

Refugee Week

This week is Refugee Week and yesterday was World Refugee Day. We thought about this this time last year but if anything the situation has got worse since then. That is certainly the perception of the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, which on its website states that we are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record.

The statistics they give are staggering. It is estimated that there are nearly 25.9 million refugees in the world, over half of whom are under the age of 18. However, they are only part of an unprecedented 70.8 million people around the world who have been forced from their homes. Added to which are millions of stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement. The UNHCR further states that nearly one person is forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution.

It is difficult to imagine what it must be like to be forced to leave one's home and have to go to another country. There are of course those who chose to live abroad but refugees and asylum seekers normally have no choice. And the host country is likely to be very different, even if it is a neighbouring one.

Many refugees would risk their lives if they stayed in their home country. Yet their journey to a safe place is often dangerous. And they do not always receive a good welcome. On the news the other week there were terrible stories about detention camps in Libya, a country with its own serious internal problems.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes the rights to leave one's own country and return to it, and to seek and enjoy in another country asylum from persecution. Although our own country has a long tradition of being open to refugees they are not always treated with the dignity they deserve, either by official bodies or by ordinary people. Political rhetoric against refugees does not of course help.

As Christians we need to remember that according to St Matthew's Gospel the Holy family were refugees at one point – the account of which we heard as our Bible reading just now (Matthew 2.13-23). And indeed many refugees are Christians, escaping persecution and seeking new homes where they can practise their faith safely.

Of course most refugees would rather stay in their own countries, in their own home. Resolving the conflicts in those countries is the underlying task and priority. But in the meantime compassion and practical help is needed for those who have no choice but to leave their homes and seek safety elsewhere.

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