



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Global Coronavirus: Homeless Migrants

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One of the most poignant pictures on our TV screen lately has been the pale face and dissheveled hair of the British PM, Boris Johnson. His normally vibrant eyes seemed lightless. Johnson is 55 years old, a former journalist and a mastermind behind Brexit. No-one knew the recently elected prime-minister of the United Kingdom was that ill, infected by the dreadful covid-19.

For a week he was seen outside 10 Downing Street, then suddenly he was wheeled into in the Intensive Care Unit of St Thomas' Hospital in London. He survived three nights, in his close encounter with death. And when he came out, he praised the medical staff of the hospital but singled out two nurses, both migrants, one from New Zealand, the other from Portugal. They saved my life: it was touch and go but they kept a 48 hour-vigil; every moment was precious, he admitted.

'But for their intensive care, it could have gone either way', the PM reflected once he could breathe freely.

The world took a sigh of relief in the belief that Britain will now do something to save lives: almost 2 million people world over are now infected and billions others are affected in one way or another. The gist of this story is that two migrant workers in their medical capacity saved the life of a newly elected prime minister at the risk of their own lives. It's an illuminating truth of our lives. Moments like these shape our humanity through the beatings of our hearts close to another's.

But like all good stories there's another one hidden behind the lines. Our treatment of migrants: almost everywhere in Europe migrants are shunned: many die in the dark seas, in the lorries, on the fields and by the lonely roads while on their desperate journeys in search of a new life. One wretched leader is already equating the virus with migrants--both he says are 'movements'. The implications are insidious. One can imagine once we're out of this overwhelming tragedy that the poor and the vulnerable will be marginalized, with racial and religious colourings.

You can see that in the greatest democracy, the US, and in the largest, India.

The crowds at the Indian railway stations, at the bus depots, tell the disaster, just below the surface, was waiting to happen. These 'migrant workers' are the blossoms in the dust, the nectar in the sieve, millions of them who dwell in the shadows of big buildings exploited by 'slum-dog millionaires'.

Instead of providing them free transport to their remote villages, these 'migrant workers', citizens of the nation, are walking miles with their children and their little burdens while the police chase them with their lathis wearing khaki uniforms, reminiscent of the brutal days of the Raj.

It's a great shame: and some leaders tell their people to recite mantras, light lamps, toll the bells (ghanti bajao!) and shout: Corona go back to China. But China is not listening. Instead it's hiding the facts and the precise figures just as it hid the virus and destroyed the one honest doctor who first revealed its presence among people. He's probably lying in some unmarked grave as the enemy of the State.

Even in the Pacific our treatment of a handful of asylum seekers has been shameful and sad. And now suddenly we're all seeking asylum in our homes, in self-isolation. Even at home one is longing for a home: a house is not a home: where are your children? They can't visit you; the schools and shops are shuttered; the neighbours are keeping their social distances; and friends avoid you; just in case you carry the sinister virus hidden in your nostrils or a handshake. But human breath is a dangerous thing: it is this that makes us search for homes anywhere in the world when nasty people make you homeless.

In Australia there are at least a million migrant workers: the Morrison government is giving billions to help business, workers, airlines, universities, etc, etc--think of any institution or group and it has been propped up with the taxpayers' dollars. So it should be. The unemployment rate will go up to almost 10%, the economic downturn will be around that by the end of the year. The societal consequences and economic projections are grim. The personal tragedies will be many and varied.

In between are caught a group of people no-one seems to care: the migrant workers, on temporary visas, stranded away from their home countries--they're mainly from poorer countries; the borders are blocked; the flights cancelled, and now no work, no welfare payments. One callous minister, whose people were migrants to Australia, puts it crudely: they should go back home. But where is home for them--these people from our region? These are workers who on special visas come to Australia, earn a few dollars and work on the farms, fisheries, fruit orchards, vineyards, and vegetable gardens so that we have food on our table and wines in our cellars. No provision seems to have been made for their welfare during this horror-stricken crisis.

The treasurer of Jewish background, a capable and decent man, says we must draw the line somewhere? But where? Right at the bottom? Those who are most vulnerable, and also most valuable become valueless like thirty pieces of silver scattered in the potter's field. Who takes responsibility for these migrant workers? A few noises are made here and there. But no sustained attempt to give them a livelihood as we're giving to many millions.

And this in a largely migrant country--a civilization built by migrants from the discarded outcasts from glorious England, Ireland, Scotland and much later from the feuding, fighting Europe and a

few other broken places. Whether we like it or not, Australia and New Zealand are Indo-Pacific countries in a region, washed by two oceans. Pacific workers have been building roads, bridges, railways, sugar mills, homes, and economies for generations through black-birding, indenture, migration wherever Australasian interests are reflected.

If anything good were to come out of the current crisis: it is that there has to be a more regional approach to such a pestilence. It's not a cyclone; it's a season of anomie. Giving small amounts of aid to fight this borderless, inexorable enemy will help but we must prepare for many more 'waves' that will touch our shores and the lives and livelihood of our children and grandchildren. The responsibilities must become regional. Nationalism may show its narrow-mindedness and ugly side in any crisis, but nations may also decide to cohere and fight against a common danger that threatens us all. You're only as safe as the poorest country that is a link in the chain of our region.

'No man is an island entire unto himself...' was written long ago by the English poet John Donne. And what's not done can yet be done. We can make certain that we care for those who have given the best part of their lives as migrant workers. They deserve the care of governments which can afford to look after them. They may not be citizens, but they are on the shores of the largest island and a genuinely generous nation.