

Advent 4 2020 Refugees/Love

So, we come today to the last of our advent reflections on homelessness and some of its causes. Whilst bearing in mind the amazing love of God in sending Jesus to rescue us from sin and death and how we are instructed to treat foreigners in Zechariah and other places, we are going to look at the sometimes contentious subject of refugees.

Firstly we need to be clear about the people we are talking about. The term migrant or immigrant is something of a catch all. Lots of people migrate for many reasons, and there are of course many economic migrants. This in itself is not a crime or a bad thing. Interestingly when we migrate for work or financial reasons we don't call ourselves migrants but ex pats, however when I lived in Canada for example I was officially a landed immigrant.

A refugee or asylum seeker is someone who has fled their home or has been displaced by war, disaster or persecution. These are almost all people who are fleeing terror and devastation. And the right to seek asylum in another country for such people is enshrined in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is never a crime to seek asylum even if a person has entered a country by irregular means.

Half of the world's refugees are children and more than 110,000 are separated from their families. Many child refugees disappear, taken into slavery. When they broke up the camp in Calais there were children who were waiting to be reunited with family in the uk but were being refused entry and many of them have disappeared without trace. I know this because I know someone who was working with them.

People seeking asylum make up a very small proportion of new arrivals in Britain. We are not more generous than other countries in fact we are a lot less generous than some. There were 31,752 asylum applications in the last

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year, of course this figure will have been impacted by Covid-19. Most of these come from Iran, Albania, Iraq, Eritrea and Sudan. Syrian refugees account for around a third of refugees world wide.

Not everyone gets a grant of protection the first time they apply, only 49% although more are successful on appeal. Asylum cases often take years to be resolved leaving people in limbo unable to work or move on with their lives. There are currently 46,108 people who have been waiting more than 6 months for an initial decision. In this country people seeking asylum can be detained indefinitely. Although the government has supposedly stopped detaining children since 2010, 36 children were detained in the year ending September 2020.

So why do so many refugees end up homeless on the streets of this country? When someone applies for asylum the Home Office provides accommodation on a no choice basis and subsistence support of around £5 a day if they would otherwise be destitute. They are not allowed to work whatever their skills and qualifications. However when someone receives a positive decision on their asylum claim all support stops within 28 days. They receive no help or support to find housing, work, or anything else they might need to do before being evicted. And so many newly recognised refugees experience homelessness and destitution just at the point when they should be finally feeling safe and able to build a future.

Across the world this problem is growing. In 2018, 37,000 people were displaced every day! That is double the amount twenty years ago.

So what should our response be?

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Well the short answer is, it should be one of loving concern and compassion. And as we heard in Zechariah, show mercy and compassion, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. In practical terms we can do all the things we have already talked about. Be informed, understand what the issues really are, not just what is printed in whichever newspaper you like to read. Write to your MP, support charities for the homeless financially. If there is an opportunity to volunteer in some way you could do that. Above all pray. Pray for all who are suffering, pray for all of the last, the least and the lost, especially the homeless and vulnerable – with great thanksgiving for all that we have and without prejudice or judgement in your heart about these people. And if there is even the smallest amount more that you can give, then give it. As I said before, of course we cannot put right even the smallest fraction of all that is wrong in the world, but that is not a reason not to play our part, however small that might be. One day God will ask us what we did - how happy are any of us going to be with how that conversation goes.....

There is one thing that I would like to add. These sermons have been about the very real and increasing problem of physical homelessness in our country, how we should respond and what we might be able to do to help. But Spiritually speaking everyone is homeless until they find their place in God's kingdom. Augustine of Hippo famously wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they can find their rest in you". This was a man who searched for fulfilment in every earthly pleasure that the world of his day could offer. He tried false religions, philosophy, dissipation until finally he cried out to God and was led to a passage in the Book of Romans that showed him that through faith in Jesus his sins could be forgiven and he could be free. His testimony, was that

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His soul had found rest and it's eternal home in it's creator. We should always be grateful for our material good fortune and seek to share it as much as we can. At the same time we should hold all earthly possessions lightly knowing that the most important thing, the greatest gift that we have been given is our relationship with God the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit through the saving Grace of Jesus, who loves us and gave Himself up to death on the cross for our sakes in order to bring us home.