

The inviolable inherent dignity of Aylan Kurdi

Fr Frank Brennan SJ AO
06 September 2015

It's wonderful for a Jesuit to have an opportunity to address a captive audience of 2000 persons in the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House about 'What I believe'. I believe it is a privilege and a blessing to appear on stage with such a diverse and talented group of speakers who have thought long and hard about what they believe ultimately matters.

We will be able to do this confident that there will be no violence and no personal abuse despite strongly held conflicting world views. I believe it is a privilege and a blessing to be able to preach though briefly in the Sydney Opera House, enjoying a box seat to listen to my co-presenters who, like me, will be judged by their fruits rather than by their critique of others.

I believe this serious task can be undertaken only with a touch of fun and play, and I am delighted that some other speakers are so much more deft than I with humour.

These last few days, all of us, no matter what our politics, no matter what our comprehensive worldview, have been arrested by the image of Aylan Kurdi, the dead boy washed ashore on a Turkish beach in his all too familiar clothes.

I believe in Aylan's inviolable, inherent dignity as a human being like all of us, no matter what side of a national border we might live. I believe that a globe of 7.3 billion people with inviolable, inherent dignity confronts huge challenges and real evil when almost 60 million people are displaced, when inequality is increasing, and when climate change is accelerating.

I believe that secure national borders for a country as geographically and jurisprudentially isolated as Australia confronts an enormous moral challenge, and that we are falling short, badly and selfishly.

Though I am a Catholic priest, I believe it is a privilege and a blessing to live as a person with multiple affiliations. I would hate to live in a theocracy even if it were run by popes and bishops. I believe it is a privilege and a blessing to live in a polity which is pluralist and democratic, with a commitment to transparency and the rule of law.

I believe we are all capable of professing huge ideals while admitting our human limitations. In a secular age and environment, we religious people are judged to be martyrs or hypocrites. But I believe we can profess ideals, fall down, seek forgiveness and start again as flawed individuals with noble ideals.

I believe that all of us are open to the transcendent, while being fully grounded in our material being. Some of us seek it through the arts and human excellence embracing the bounds of the scientifically knowable. Others of us seek it through the religious experience of a relationship with a creator and even a redeemer. I believe we are our

best and we produce the finest fruits when we form and inform our conscience, and to that conscience are true.

I believe that the strength of our age is found in the prizing of the individual, in human rights, in self-determination, and in non-discrimination. But I further believe these notions are inadequate without a commitment to community, the common good and the public interest.

I believe that whatever the shortcomings of institutional religion, the occasional leader like Pope Francis whether he stands on the foreshore at Lampedusa and asks 'Why' or gives the press conference on a plane asking, 'Who am I to judge?', is able to inspire us all as he juggles the balls of care for creation, concern for the poor and marginalised, commitment to the common good, and interior peace.

I believe that we live in a time when the quest for meaning and transcendence is a uniquely personal journey and that tradition, authority, ritual and community count for less for many who find institutional religion a bar rather than an aid to spiritual enlightenment.

I believe we are privileged and blessed as human beings to enjoy a sense of belonging and relationship not only with each other, but with the whole of creation, as scientists like Peter Doherty expand our horizons and philosophers like A. C. Grayling deepen our foundations for inter-disciplinary learnings.

I believe that politics matters, because there are matters which can be resolved only by civic deliberation by persons with diametrically opposed comprehensive worldviews. I believe that law matters, because otherwise politics risks becoming simply the will of the majority without regard for the legitimate aspirations of all, even those who are despised and powerless.

I believe that constitutional arrangements matter because the foundations of our laws and politics need to recognise the abiding realities of our polity, including the history and aspirations of Indigenous Australians.

I believe in the language and jurisprudence of human rights because it is the discourse which allows the cross-fertilisation of ideas between different societies about how best to protect the inviolable inherent dignity of all persons. I believe that an understanding of our interdependence matters — an appreciation that my peace, wealth and security is dependent on the same social matrix which denies peace, wealth and security to others. I believe that our commitment to solidarity matters — taking a stand with those on the margins even when justice in the short term is unachievable.

I believe that we get the politicians we deserve. I believe that politicians like Angela Merkel make a real difference when compared to our run of the mill leaders like Tony Abbott and Bill Shorten because the likes of Merkel are more humane, more noble, more worthy, and more blessed, regardless of the short term political consequences confronting them.

I believe it always helps to eyeball both the decision makers and those adversely affected by those decisions. At least it stops you from becoming sanctimonious or intellectually smug.

I believe that each of us can make a difference by enacting a comprehensive worldview which accounts for the inviolable inherent dignity of Aylan Kurdi.

I believe it's a privilege and blessing for us to enjoy the fruits of the good life behind secure national borders. I believe that we must share those fruits with those on the other side of those borders.

Thank you for this opportunity to share what I believe. Thanks especially to those who could not disagree with me more strongly. May you too bear abundant fruit in a world crying out for good to triumph over evil. May we continue to respect and uphold the inviolable inherent dignity of each other.

Fr Brennan is a Jesuit priest, professor of law at the Australian Catholic University, and adjunct professor at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, as well as the College of Law and the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University. This article first appeared on [Eureka Street](#).