

Sermon Archive 591

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Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on UNUDHR - Article 13

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Reflection: The Problem of the Border

Article 13

Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his [or her] own, and to return to his [or her] own country.

People move about the world for many reasons. My father's official reason for moving to a new country was to train as a school teacher, since that's what he wanted to do, but was not able to do in his home country. Rumour has it, also though, that there was an element of catching up with a beautiful Kiwi woman he'd met visiting his home country the year before. Dad was a voluntary migrant - he moved eagerly, and the immigration settings of the time made it easy for him to do so. You would hardly call him "displaced". It was good he moved. I am the son of an immigrant.

More in keeping with the idea of displacement are those who move because of famine, or war, or the likelihood of persecution. The boat people; the wall climbers; the stow-aways; the applicants for asylum - who need to contend with an **unfriendly** border. Unfriendly? The border was friendly to my father. Unfriendly? A friend who finally was awarded New Zealand citizenship spent years dealing with the feeling that Immigration New Zealand would prefer that he just went away. Every success (visa, residence, citizenship) had felt like it had been begrudgingly conceded. There was no rejoicing or welcome on the Kiwi governmental side. For others who move about, it's the racist comments they hear. For others, it's the fact that immigration has been chosen by some political parties as a key election issue (the butter chicken comments and non-apology).

Article 13 protects people's rights to move about - to leave if they want or need to. It's proper protection for those who seek safe space in which to live. The complication, of course, is that it has to work in conjunction with the right of each state to determine who may enter, who may cross its borders. How can you

leave, if you have nowhere to go? I remember when we, Aotearoa New Zealand, came to the aid of 150 of the Tampa Boat people in 2001. It was after John Howard, Prime minister of Australia, boldly declared "**WE** will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come".

Lack of welcome for the stranger is no new thing. Four hundred years ago, William Shakespeare wrote of an example. So we watch Ian McKellen in a video clip.

A Video Clip: Ian McKellen delivers a piece of Shakespeare

Hymn: Community of Christ

The First Lesson: Deuteronomy 24: 17-21

A Reflection: Remember that you yourself were once an alien

The book of Deuteronomy is sort of a second version of the book of Exodus - set in a time when the Hebrew people were moving from their time of vulnerability into a time of greater confidence. Exercising the principal later to be enshrined in Article 13, they had chosen to leave one country - Egypt. They were not, any longer, going to be held in a place where they didn't want to be. And now they're travelling North, through regions where once-established authorities are capitulating to them (to their culture, to their force, to their presence, to their military might). They're becoming the insiders, the over-lords. The region is feeling more and more like it belongs to them. See that field over there? Who does it belong to? It belongs to us. And growing in that field - crops that belong to us - crops that are ours.

There will come a time when the descendants of these people will need an Article 13. Article 13 also provides for every person's right not to be exiled. Freedom to move around one's own country includes freedom not to be removed, to be made stateless, to be rendered without anywhere to live. And that right will seem very wan and weary when Israel is taken off to Babylon - where their hearts cannot allow them to sing the Lord's songs. They **were** slaves - they **will be** exiles. The cycles spin. But now, their movements are the cross-border movements of people advancing, finding the advantage. If the borders are unfriendly, they just push on through.

Deuteronomy is not only the story of the movements of a people. It's also the story of their hearing God, as God speaks to their better nature, refines the way they live together - to reveal the life of God as they move. Deuteronomy is full of the laws they believe they are receiving from the One God who made heaven and earth and a pilgrim people of God's own image.

Remember that field, from just a minute ago? The one that belonged to us, and was full of crops for us to eat? Well, one of the laws given by the community-improving God says concerning that field, and those crops, is that part of the harvest needs to be left behind when you're finished. That part is to go to the alien (and the orphan and widow). And those olive trees? When you beat the olives from the branches? Don't take them all for yourself. Leave a portion - for the alien. And those grape vines? Indeed, leave some of the grapes for the alien. The community-improving God asks the people to make provision (room within their growing belief that the world belongs to them) for those who have no such advantage. To the alien, the one who doesn't strongly belong, who doesn't have credentials in the prevailing culture, make sure you structure in some support. Yes, we remember the orphans. We remember the widows - who belong to "us", whoever we mean by "us". But we remember also the "alien" - the displaced person from another place.

What will motivate an ascendant people, a people on the move, a people receiving a natural cultural advantage, to remember the alien? The God of Deuteronomy seems to believe that the people will be encouraged to be kind to the alien by remembering that they themselves also once were aliens. "Remember", says God, "that you were a slave in the land of Egypt".

Don't fall into blaming people for being aliens. Don't imagine for a second that their displacement is a result of their moral failings. You too, you yourself, from the inside of persecution and non-welcoming borders know exactly how **wrong** that is. And as Shakespeare wrote much later - what would you do if turned out from home, you found nowhere will to receive you?

Provide for the alien. Article 13.

The Knox Singers

The Second Lesson: Philippians 2:5-11, 3:20-21

My mother's great grandfather, John Hardy, **somewhat** freely moved from England to these islands in the South Pacific around 1860. I say "somewhat freely", since we understand there may have been some pressure applied from some members of the family who found it awkward having a bastard son present. His somewhat free movement from there to here began my family's belonging in this land.

I have, on two occasions, shed a tear as I processed my sense of belonging. First occasion: having spent a year in Europe, I fly back to Tāmaki Makaurau. Coming in to land, I hear the woman in the seat behind me in the plane saying

(as she sees Aotearoa for the first time), "O, it looks just like Scotland - so green!" I think to myself "it's nothing like Scotland", and a wee tear falls.

The second time, after five years away, in a country I might have made my home, I'm in Dunedin - putting my stuff into storage in a lock-up out the back of a house I own. It's ANZAC Day, and I'm sitting in the Knox College Ross Chapel, for the ANZAC service. I'm full of thoughts about my last five years in Australia (the people I met, the things I wasn't able to do - world peace, not even parish peace), wondering what it will be like in China, and where I'm going to "end up". Part of the service includes the National Anthem. We stand to sing it, but I can't. There is a tear.

Belonging is such a deep and complicated thing. It can take a while to belong. Article 13 provides for us a chance to move, and to be somewhere else, and to go home - it's based on protecting for the human being a capacity to belong. Citizenship is about being at home. It is about belonging.

Writing to the Christians of Philippi, the apostle Paul meddles with our thoughts about "home". He suggests that our true citizenship is not in the places with which we are familiar, where we know the line of the hills and the flow of the water and the colours of the clouds. He speaks, somewhat threateningly of our deepest citizenship being heaven - in the realm of Jesus Christ. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon wrote a book reflecting on Paul's claim of "citizenship in heaven". They called the book "Resident Aliens". A major theme is how commitment to a heavenly citizenship moves us to engage with the aspects of our current culture and time that aren't sitting right - to love where we're from, but also to work as people from somewhere else - from the place of the beloved.

No time for a book review. I simply float the idea that we, whose right it is to move about, to leave home, to come home, to belong, do all of this as people whose *other* citizenship forms our understanding of who might be our brother, who might be our sister, the high priority of peace among the cultures and nations - Jesus in whom we find a deep, world-mending unity. Our true citizenship is not from here . . .

Lucky Linda gets to lead our prayers soon. But for now, we keep a moment of quiet.

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