

Refugee Week

This week Refugee Week is celebrating 20 years of refugee support, acknowledging the contributions, creativity and resilience of refugees. This is part of the global marking of World Refugee Day on the 20th of June designated as such by the United Nations in 2000. Refugee Week, which takes place around that day, started earlier in 1998 as a direct reaction to hostility in the media and society in general towards refugees and asylum seekers.

I last gave a reflection on this two years ago, just before the referendum on EU membership. The whole issue of immigration was central in the campaign and probably tipped the balance in favour of leaving the EU. The abuse suffered by people from other countries that followed sadly brought to the surface an undercurrent of hostility to those who were not considered to be fully native British people.

The whole issue of immigration in all its forms has of course not gone away and possibly never will do completely. For there has always been that suspicion of the foreigner, the alien. Immigrants have been seen as a useful scapegoat for the various problems in society, economic and social, and some politicians have sadly joined the bandwagon.

There always have been refugees and there probably always will be. Most people do not leave their country, their homes out of choice. They would rather live a good and peaceful life in their own familiar surroundings. Yet war, violence, terrorism, fear, persecution, prejudice, exploitation and poverty drive people away from their homes to seek a better, more peaceful and more stable life elsewhere. Who can blame them? Would we not do the same?

The way refugees are treated when they arrive in other countries is often far from welcoming, though, which only adds to the pain and hardship they have already suffered. In contrast those verses we heard just now from the book of Leviticus (Leviticus 19.33-34, 36b-37) are a salutary reminder of how refugees should be treated, as fellow human beings. They are not to be oppressed. They are to be treated as fellow citizens. They are to be loved. For the ancient Israelites this was a particular duty since they too had been refugees, aliens in a strange land. And of course Jesus himself was a refugee soon after his birth, which makes concern for refugees and others a particular Christian duty too.

I would suggest that the Christian response to refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants more generally is twofold. On the one hand we should be welcoming and compassionate, and, where we are able, offer friendship and practical support. On the other hand we should not be afraid to speak out in support of them and against the prejudice and hatred they encounter. That may be difficult for us to do as individuals but the voice of the Church needs to be heard. For the Good News of God's love, compassion, justice and forgiveness is for all.

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