



# Justice News

Newsletter of the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee

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## A deplorable way of treating vulnerable people

The prolonged and indefinite incarceration of asylum seekers in remote and overcrowded detention centres is a deplorable way of treating vulnerable people who have come to Australia seeking refuge and protection. In recent weeks there have been reports of disturbances in detention centres, severe overcrowding of facilities, cases of detainees held for inordinate periods of time and instances of self-harm. Tragically, there have been further cases of desperate detainees taking their own lives.

The arrival of asylum seekers on boats and the manner in which they are subsequently treated continue to be the subject of divisive and emotive political debate. Amid a barrage of political slogans, personal invective and point scoring, the personal plight of these vulnerable people remains generally ignored.

It is clear that both international law and Australian law allow a person to enter Australia in order to seek asylum. To then lock these people up for prolonged and indefinite periods in remote detention centres is harsh, punitive and unfair. Placing vulnerable people who have fled violence and persecution into these situations adds further anxiety and trauma to their lives. Despair and a sense of utter helplessness result in cases of mental illness often leading to self-harm or even suicide.

The Director of the Jesuit Refugee Service Australia has recently observed that at current rates the Department of Immigration and Citizenship will soon be running the "largest prison system in Australia" with a prison population made up of people who are not criminals. He pointed out that convicted criminals get a better deal than asylum seekers in that they at least know the length of their prison sentences and also have easier and better access to the legal system and to other services.

In 2008 the government announced its intention to adopt a "risk-based" detention policy whereby asylum seekers would only be detained for the purpose of establishing that they posed no health, identity or security risk to the community. Moreover, detention was to be used as a last resort and for the shortest practicable time. Clearly this has not happened and as a result asylum seekers can understandably conclude that their prolonged and indeterminate detention in these remote centres constitutes a deliberate and unjust punishment of them.

It is time to adopt a better and more compassionate asylum seeker policy. Early assessments of asylum seekers need to be undertaken and those who pose no risk or danger to the community should be moved quickly into an appropriate community setting where they can be properly supported.

Bishop Christopher Saunders, the Chairman of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council in a recent statement on detention said this about asylum seekers –

"These people are in need of compassion and security. The appallingly long time it takes to process their claims is a sad condemnation of our moral worth as a people who pride ourselves in always preserving a spirit of fairness."

The current way in which asylum seekers are detained is harsh, punitive and unjust. It has got to stop.



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## Lessons from Jesus the Refugee

People leave their homeland for many reasons, including, war, racism, religious persecution, societal breakdown, ecological and economic collapse. Current emotive arguments about the number of refugees coming to Australia in boats, indicate that political discussion in this country is driven by fear and is falling to the lowest common denominator. The ideas of 'a fair go' and basic humanitarian values seem to be put to one side while political leaders and their party hacks spend all their time scoring points.

Confronted as I am with this long running debate, I remember the story of Jesus. Jesus was a refugee. Jesus, escorted by Joseph and Mary and under the threat of death from those in power, fled from his birthplace to Egypt. Jesus was born on the West Bank of Palestine, which today has a giant inhuman wall passing through and around it with Israeli soldiers intimidating those who seek to go through their checkpoints.

After the death of the political tyrant, Herod, the Holy Family returned to Galilee where Jesus grew up under foreign control and manipulation. Roman occupation swiftly and brutally dealt with any dissent. Yet within this context Jesus began his ministry from the margins, not from within the Jerusalem Temple establishment but from the desert. Today, he would be called subversive. Among his friends and disciples were zealots, people who today would be called terrorists. In the end the Jewish religious establishment and the Roman political machine joined forces and had him crucified.

Two important matters arise for me from the Jesus account. The vast majority of people become refugees because they suffer in their homeland under morally bankrupt political systems and/or from the greed of corporate powers. Furthermore, they receive an inhospitable response from places where they seek refuge because of a political and societal mindset driven by fear and misinformation instead of clearheadedness and compassion.

The *second* thing I notice about the Jesus story is that he sought to challenge the very mindset of those in power. He was not murdered on a cross because he went about healing and doing good. By his words and actions Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God. This vision of the Kingdom included the idea that we are *one* human family with *one* Father (see the "Our Father"). Jesus' Kingdom message included everyone having bread to eat and thus the opportunity to work to support themselves and their family. His vision included financial debts being forgiven and people being reconciled. The Kingdom of God included resistance to all systemic powers that dehumanise and destroy people and God's vision for all creation.

It is apparent that politicians on both sides seem uninterested in addressing the fundamental causes or needs of the refugee diaspora. Recently I heard a scientist say, "It's time to stop listening to spin doctors and radio jocks and it's time to start listening to the science." Right! It is also time to stop listening to the same mindless chatter from our politicians. Let's ask ourselves what promotes Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God. It is precisely this vision we should be working towards.

**Rev Dr Kevin Yelverton**

## After the apology ...? Business as usual!

Until 2008, Australians had a collective guilty conscience about their nation's treatment of its original inhabitants. This land was ruled and owned until just over two centuries ago by numerous thriving Aboriginal nations. But the British colonisers ended all that and stopped at almost nothing to seize government and ownership of Aboriginal lands, even attempting to breed the race out of existence. Then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology was supposed to right all those wrongs and establish unity between white and black Australia for the first time. The persistence of the Labor government with the Northern Territory intervention, sadly, gives the lie to that supposition.



