



Sermon at Cathedral Eucharist – Sanctuary Sunday

Second Sunday After Trinity

readings: [1 Kings 19.5-16, 19-end](#), [Galatians 5.1, 13-25](#), [Luke 9.51-end](#)

26 June 2022

What a brilliant week you have put on in the City of Derby around Refugee week, which culminates today. Exhibitions, illuminations, community meals, pebble painting, football, park runs, music, dance. Something for everyone. Celebrating our multicultural city, a city where we seek to make everyone welcome, to make everyone belong.

This Cathedral Church is proud to be a Cathedral of Sanctuary. This is because the church is unashamedly biased on this issue. Each of us comes from a particular place or perspective on issues of migration. But *this* place, the church, is biased in favour of the outsider, the migrant, the refugee. All are welcome here. A church is through and through a place of hospitality. If ever it is not, it has missed the point.

For followers of Jesus, allegiance to the Kingdom of God, which was the heart of his message, is more significant than any loyalty we profess to our own country. St Paul got this. Despite his pride in his dual identity as a Jew and a Roman citizen, he says **Our citizenship is in heaven.**

In this 'Kingdom of God', our common humanity trumps ethnicity or nationality every time.

One of our most famous patriotic English hymns acknowledges this: 'I vow to thee my country, all earthly things above', says verse one.

But verse two takes us to the heart of the matter. 'And there's another country I've heard of long ago, A prior loyalty – *most* dear to them that love her, *most* great to them that know – 'and her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her paths are peace.'

O, in a world of pandemic, of extreme poverty, of war, of climate emergency, of refugee and migration crisis – o for the ways of gentleness,

and the ways of peace! Whatever our faith or lack of it, surely, the world being as it is, we long for this!

Yes here in church we are biased, prejudiced even. In a good way, I believe. As the first reading said, **'The whole law is summed up in a single commandment – you shall love your neighbour as yourself.'**

Prejudiced in favour of our neighbour especially where he or she is in danger.

Look at our shared history as a people of faith -

We, the church, along with our fellow travellers in other religions - are a pilgrim people. A migrant people, from a migrant heritage. It is in our DNA.

Think of Abraham, though an old man setting off from Ur of the Chaldees on a journey with no certain destination.

Think of Joseph, at first sold into slavery by his brothers and trafficked into Egypt, much later welcoming his family there, as they fled famine and hunger in their native country,

Think of Moses, fleeing for his life to Midian, eventually returning to Egypt to lead his people on one of the most famous migrations of all time, in search of a promised land.

And think of Jesus, who as a child in his life story as told by Matthew echoes the story of Israel's migration to Egypt.

Jesus, who in today's Gospel reading, identifies with the fugitive, the migrant, the traveller, of no fixed or permanent abode: **'Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'** He says this after being rejected by a Samaritan village, because he was a stranger and a Jew, bound for Jerusalem. The *Hostile Environment* is nothing new.

Unsurprisingly, obviously, following this same Jesus, Christians are going to be concerned about the welfare of those seeking humanitarian protection, wherever they may be. In this kingdom they are our brothers and sisters.

After all, the scriptures teach us to treat other people as if they were actually Jesus himself – especially where they are in danger or in need of help, or home.

Some years ago, it was our privilege to welcome into our family a young man who had become a refugee after suffering the tragic loss of his immediate family in his home country in Africa.

We saw the impact of this trauma on his physical and mental health. He hated the stigma of PTSD. We saw how the way he was treated whilst seeking asylum made things much worse. The fact he got a good degree whilst all this was going on was a wonder!

Our young friend, who became one of the family, was so battered mentally by our country's asylum process that when his case was refused, he *chose* to return to Africa rather than face the further trauma of an appeal raking through every detail of the tragedy that befell his family. You could say, the policy of the 'hostile environment' *worked*. To our our shame, I would say.

In time, the third African country in which he sought sanctuary was in fact Rwanda – a country that in recent years has accepted large numbers of refugees from its neighbouring countries. And yet it was not the safest place to be. There his passport was taken from him and he was imprisoned for weeks on end.

