The Good Society: Borders and Exiles

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Andrew Bowyer

Genesis 3: 21 – 4: 12 *Ephesians 2: 4–end*

'Good fences make good neighbours', or so people affirm when they're quoting Robert Frost's poem out of context:

> Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
> What I was walling in or walling out,
> And to whom I was like to give offence.
> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That wants it down.[1]

Borders and walls demarcate a country called home in contrast to a foreign land. They mark out who's familiar and who remains strange. They define the citizen in opposition to the alien. Countless people have died to protect borders and they've died trying to escape them. Borders can become sacred things; sites for human sacrifice. Political careers have been built on dismantling walls; others on building them. Borders can be marked-out by fortified concrete, or they can be invisible to the eye. Borders of the mind are none the less defining. Borders enable us to protect what we value. Because we have borders, we also have exiles. Exiles are those forced from home, across borders, into new and unfamiliar territory.

Please have look at the copy of the fresco by Masaccio in the service booklet. It was painted in 1427 and is entitled *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. The first humans, Adam and Eve, are forced out of the garden. A threatening angelic being wields a sword barring the way back. Masaccio's Adam and Eve move across a threshold into a barren landscape. Their steps are languid and halting. Their gestures differ according to the gender stereotypes of the time. Adam's hands are lifted to his face: there's shame in the public expression of emotion, the corruption of reason.[2] Eve's face is visible, contorted with grief; her shame is bodily and sexual. When I saw it, it reminded me of a report I'd read about single women on the refugee route from Syria, pretending to be married to single men along the way, so as to ensure better treatment at borders and in the hope of reducing their exposure to sexual violence. The fresco combines two scenes of the biblical story into one: the fall from an original state of blessing and the eviction from Eden. It's the journey from innocence – from the womb, from home – into a world of insecurity, anxiety and violence. In the Bible, this is the first forced migration. An angel is set up to maintain the first border. Universal experiences of alienation, loss and displacement are captured here.

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[1] Frost, R. 'Mending Wall', www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44266/mending-wall

[2] Clifton, J. 'Gender and Shame in Masaccio's Expulsion from the Garden of Eden', *Art History*, December 1999, Vol. 22(5), pp. 637–655

Italy is the home to Masaccio's fresco and it's the country that has, in recent times, received an influx of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean. Shortly after he was elected, Pope Francis made his first official visit to Lampedusa, a tiny Italian Island of 6,000 inhabitants. Like Lesvos in Greece, the island sits on the outer frontier of the Schengen migration zone; both are vulnerable points in national borders, accessible by the small inflatable boats favoured by people-smugglers. The International Organisation for Migration reports that 13,000 people died attempting to make this sea crossing in the four years between 2014 and 2017. The Pope visited to show solidarity. He said this:

> In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn't affect me; it doesn't concern me; it's none of my business!
>
> "Adam, where are you?" "[Cain,] where is your brother?" These are the two questions which God asks at the dawn of human history, and which he also asks each man and woman in our own day, which he also asks us. But I would like us to ask a third question: "Has any one of us wept because of this situation and others like it?" Has any one of us grieved for the death of these brothers and sisters?[3]

The Pope was speaking in 2013, and the problem was set to worsen, with the flow of people heading north reaching a peak in 2015 as the situation in Syria deteriorated.

When I want to try to understand the issues around global migration beyond the headlines, I read the Oxford economist Paul Collier. He's collaborated with scholars of migration to write books that combine fact-based analysis with a moral commitment to compassion and the dignity of each life.

He comments that 'global modernity has not only produced technological miracles like the IPhone, and more that 1,800 billionaires; it has broken all records for the human tragedies that constitute displacement.'[4] Writing in 2017 he notes that the total number displaced by violence is 65.3 million, the highest figure ever recorded.

Focusing on the so-called European migration crisis, Collier notes that the greatest source countries are Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. They all have two things in common: society-wide violence and the breakdown of state institutions. For all the panic in Western Europe about the burden posed by refugees, it's a fact that the heaviest responsibility falls on the immediate neighbours. Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran and Jordan host almost 7 million registered refugees between them. To put that in some context, the UK offered protection to almost 16,000 people in 2018 and hosts a total refugee population of 124,000.[5]

In his book *Refuge; Transforming a Broken Refugee System*, Collier focuses on what he calls 'survival migration'. The label describes people who leave their countries because they find it impossible to secure minimum conditions of human dignity. Many find themselves in a neither/nor situation: neither are they recognized as genuine refugees under the current legal definition, nor are they simply voluntary economic migrants. Collier argues that those forced to flee Syria have three undesirable options. They can join the 21 million warehoused in refugee camps, where they may languish for years without any right to work, and with

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[3] Pope Francis, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa

[4] Betts, A. and Collier, P. *Refuge; Transforming a Broken Refugee System*, London: Penguin, 2017, 15.

