

I Have Called You by Name



To be called by name is to be known; to address another by name is a mark of respect for their otherness, for their personhood, for their humanity. How we name another, how we speak of them, St Benedict reminds us, is more a reflection of our own heart and our desire to build up or break down the bonds of community.

To refuse to use another's name is to demean and dishonour them. To refer to another by number, or worse, by an acrimonious acronym, is to deny their humanity, their identity and, ultimately their right to exist. They become a threat simply because they are "other".

As a nation we have responded to this perceived threat of the "other" by incarcerating people deemed true refugees who have fled to our land, attempting to escape sustained violence in their own countries. Our policies of mandatory and prolonged detention effectively perpetrate further violence upon these innocent, but largely invisible people, year after year after year.

When we continue to demonise the "other", all manner of things become justified in the name

of national security. One of my friends, who also happens to be a particularly law-abiding Good Samaritan Sister, was informed by the Australian Border Force that she is a "known activist" and is deemed a potential security risk. Her "activist behaviour" was to regularly visit one detention centre and then, when refugees were moved from there to other very remote detention centres where visitors were few and far between, she would send clothing parcels and be in occasional email contact with them, letting them know they were not forgotten.

While there is little joy in being labelled as a security threat, there is no joy at all in being detained with no prospect of release because of the application of brutal policies, justified as deterrents to others who might seek refuge here. These are issues that threaten our very humanity. And Jesus left to all of us the obligation to speak up on issues that threaten to erode our humanity, to speak out for the innocent and oppressed. To keep speaking, however long it takes and whatever the accusations ranged against us.

Our liturgy teaches us that language is important, that language used to build up can take us to new places of joy and hope. Language can also be a force for evil, such that xenophobia and hate speech are increasing in Australia, creating a significant trend in the negative perceptions of migrants, of those who are not "like us".

More than ever we need to gather ... to stand together ... to call on Wisdom, mightily and sweetly ordering all things, to come and teach us the way of prudence, to delay no longer, to give us courage so that those in prison may be freed, those in darkness may see the light, that all peoples may be saved.

Source: Sister Catherine Slattery, November 27, 2016, Sydney. Source: <http://www.goodsams.org.au/good-oil/to-be-called-by-name-is-to-be-known>

REFLECTION

- > How are you able 'call people by name' in your ministry?
- > Where is 'othering' visible in your community?