is possible to look on idle and unmoved at children in despair when you are in a position to address the causes of their despair. What is it that enables us to pass by damaged children, untroubled?

The answer may lie in the quality of our moral imagination. It is possible to see these children abstractly as members of a class — asylum seekers, illegal immigrants or security threats — and not as unique persons, each with their own dignity and inner life. If we see them in this way, we shall more easily approve of treating them instrumentally. The suffering to which we have condemned them is seen as unfortunate but necessary to deter other people from coming to Australia. We might even pride ourselves that we have had the strength of character to overcome our natural sympathy and to focus on the larger good. More commonly, though, we dismiss the extent of the suffering and the worthiness of those who suffer.

A more expansive form of the moral imagination sees each human being as precious, each with her own destiny and inherent value, and so demanding of respect from others. It is outraged when it sees human beings treated as instruments for policy goals extraneous to them. When we imagine the children on Nauru and the men on Manus Island we look into their eyes and see scars from their being treated as means to someone else's end. And we count down the days until they are free.

These two forms of the moral imagination are represented in the stories of the first Christmas. They offer the expansive vision of a God who loved the world and each person in it so much as to enter it as a little child dependent on other people's love and respect. The story invites people to treat one another as precious and with respect for their inherent worth. The instrumental vision is represented in King Herod. In order to remove a perceived threat to his rule and to the security of his people he had all the small children in his kingdom killed. He saw their deaths and the grief of their parents as an acceptable price for larger goals.

At Christmas time we might rejoice with the children brought from Nauru to Australia. We might also hope that their release reflects a change in the moral imagination of politicians, and not simply a changed instrumental calculus. And we should continue to press for the children and their families to find a permanent home in Australia and for the release from Manus Island and Nauru of all people who have sought our protection. Christmas puts human beings first.



Nativity, Sieger Köder

Questions for reflection:

As we meet for the final time in 2018 reflect upon our shared ministry this year...

- ❖ share the joy of the moments when members of our community have treated others 'as precious and with respect for their inherent worth'
- ❖ as we approach Christmas, for whom in our immediate and extended community do we need to consider 'the extent of the suffering and the worthiness of those who suffer?'

Take a moment to celebrate with one another the joy of the shared work of 2018 and the hope with which it draws us forward...

A Christmas Blessing

(Joyce Rupp)

May there be harmony in all your relationships. May sharp words, envious thoughts, and hostile feelings be dissolved.

May you give and receive love generously. May this love echo in your heart like the joy of church bells on a clear December day.

May each person who comes into your life be greeted as another Christ. May the honour given the Babe of Bethlehem be that which you extend to every guest who enters your presence.

May the hope of this sacred season settle in your soul. May it be a foundation of courage for you when times of distress occupy your inner land.

May the wonder and awe that fills the eyes of children be awakened within you. May it lead you to renewed awareness and appreciation of whatever you too easily take for granted.

May the bonds of love for one another be strengthened as you gather with your family and friends around the table of festivity and nourishment.

May you daily open the gift of your life and be grateful for the hidden treasures it contains.

May the coming year be one of good health for you. May you have energy and vitality. May you care well for you body, mind, and spirit.

May you keep your eye on the Star within you and trust this Luminescent Presence to guide and direct you each day.

May you go often to the Bethlehem of your heart and visit the One who offers you peace. May you bring this peace into our world.

