

Goodness in Dark Places

It is the week of Refugees and Migrants. Because of what I have seen and lived, I know that the journey of refuge or migration is a dark, difficult place. Yet there is always goodness to be seen.

Let me take you there.

A refugee camp on the Thai Cambodia border. Almost two hundred thousand people are crammed into a small space sheltering under bamboo and blue plastic tarps. No running water. No electricity. Not enough food. Brutal guards. There is no 'safe haven' here. A woman who has just stumbled through a hole in the fence and into the camp clings to me, convulsed in sobs. A wide-eyed toddler clasps at her sarong and looks up. His mother is gasping for breath and blurting her sorrow. Government forces suspected her husband of 'something'. They killed him in front of her despite her screams. They snatched the baby from her arms and swung him against a tree. The little boy looking up has seen it too. He makes no sound. My tee shirt is soaked with tears. Close beside me are other Cambodian refugees. She belongs in their arms, not mine. This community that knows how to love and to heal. They will take her, hear her, show her how to stay safe, protect her. There is goodness here.

A western suburb of Melbourne. A strongly built, gentle, South Sudanese man sits at the kitchen table, stirring sugar into his mug of tea. I have known his family during the time that the youngest three of his six children were born. Usually we talk of day-to-day things. Today he is thoughtful. He glances at the crucifix on the wall. 'I was about 9 when my eldest sister was tortured all day by the invading Sudan soldiers ... she died, and we cared for her little, little baby ... then our family separated in danger ... I ran north ... sheltered for a while by the Salesians'. We sit silently drinking our tea. 'Grew older ... thought I was safe ... dared to attend a Catholic wedding further outside the Salesian walls ... imprisoned without trial ... accused of being Christian...stripped and publicly whipped.' He stands, boils the kettle again. There is nothing I can say. 'Like Jesus' he says. He fled to Egypt, was recognised as a refugee and now is a poorly paid security guard in outer western Melbourne, a place that our media describes as very dangerous. 'I think this is what God wants in my life. Of course.' he says. 'I can keep young South Sudan kids out of trouble there and protect people from racist attacks'. Again, I sense the goodness that enlarges in terrible times.

I have heard such stories time and again in the public housing towers in Melbourne where new arrivals living in poverty congregate.

By the grace of God, I do believe, an experience that tests a person to the limits can be a seedbed of human goodness. [read more]

William Butler Yeats in his poem 'Easter 1916' reflected on the transformation that can arise in times of suffering and sacrifice.

All is changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born.

Of the Melbourne public housing towers, I can only tell of what I have seen: lifts that don't work, windows that won't open, public spaces not maintained, mothers hauling babies in pushers up steep concrete stairs, serious overcrowding. I watch recently arrived refugees and migrants with no secure employment making it their home. It is the best they can hope for. Neighbours help neighbours.

A nurse, gowned in full personal protective equipment, was fearful when assigned to virus-test the residents in their homes in the towers. Day after day she knocked on doors. Nobody refused to be tested. She reflected: 'I left ... with a full heart thanks to all the "thank yous" and "I love yous" from the residents. We were invited into many homes, and even offered tea and coffee. We felt like guests.

In the most dangerous times on the Cambodia border, during the darkness of night and the closeness of war, no foreigners were permitted to work this risky place. However, the woman I met at the edge of the camp and thousands of vulnerable people were protected by a strong network of 'Cambodians help Cambodians'. Whenever war came to the edge of the camp and shells dropped into this crowded space, whenever bandits came looting and raping, Cambodians risked their lives to reach beyond their own families to protect those most defenceless. In the final days, as the camp neared its end, there was arson ripping through the bamboo structures. There was banditry from outside. The network of refugees caring for their most vulnerable continued without pause.

The South Sudanese father knows, as other refugees and migrants all know, that they work for their children to have a better life. He has abandoned his hope for a tertiary education and found work through a labour hire firm. Employed as a casual he must accept the roster, sparse or adequate, that comes up on his phone each week. He understands that his rights as an employee are not protected in this system, that he wears the uniform of a trusted security organisation but is not paid by them. Worksafe cannot assist him, the labour hire firms, his employees, keep dissolving, disappearing and sometimes emerging with a new name. It is exploitation but he dreads unemployment. This is better than his years of unemployment. He helps newcomers to navigate this system as best they can, and to nevertheless hold on to their dignity. Most of all he mentors and challenges young people within the community of South Sudanese Australians.

Now, in 2020, the truth of goodness in dark times is being observed everywhere.