

## June 20: World Refugee Day

In the cruel world of the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution an English poet wrote an ironic version of the Ten Commandments as practiced in Great Britain. The Fifth Commandment was:

Thou shalt not kill, but needs not strive

Officiously to keep alive.

In Arthur Hugh Clough's usage 'officiously' did not mean 'bossily' as it commonly does today, but as 'one of the duties of your office'. The lines implied that governments and employers were not entitled to kill the people who depended on them, but had no responsibility to prevent them from dying of starvation.

As we mark World Refugee Day this year Clough's lines speak to our world, too. Throughout the world preoccupied with coronavirus and the difficulties of overcoming it, people are tempted to be focused on their own lives, their own families and their own nations. They may see people who are outside their own group or their own country sometimes as threats to their health to be expelled and excluded, sometimes as a burden, and always as people to whom they have no responsibility.

We see this in the way wealthy societies hoard vaccine and refuse to make it available to people in poor nations, the way in which passing boats leave refugees fleeing in sinking boats, the way in which governments lock their doors against immigrants and visitors and even their own citizens caught outside the nation. It is seen also in the treatment of refugees and overseas students already living in the nation. It is reflected, too, in the general lack of sympathy for refugees both in developed nations and seeking to go there.

This is a global phenomenon that threatens to erode compassion for all people who suffer from disadvantage or are different, as are so many of the people whom Jesuit Social Services serves. The lack of sympathy for refugees is reflected in Australia in the separation of family members within Australia, the way in which security is appealed to in order to make detention centres inhumane, the sudden decisions to process people who have sought protection for seven years or more, with a finishing date that will prevent many from seeking legal advice essential for their cause, and in the cruel detention of people in hotels which offer the sights and sound of freedom while depriving people of its reality.

In the present climate it would be wishful thinking that things will change soon. In public debates governments will win more votes than they lose through the brutal treatment of refugees. If we care for refugees, then, we must be in for the long haul, encouraging one another 'officiously to keep alive', to take the opportunity to meet refugees, to speak on their behalf to our friends and institutions, to keep writing to government ministers and our members of parliament in support of people in detention and in the community, and to ask more of our government. When the national mood changes from suspicion of outsiders to a more hospitable outlook, we must be ready to encourage it. Hospitality to refugees must begin in hospitable hearts which ultimately will outlive the walls that fear and prejudice erect against it.