[5] UNHCR, 'Asylum in the UK', www.unhcr.org/uk/asylum-in-the-uk

limited opportunities for their children. They can make their way to urban centres in the developing world, risking destitution and exploitation in the informal economy. Or they can make perilous journeys to Western Europe, risking drowning, harassment and exploitation, as those currently trapped on the Libyan coast or in Calais know only too well.

Collier notes that Western government responses to survival migrants tend to lurch between that of a 'headless heart' and a 'heartless head'.

The 'headless heart' demands open borders. It makes this demand sporadically, whenever the suffering of survival migrants enters the brief attention span of the mass media. It may express genuine compassion to the few who make it to the border, but it may fail to find the will for the serious allocation of resources to advance the prospects of the far greater number left behind in refugee camps.

By contrast, the response of the heartless head demands that no hospitality be shown to survival migrants whatsoever. It demands the slashing of humanitarian aid. It wants sealed borders and the cancelling of search and rescue operations on the Mediterranean; destitution and death as a deterrent. The heartless head is often driven by populist anti-foreigner sentiment; it ignores the gross structural inequality that divides the world's population, it feels no responsibility for the suffering stranger.

The challenges are huge and the situation is complex. There's no simple answer, and the problem isn't going away. 'The dynamics of conflict, climate change, and state fragility [mean] that displacement – and survival migration – will be a defining feature of the twenty-first century and beyond.'[6]

The Bible is full of the language of borders and exiles: again and again we hear references to resident aliens, strangers and foreigners, sojourners and citizens. After murdering his brother, Cain is doomed to wander the earth. The Israelites were survival migrants, fleeing slavery and then wandering through a desert for 40 years. They developed an acute moral sensitivity for the plight of the resident alien and displaced foreigner, evident throughout the Old Testament law.

'Thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.' Exodus, Chapter 23.

Later, after Jerusalem had been destroyed in war, most of the traumatised population was forcibly deported to Babylon and a generation lived in exile. Centuries later, facing persecution within Roman Empire, the first generation of Christians described themselves as resident aliens. They looked to Christ: the one who arrived as a stranger, only to be exiled on a cross. They embraced the paradox that Christ's exile made a homecoming to God possible. His arms open wide on the cross, offering God's hospitality to all: peace to those near and those far off.

What sort of a presence should today's Church have in the continuing debates about borders and exiles?

The church is a symbol of the 'catholic' [that is, the universal] love of God for his creation. It witnesses to the truth that all humans have a common origin and destiny. A faithful church will refuse calls to worship national borders. It will accept borders as pragmatic things that need to be well managed. However, the Church will also insist that a border is only made good by the hospitality that's extended across it. A faithful church will hold on to the dangerous memory of Jesus; the one who reminds us that the stranger in our midst bears the image of God.

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[6] *Refuge*, 134.

When I think of the contribution of the Church to this issue:

- I think of a monk who moved from the safety of a monastery to start a house of welcome to refugees in Calais; extending a welcome to those subject to hostility and destitution.
- I think of a priest on the Hungarian border who offered shelter in his parish hall to Muslim Syrian refugees in the height of the crisis in 2015, when opposition to foreigners was at fever pitch.
- I think of the Jesuit refugee service here in the UK, offering a human face and practical support to those languishing in the immigration detention system, and those appealing Home Office decisions.

These are small gestures, but they are pockets of resistance to the globalisation of indifference.

As we open our hearts before God in prayer tonight, may we remember:

- all who are uprooted because of violence, poverty and environmental breakdown;
- all who have died on perilous journeys;
- all unaccompanied children on the refugee trail;
- all who are subject to immigration dentation and those charged with their care.

Justice is the manifestation of love in conditions of conflict. And so may we pray for *that*, and for the coming of God's peaceable kingdom.