

Let Us Pod

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'Migration' with Sister Moira McDowall

Sister Moira McDowall

Moira McDowall is a Sister of La Retraite. She worked for many years in Brussels with a team of Belgian Jesuits on a variety of social justice issues, specialising in migration and asylum. She has lived in Bristol since 2002, a member of the La Retraite community at Emmaus House Retreat and Conference Centre, where she continues to combine her passion for faith and politics, justice and spirituality. She is a member of the Clifton Diocese Justice & Peace Commission.

Full text of podcast

A friend once gave me a poster. It was a collage of all sorts of different faces but together they became the face of Christ. I often think of this poster when I think of migration in our world today, the great variety of faces we now see all around us, in nearly all of our cities and towns. Together, as the poster so cleverly portrays, we make up the Body of Christ and show Christ's face to the world.

It's a bit of a cliché to talk of people as always being 'on the move' and yet it's true. In biblical times we hear the people being reminded of their journey out of Egypt into the Promised Land. The book of Deuteronomy says: 'My father was a wandering Aramaean. He went down into Egypt to find refuge there. The Egyptians ill-treated us. But we called on Yahweh the God of our fathers. Yahweh heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and oppression; and Yahweh brought us out of Egypt and gave us this land, where milk and honey flow.'

This Exodus experience was to influence every aspect of people's lives and relationships, particularly their attitudes towards those in need. Not only widows and orphans but strangers too, as we hear in Leviticus: 'If a stranger lives with you in your land do not molest him. You must count him as one of your own countrymen and love him as yourself for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh your God.'

The parallels with people on the move today are obvious, but at a deeper level they also speak of each of our journeys in faith, whatever the events of our individual lives or societies, and our relationship through them with the God who saves?

This makes me think of a Congolese friend Gabriel. When I first met him Gabriel was an asylum seeker, whose claim had been refused. He was going through the appeals procedure. He had no way of proving each of the circumstances that had forced him to flee his homeland or why he risked his life if he was sent back there. He was a young man, full of all sorts of potential but he was completely alone in an alien land, without friends and family. All he had left in fact was his faith and his integrity. He had tried to live his life according to the teachings of the Gospel and he was ready to assume the consequences of his choice, and this no one could take from him. Although he didn't realise it Gabriel taught me something profound about my own faith for wasn't Jesus also left alone to assume the choices he had made in his life, even if this meant his Passion and death? In the end, Gabriel's agony and passion also led to resurrection as a witness was found. He eventually received refugee status and was able to start a new life, working with other young refugees.

Gabriel is one of the many refugees and migrants I have had the privilege to know over the years. Although I have sometimes been perplexed by their customs or ways of thinking, over and over again I have found myself inspired and profoundly moved by their courage and generosity, their hope and their dignity, which I know too have influenced the way I try to live.

But that's just it perhaps, for it seems to me that through the sometimes dramatic circumstances of their particular journeys, the stranger mirrors the joys and sorrows, the hopes and dreams of us all, including our fears and emotions, the bits about ourselves we find hardest to cope with. Migrants and refugees invite us to look at ourselves, to get a bit of perspective, to grow in compassion and rejoice in our common humanity.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells the story of the Last Judgment. All the nations are assembled before the King. When he is asked: "Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick or in prison and visit you, clothe the naked, give the thirsty to drink, visit the sick or those in prison and see you a stranger and make you welcome?" the King replies: "in so far as you did this to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me"

This passage, which names the most basic of human needs, touches the heart of our Christian faith. It is the way we are invited to recognise Christ in our world and be Christ to each other, all of us together, wherever we're from and wherever we are. This is what my old poster is all about!

And how are we to do these things? In whatever way we can, as Jesus shows us in other parts of the Gospels. The emphasis though is on service. An attitude of service doesn't deny the challenges of migration; it doesn't stop us taking appropriate action when called for and indeed, as in St Matthew's Gospel it may encourage is to do so – but it's always how we do it. The focus is on the humble service of hospitality, dialogue and respect, of "being with" of listening and trying to understand, of trying to love my neighbour, whoever they are and wherever they're from, as I try to love God and to love myself.

In the words of the hymn, "Servant Song" Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you; pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

Useful contacts

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