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Sunday December 14, 2014

Hope for those who have no hope

By Jim Taylor

During this pre-Christmas season, many churches focus their Sunday worship on themes of Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace.

When Bob Thompson was a minister in Winnipeg, he wondered what “hope” might mean to the Asian refugees – commonly called “Boat People” – that his church had sponsored.

The women in the group were Cambodian. They had fled from the Khmer Rouge massacres to Thailand. Accepted as legitimate refugees, they were placed in a refugee camp on the shores of a river. Across the water, they could hear Khmer Rouge troops rounding up desperate people trying to swim to freedom... And shooting them...

Two young men did manage to swim to Thailand. But they were considered illegal refugees. If caught by Thai authorities, they would be shipped back across the river to certain execution.

So the women buried them alive.

Every day.

Beneath the floor of their barracks. Deep enough that police probing with long poles wouldn't find them. The two men must have had some framework over them to keep from being crushed by the weight of earth. They breathed through straws. All day.

And every night, the women dug the men up again. To give them a few hours of pseudo-freedom, before returning to their living graves.

“They must have had enormous hope,” Bob Thompson blurted.

“They had no hope at all,” the women told him. “We had to do the hoping, for them.”

In that story, Bob heard a powerful message for his congregation, and for all of us. Hope is not about a promotion at work, a winning lottery ticket, a new red wagon. We can provide hope for those who have no hope otherwise.

Mass migration

And there are lots of those people who have no hope. Or at least, very little hope.

The UN's High Commission on Refugees reported that there 51 million forced refugees last year, people driven from their homes by forces beyond their control.

By war, most obviously. In August, we saw video of 150,000 Yezidi Kurds clinging to barren rocky slopes in the Sinjar mountains, as they fled from the Islamic State's atrocities.

Three million Syrians have been driven by civil war to refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Canada offered, reluctantly, to accept 1,200 of them, but as of September had taken only 200.

Similarly, the chaos in Somalia has led to a mass exodus. Some Somalis went to Europe. About 45,000 came to Canada. But most headed south, into Kenya, where the Dabaab refugee camp alone has become a city of 340,000.

Most of Liberia's doctors fled during that country's civil war, leaving it hopelessly understaffed when Ebola erupted.

The key word in the UNHCR report is “forced.” The 51 million doesn’t include voluntary migrations, like the Mexicans trying to get into the U.S. It doesn’t include the millions who flood the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf looking for jobs. Saudi Arabia, I gather, reserves its plum jobs in administration and government for Saudis; Filipinos staff the hospitals built by Pakistanis.

It doesn’t even include internal migration, as rural people abandon traditional farmlands to fill the cities. Canada was ahead of that trend. A century ago, Canada was 80 per cent rural; today, it’s 80 per cent urban.

The UNHCR reports calls this the first time the forced refugee total has topped 50 million since World War II.

Unprecedented movements

World War II gave us the term “Displaced Person,” commonly turned into an epithet, “DP.” At the end of the war, Germany alone had 17 million DPs. It was, Crawford Kilian editorialized in *The Tyee*, “a social and political upheaval on a scale never before seen. But it was just a dress rehearsal for the vast migrations now underway worldwide.”

Because according to another UN estimate, some 232 million people are now international migrants.

Stop! Read that sentence again. You skipped over it the first time.

Roughly a quarter-billion people have become drifters, disconnected from their homes and cultures – nearly five times more than were uprooted by six years of all-out warfare in World War II.

And that number is steadily increasing. In 1990, some 154 million people were considered international migrants. By 2050, it’s likely to rise to 500 million.

When that many people move, says Kilian, “it’s not just wanderlust.”

Citizens from Zimbabwe follow the money to South Africa. Haitians head for Brazil, or take overcrowded small boats to Florida. North Africans risk drowning in the Mediterranean to reach Greece and Italy.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress attempts to build a Berlin Wall along the Mexican border.

Like those two men willing to be buried alive every day, 232 million are desperate. They have no hope. So they will risk drowning, getting shot, and imprisonment. Because the alternatives are unthinkable.

We have to offer hope to them. And then do something to make that hope possible.

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YOUR TURN

I didn’t get a lot of letters about last week’s column on child labour. (Am I tackling too uncomfortable topics? Should I stick to schamltz?) But the letters that did come in were thoughtful.

Steve Roney challenged my comment, “Who could argue against better treatment for children?” Steve responded, “A lot of people, actually, in my experience. A lot of people in the Third World, including my wife, have nothing good to say about the current campaign to end child labour in the Third World. The problem can be stated simply: for the genuinely poor in the Third World, if you cannot work, you die.

“Surely, you might think, it would be better for these children to be in schools. Possibly; but then you need to build the schools first, and not only make them free, but provide food and clothing for the kids while they attend. Then you have to create lots of jobs that actually require the skills they might learn in a school for when they graduate, instead of the simple manual labour currently available. A tall order, and nothing good is accomplished by putting the cart before the horse.

“The Nobel Prize for Malala Yousafzai turns out to also be highly controversial among my Pakistani friends. Their response is ‘what did she ever do to deserve this?’ It is, they feel, an insult to all of the real reformers who have been working for many years to make things better in Pakistan, to give the prize to a child who has done nothing other than being a victim. It paints an image of Pakistanis In general as either ogres or helpless victims.”

A writer who preferred to remain anonymous suggested that I was overlooking the problems of child exploitation back home in Canada: “The statistics of children in Canada dying in farm accidents was about 10% of all fatal farm accidents... If memory serves, the number overall for last year was about 109, so there were approximately 10 children killed. So while child labour in third world countries is something we cannot and should not ignore, we in Canada, I believe, also share in this exploitation of children. Somehow it's assumed in our culture that children working in family enterprise is acceptable and is not equal to those children exploited in developing countries.”

Mary Faith Blackburn recalled her visit to Egypt: “I did not know about the shared prize, and I appreciate your columns for shedding light on complex subjects.

“In Egypt two years ago we were taken to a rug making ‘factory’ and store. Of course, it was hoped that we would support this particular business by purchasing rugs. There was a small boy and an older boy weaving rugs -- and it was explained that the opportunity to train in this place was a good thing, as it ensured a livelihood for the young person. Some families had rug weavers for generations. Unfortunately, we did not learn whether the boys had any other opportunities for education or recreation.

“I was reflecting just yesterday that for my three-year-old grand-daughter, full time daycare is work. Even toilet-training takes place at day care. She is expected to adhere to routines, rules, and get along with other children. She is exhausted by the end of the week, and sometimes acts out because she is still unable to verbalize her feelings, needs and wants. She has a good and caring day home provider. Yet is this not another form of child labour, when wee ones are expected to conform to the expectations and demands of others day after day?

“Such a complex subject.”

TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>

- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