Eventually, having fled elsewhere for a while, when the immediate danger in his home country ceased, he was quick to go back, and now works in development there.

Last week he said to me – the *first* instinct of the refugee is survival – to get to somewhere safe. The *second* instinct is, having left everything and everyone behind, to try to start a new life in a new place. Rwanda he said, is safer, but the resources and opportunities are not there. The *third* instinct is about choice - having lost everything else, you really don't want to lose your dignity as a human being, or your agency in decisions about your own life, your own safety. In fact, that is what you may need most of all.

Our young friend, our foster son's experience has rather soured my hearing of the repeated claims that Britain has a proud record of welcoming those who need our protection.

But I do really want the UK to have that good reputation in the world. As the song asks, When I needed a neighbour, were you there? And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter, were you there?

Good as it is to seek to prevent vulnerable people from risking death crossing the Channel, and worthy an aim as it clearly is to stop the evil of their exploitation by criminal traffickers, many of us want to ask, is punishing the victims really the best way to prevent this? Can we not come up with a better plan? Surely. Let's talk then.

We need a sensible conversation, that recognises these issues are not straightforward, but which starts with the principle that vulnerable people are to be treated with kindness, not with cruelty. I have been involved in the past in such talks over destitution and the right to work for those seeking asylum – often with civil servants who understand the issues and share a desire for a just and humane outcome. But those we have talked with have been tied to agendas set by successive governments, usually dictated by a presumed bias amongst the electorate against refugees.

By contrast with this presumption, recently, with the hideous experience of so many seeking refuge from the fighting in Ukraine, it has been good to see so many coming forward to offer hospitality. This is never an easy thing to do. It has been made more challenging given the complexity of the application process, as many Derbyshire hosts and their new or anticipated guests have found.

But again, hosts are finding it is a privilege to be able to offer support to people in such desperate situations. They will learn and receive so much as they journey with their new guests. They will share joys and sorrows, hopes, and fears. In one Derbyshire school that had made space for Ukrainian children I heard that at playtime these children become very anxious when planes fly overhead..... Lord, have mercy.

In recent weeks we have heard from so many families divided by war, where wives and children have had to bid farewell to husbands, where the older generation has been left behind. Our first reading pointed to this – as Elisha begs Elijah for time to say farewell to his parents before setting off on his journey. There is such a sadness there.

Yes, 'Foxes have holes and birds their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' When we make room for the stranger, we make room for Christ himself.

There are too many goodbyes in life. Too much grief. Too many families torn apart by terror, or war, poverty, or famine.

Ukraine, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Eritrea, Sudan – too many places where that terrible decision has to be made, to set off into the unknown, leaving everything, parents, loved ones behind, to risk everything for a better, safer future.

What can we do?

We are and must be a sanctuary people. A people who not only care, but also take action. Ready for a world where friendship overcomes suspicion, where trust can be restored. Where lives can begin again. Where people are seen as people, not flotsam and jetsam, not a problem, but men, women, children, who are our brothers and sisters, our very own. Neighbours, fellow travellers. Friends.

A city of sanctuary, and a cathedral of sanctuary, will rejoice in the presence of those seeking refuge here, and seek to bless them, and not to curse.

People of sanctuary will want to explore fresh ways of tackling the challenges of mass migration and how they impact on migrant and host communities. We need a new openness to talk, around a shared commitment to protecting the vulnerable from the danger, from exploitation, violence, and harm.

On this Sanctuary Sunday I salute those of you in Derby who do so much to support those who need help while seeking protection here. There is so

much you do already. And so much more we could do - getting involved, learning, listening, standing alongside, giving, praying – I thank God for the commitment of this Cathedral and this city as a place of sanctuary.

What Jesus does, which we celebrate in this service, is something very simple. It is to invite people to share a meal with him. Bread is broken and shared. conversations are had, stories told. It happens formally here in worship. It will happen informally afterwards.

Jesus invites everyone to the table. All are welcome. And somehow, in the breaking of bread, and in the sharing, from out of the brokenness and pain of our broken world, new life, new hope appears.

This we celebrate. Alleluia. Amen.

The Right Revd Malcolm Macnaughton, Bishop of Repton