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Jesus the Refugee

Amritha Mariam Zachariah¹



“Out of Egypt I Have Called my Son.” Lithograph from Salvador Dali’s Biblia Sacra series, 1964

On March 15th, Hamza and Khaled Mustafa were offering their prayers at the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch when they were killed for the sin of being ‘different.’ The Mustafa family had just reached New Zealand from a refugee camp in Jordan where they had sought asylum for several years after they were forced to flee from their home in Syria. New Zealand was their safe-haven, their final pursuit for peace after years of turmoil. But even there, they were denied refuge.

In the last decade alone, we have witnessed numerous changes. In some aspects of life, these changes have resulted in remarkable progress and strides for humanity. However, amidst this progress, lies the bare fact that there has been much devastation and violence. There is a serious refugee crisis around the world where people are being forced to move from their homes because of wars, climate change and political instability. The rise of hyper nationalism and racial superiority around the world has also created a sense of insecurity for those belonging to marginalized communities. These communities are driven out of their own lands but, when they seek refuge in other countries, they are once again mistreated. Mother Nature has also been stripped of her resources. Our senseless rampage of natural resources has led to the destruction of various ecosystems. In a report released by the United Nations, scientists have concluded that climate change is exacerbated by inequalities. This suggests that those affected by climate change are most often individuals belonging to marginalized communities (*Inequalities exacerbate climate impacts on poor*, 2016). These

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factors lead to forced displacement of individuals because their homes are no longer safe for them.

Our sense of global responsibility been replaced by a selfish political and social discourse that demeans, alienates and villainizes those who are different and those who seek refuge. Our television screens blare stories of violence that has been committed against minority communities around the world and yet we choose to remain detached from these issues. We take a position of ignorance and hold on to our privilege all while our neighbors suffer, lest their pain brings us discomfort.

In the last year, the world has witnessed many stories of pain and suffering from individuals and communities seeking refugee status. The Rohingya Muslims in Bangladesh have been forced to seek asylum because of the genocide and ethnic cleansing spearred by the ruling party in Myanmar. Syria has witnessed its worst humanitarian crisis, with families hanging on for their lives and living in sheer desperation. As fellow human beings, our response to this is integral. Very often, we are unable to identify with these people and instead we distance ourselves from the problem. What is worse is that we choose to vilify the other. Those in positions of power create a discourse of fear of the other in order to further isolate peoples. In the last year, various messages and false information was spread across India about the Rohingya Muslims refugees who were seeking asylum in India. These messages were a part of a systemic process of fear mongering. This created in the minds of people a sense of fear and distance towards these refugees who had lost everything. This is not just an odd case in India. Examples of such negative othering can be picked up from around the world.

In the guise of solving this global crisis, world powers tend to exoticize the identity of the refugee through markings and terminology. Trinh-T. Min-ha, in her work, addresses this. To her, these individuals are stuck between a sense of refuse and refuge. In the permanent unsettlement that they face 'within and between' cultures, they are also challenged to refuse the markings that are forced upon them. These markings are most often caste upon those in hegemonic positions. These markings, though disguised, further contribute to the discrimination and violence that they are exposed to. They are actively used to contain and control the lives of these individuals (Trinh, 2011).

How then can we fix this problem? How can we create a sense of collective responsibility? Thibodeau & Boroditsky (2011) identified the influence of metaphors in understanding and solving social problems. Metaphors are covert, but they create a lasting impression. The painting I have selected for this assignment is by the world-renowned artist, Salvador Dali. In Dali's painting, Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus are also fleeing. Dali's strokes show a young family fleeing from their home in fear of persecution. Mathew 2:13-15, is a perfect representation of this painting. In the biblical verses we see the Lord appearing in the night in a dream, commanding Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt so as to avoid Herod's wrath. Their journey is based on a divine intervention. Dali's painting perfectly encapsulates these verses. However, he takes it forward. Dali seems to suggest that this is not just an isolated event or a single family that is fleeing. Rather, his painting depicts the thousands of families at our borders seeking shelter and refuge. In this particular painting, Dali's surrealist style is portrayed by the monster that is in the path behind the family. The strokes in the rest of his painting seem to be subtle and light, but this monster is loud. Dali seems to want this monster to irk his viewers. This seems to be his way of suggesting that they were leaving their home only because home was now a monster. This is true of the

people who try to seek refuge even today. They are taking the arduous path to a new country only because their home is no longer safe for them. The Mustafa family did just that. They fled their home in Syria in order to survive because their home had become a monster.

Matthew's gospel goes further (Matthew 2:15-18) (Attridge, Meeks, Bassler, & Society of Biblical Literature, 2006) and narrates the inconsolable massacre of the innocent children. This also became very poignant in understanding this painting. Dali's Jesus is barely visible, he is carefully tucked in Mary's bosom, but he is the reason that family is escaping. A few years ago, Aylan Kurdi got on a boat to escape the civil war in Syria, his home country. Like Jesus, he was taken on a difficult journey to escape the monster that had taken over his home. But unlike Jesus, he never made it. We have borne witness to the inhumane policies of child separation that have been taken by our neighbors to the South. Children held tightly by their mothers, just as Mary holds Jesus in the painting, were snatched away from their grips and exposed to inhuman conditions because they were trying to escape the monster. A harsh reality is that we cannot distance ourselves from it. Torn families and helpless children aren't sights unique to the 21st century.

Our response to this must be through our refusal to distance ourselves from the plight of our neighbors. Canada as a country has been endowed with positive stereotypes. Around the world, the story of Canada is one of warmth, openness and generosity. What gets lost in this narrative is Canada's unpleasant history with its indigenous people. As the country spends this weekend celebrating families, there is a certain sense of irony that cannot be ignored. To the world, family day seems so authentically Canadian. However, in its realness, family day is a day of privilege and ignorance. In the silenced history of Canada lies the stories of families ripped apart from each other, stories of women raped, and children sent away to residential schools where they were forced to forget their families. Canada's global responsibility and stewardship towards refugees that we have witnessed in the last few years seems to be a part of a process of reconciliation. The openness that the country has shown seems like a lamentation for the families that the government so mercilessly destroyed years ago.

After the gruesome attacks in Christchurch that killed Hamza, Khaled and forty-eight other people, the Prime Minister of New Zealand urged for respect and acceptance through her now famous words, 'They are us.' Though powerful, embedded within this lies the need for us to introspect and challenge our own actions. As a faith community, we must be empowered to fight, to help restore lives, to resist and to break down the walls between us. Jesus the refugee continues to be at our borders sharing the pain of all stateless, marginalized and undocumented people, yet inspiring them to dream an alternative world devoid of walls of fear, prejudice and hate. These walls are reinforced by the ideologies and theologies of supremacy and privilege. The challenge before us is to contest those supremacist ideologies and theologies and dismantle the walls.

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