



'From what I am aware of about Christianity, I believe it is based on mercy and forgiveness. Does this beautiful religion accept the humiliation of an innocent human by insulting their values and dignity and imprisonment for no crime ...'

Mehdi Ali, refugee detained for 9 years

IF YOU WANT PEACE WORK FOR JUSTICE

Pope Paul VI 1972

For just over 40 years, ecumenical Palm Sunday Peace Rallies have taken place throughout Australia. The focus has ranged through concern for nuclear warfare, the invasion of East Timor and the plight of its people and the war in Iraq. For the past twelve years, the focus has continued to be on Australia's treatment of people seeking asylum and refugees.

SOME VERY RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Following nationally organised campaigns earlier this year by coalitions of Christian churches, Jewish and Islamic leaders, the government announced 16,500 additional places for Afghan refugees over the next four years.

On Friday evening, 11 March, nine men who were seeking asylum were suddenly released from detention into the community. On another Friday evening, 1 April, a further 10 men who were seeking asylum were also released into the community from detention. They will not be permitted to settle in Australia.

While waiting for transfer to another country for settlement, the men have been provided with minimal transitional support and bridging visas for six months. They are not permitted to work and will quickly become largely dependent on agencies such as Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS), Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA) and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC).

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR AUSTRALIA'S REFUGEE POLICY

The Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law at the University of NSW, has recently released some guiding principles for Australia's Refugee Policy which:

Show how Australia can respond to the crises of tomorrow and today, including the millions of people recently forced from their homes by the Taliban take-over in Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The principles are available in full and as a summary at: <https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/news/election-2022-resource-our-updated-principles-australian-refugee-policy>

PALM SUNDAY AND REFUGEES

Fr Andy Hamilton SJ, a contributing editor to *Eureka Street* with a longstanding engagement with refugee communities, writes:

The story of Palm Sunday speaks to the experience of refugees. Like Jesus in his entry into Jerusalem unarmed refugees also seek hospitality in centres of power. Like him, too, they are perceived as a threat, are driven off, imprisoned, maligned and left resourceless.

They make us ask what a human being is worth when stripped of power and connections. Palm Sunday and the vindication of Jesus at Easter answers that question. Each human being is worth living and dying for, God has done so.

This year we all have in our minds and hearts people who have been forced to leave Ukraine. They will seek hospitality in European nations that proved inhospitable to earlier Middle Eastern refugees. Palm Sunday is a day to grieve for them and to be in solidarity with them in their need for food, shelter and opportunity to live with dignity.

This year too, is a day for us Australians to welcome the refugees who have settled in Australia and especially the Afghan people who still wait for the visas promised them months earlier. It is also a day to remember the suffering of refugees in Australia who are forced to live from hand to mouth on temporary visas.

Palm Sunday is about an extravagant hospitality that trumps all human inhospitality. Visas are about enabling life and new beginnings. Temporary visas put healthy people on life support unable to live fully. People found to be refugees deserve better.



SOME OF MEHDI ALI'S STORY

Mehdi Ali left Iran to seek sanctuary in Australia when he was 15 years old. After nine years detention he was recently released from the Park Hotel in Melbourne and is now attempting to live a new life in Minneapolis in the US. While in detention he wrote occasionally for *The Saturday Paper*, the following extracts are from some of those articles.

I arrived in this country as a 15 year old child with a backpack. I set foot on Australian soil with a variety of beautiful dreams and aspirations, and I have been detained until I turned 24 years old. ... Like many other examples, I have been deprived of my most obvious rights, such as the immunity of children from arbitrary detention and the need to protect asylum-seeking children.

Why does no one ask how, since the age of 15, I was able to endure living on an unknown island called Nauru and survive there and in other detention centres for nine years?

It was a while ago when I found out that elections gave the most realistic hope to people who have been suffering in detention for all these years. Every three years we pray for a change.

For me, elections hold no hope. I cannot wait for another election believing that it will mean the end of my detention.

So what's next? That is a question I've been asking since I arrived at Christmas Island as a kid nine years ago.

What's next, I asked when guards escorted me to the airport, put papers in front of me and asked me to sign them. I didn't really understand what was written on those pages, but like everybody else, I signed. I was 16 and afraid.

What's next, I asked when I was evacuated from Nauru to receive medical treatment in Australia when I was 21.

But after that, I stopped asking, even when I would be moved from detention centre to detention centre. There was no next, and that's the most difficult part of my journey.