White Australians regard as unconditional their rights to adequate health care, education, housing and income support. When accused before the courts of crimes on which their religious or cultural beliefs have some bearing, they expect the latter to be taken into account in determining guilt and punishment. White Australians introduced alcohol to this country and freely admit that it causes serious social problems. However, they will not tolerate attempted solutions by authorities that have not resulted from full and proper consultations.

Black Australians under the Northern Territory Intervention can take none of these rights for granted. If they want adequate housing, they have to give up their recently hard won rights to their traditional lands to 99 year leases to the government, and move to urban hubs sometimes great distances away. Schools and health services also will be provided only in these hubs. Centrelink payments can be spent only on specified items and only in stores licensed for this purpose, usually very long distances away from Aboriginal homelands. Access to alcohol and pornography is also restricted. The governments argue that this is to protect the people, especially the children of the NT, from gross exploitation. They claim that these measures no longer conflict with the federal Racial Discrimination Act because they are special measures, measures designed to benefit the relevant communities, or which do not discriminate on the basis of race.

A 'special measure' under United Nations conventions must result only from the consent of the affected people. These have been imposed despite the people's opposition. The extension of some of the restrictions to non-Aboriginals is tokenistic because the vast majority of those affected are still Aboriginal people. Moreover, Aboriginal people agree that problems associated with alcohol and pornography as well as other social problems need to be addressed, and their representatives have proposed strategies for addressing them. But the governments – both Labor and Liberal - have been driven by their own agenda in these affairs. What is that agenda? According to retired Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia in a recent speech to the *The John Barry Memorial Symposium*:

I think that as time passes it becomes clear that the intervention was an exercise in social engineering to destroy Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal attachment to their traditional lands and to force Aboriginal people into suburban agglomerations and adopt a white life style.

**Michael Leahy**

Those wishing to support the right of aboriginal Australians to self-determination can sign a petition to that effect at <http://www.gopetition.com/petition/44188.html>.

The petition is addressed to the UN Human Rights Commissioner and is in the following terms -

Dear Navi Pillay, Welcome to Australia. We are calling on you to encourage Government to end the Northern Territory Intervention and to restore the rights of Aboriginal people. The people were not consulted before the Intervention nor have they given their consent to it. Control over land and communities must be returned to Aboriginal people. Changes to the law are urgently needed to restore and protect the rights of Aboriginal peoples in the NT to determine their own futures. We ask you for your assistance.

## Tackling poverty through trade

In Geelong there are at least two Fairtrade outlets. They are the OXFAM shop in Westfield shopping centre and the Catholic Church's Wing and a Prayer Shop in Malop St. (opposite Officeworks). Both these shops sell goods made by people in developing countries and the money for goods sold goes straight back to the people who made them so that they can feed their families and build up their cottage industries.

What is Fair Trade? In 2003 the Fair Trade Association Australia & New Zealand became active in Australia and can be simply expressed as:

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## Tackling poverty through trade (cont'd)

- Fairtrade is about better prices
- decent working conditions
- local sustainability and
- fair terms of trade for farmers and workers in the developing world.

Living and working in Australia we are quite insulated from much that occurs in the supply chain of products including manufactured goods, clothing, cotton products, tea, coffee, and chocolate – to name a few. Given the complexity of supply chain logistics it is understandable that most people believe that they are powerless to stop the abuses that happen, mostly in countries far away from where we live. The suggestion that we cannot make a difference is no more valid today than it was 200 years ago when William Wilberforce was successful in getting the Abolition Act into English law on 25 March 1807. But as we know the story of slavery did not end there and currently there are over 27 million slaves in the world today.

If you are not already involved in Fairtrade in Australia make a start now. Buy your gifts/presents from Fairtrade shops such as the Oxfam Shop and Wing and a Prayer.... you will be making a difference.

*Shirley Carroll*

## Supporting Project Compassion 2011

**It's not too late!**



Project Compassion not only supports long-term development projects in over 35 countries, but also enables Caritas to initiate rapid response to emergencies the world over. By supporting Australia's largest aid and development fundraising appeal, you can make a big difference where aid is needed the most.

Caritas Australia creates positive change by alleviating poverty and bringing hope, life, peace and justice to many disadvantaged communities throughout the world, including Indigenous communities in Australia.

Caritas Australia helps people help themselves — regardless of race, religion or political beliefs.

**Donate through Project Compassion boxes** - Returning them to Parishes or Schools

**Donate By Phone** - Call the Caritas Australia toll free hotline on 1800 024 413

**Donate online** at [www.caritas.org.au](http://www.caritas.org.au)

**Donate By Mail** - Send cheques/money orders made payable to 'Caritas Australia' to:  
Caritas Australia, GPO Box 9830, in your capital city

**Donations of \$2 or more are tax deductible**

## Justice News

*Justice News* is a publication of the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee, and is authorised and published by the Committee's co-ordinator, Kevin Yelverton, c/- St Mary's Parish Office, 150 Yarra Street, Geelong 3220 ([kbyelverton@bigpond.com](mailto:kbyelverton@bigpond.com)).

The Committee welcomes letters and comments in response to items published in *Justice News*. All letters and comments are placed before the Committee and will be replied to wherever possible. The Committee can be contacted via its coordinator, Kevin Yelverton.

Earlier issues of *Justice News* and further information about the Social Justice Committee are available on the website of the Justice Unit of the Archdiocese of Melbourne at <http://www.cam.org.au/justice/geelongdeanery.htm>

