

# **A COMMUNITY OF COMPASSION: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

With thanks to The Reverend Christopher Dent  
with a Colloquium in Canterbury Diocese

Diocese of Canterbury  
June 2023



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# Passages of Scripture...

**...for reflection in preparing sermons for and beyond Refugee Sunday 2023**

## **Resident aliens**

Exodus 23.9; Leviticus 19.33-34; Deuteronomy 24.19-22

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God. [Leviticus 19.33-34]

The Hebrew Scriptures differentiate between temporary visiting foreigners and those who are permanent foreigners or aliens, resident within Israel. Where people settled permanently within Israel they gained the states of 'ger' or resident alien with certain rights and responsibilities. Resident aliens and orphans were not to be deprived of justice. They could purchase houses and those such as widows and orphans could receive support - a forgotten sheaf at harvest is to be left in the field; olives are to be left on the trees when stripped; grapes are to be left - for the alien, the widow and the orphan. "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, therefore I am commanding you to do this."

Our society has a variety of terms, which produce different reactions - refugee, asylum seeker, (economic) migrant. Those seeking asylum in the UK often wait for years for their cases to be decided, during which they do not have rights equivalent to the resident alien in Israel and there are further obstacles to obtaining permanent citizenship.

## **Ruth and foreign women**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, depicting the return to Jerusalem after the exile and the rebuilding of the temple, demonstrate the hostility of the returning exiles to foreigners. Nehemiah 13.23-27 describes the expulsion of foreign woman, because Israel believed that her exile had been God's punishment for intermarriage with outsiders. Ezra 9.1-2. emphatically opposed marriage to non-Jews, demanding that foreign wives should be divorced.

The Book of Ruth is set in the time of the Judges (1100-1000 BC), but the writing belongs to a later date, possibly after the exile. Ruth is a foreigner from Moab. Moab was an arch-enemy of Israel because the Moabites had refused to help the people on their journey to the Promised Land. Ruth, identified seven times as a foreigner, journeys to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi, after the death of her Jewish husband, Naomi's son. Naomi is also a widow. They are both on the margins of society. Ruth demonstrates devotion to her mother-in-law, faith in God and integrity in the face of hostile circumstances. By her good works and faith, she attracts the attention of a wealthy Israelite, Boaz, who marries her. Their son, Obed, is the grandfather of King David, so Ruth comes to occupy a vital place, not only in the history of Israel, but can be seen through David as an ancestor of Jesus. The book of Ruth shows how God's goodness extends beyond the Covenant people to a foreign woman, living in exile.





## Lament

Psalm 137

By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept, when we remembered thee, O Zion.

In the sixth century BC, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian armies, who transported many of the inhabitants to their own country, Babylon. In exile, the people of Judah questioned whether God had abandoned his people and whether his promises were false. In their captivity, the exiles looked back towards Jerusalem, which they had believed to be God's promise of his eternal presence with them. Taunted by their captors to sing the songs of the pilgrimage to Zion (Jerusalem), they retort, how can they sing the Lord's song in a land where they are strangers? Helplessness is mixed with anger against the Babylonians and the Edomites who had seized land in Judah after the Babylonian attack. Their anger overflows in righteous bitterness "Blessed in he that taketh they children; and throweth them against the stones." Yet remembrance of Jerusalem kindles a faint hope that God is still present in Zion, even whilst they are refugees.

## Christ in the guise of the stranger

Matthew 25.35-40

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me. ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me.

Shortly after his birth, Jesus becomes a refugee, as Mary and Joseph flee with their new-born son into Egypt from the violent schemes of King Herod. Throughout his ministry, he is a homeless itinerant "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." He is rejected by the religious authorities of his day, is crucified outside the city and buried in a borrowed tomb. He comes again as a stranger after his resurrection to two travellers on the road to Emmaus. They do not recognise him until he opens to them the scriptures and is revealed in the breaking of bread. In Matthew 25, Jesus' betrayal and death are approaching and the closing section of chapter points to the last judgement "When the Son of Man comes in his glory." The 'goats' are consigned to everlasting punishment. The 'sheep', who inherit eternal life, are those who have ministered to the strangers and the marginalised. In so doing, they have unconsciously, and to their bewilderment, ministered to Jesus himself. In the scriptures and in the breaking of bread, the stranger Christ makes himself known to us and empowers us to welcome the stranger and minister to all who seek refuge.

## State persecution

Acts of the Apostles 18.2

Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.

There was a sizeable Jewish population in Rome and this expulsion may have been short lived. However, the Roman historian, Suetonius, records that Jews were causing constant disturbances at





the instigation of 'Chrestus', a possible corruption of Christ, which would have sounded the same in first century Greek. It suggests that the tensions in Rome occurred because of the activity of followers of Jesus. Aquila and Priscilla are referred to in 1 Corinthians 16.19: "Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord." The meeting of the church in their house suggests that, although they were refugees from imperial persecution, this couple was reasonably well established in Corinth, where Aquila, like Paul, was a tent maker. Persecution of Christians by Roman emperors, beginning with Nero, extends well beyond the period of the New Testament, and is documented and Christian martyrs, like Justin (c.165) and Polycarp (c. 155) are commemorated from the early Christian centuries. Persecution of Christians by the state continues today in many countries, among them Pakistan, Syria and Myanmar.

## **Show hospitality to strangers**



The motto of the town of Deal is "Welcome the stranger". It could be a motto for our diocese, although the reality is a different matter. The unknown author of the Letter to Hebrews knew that those he was addressing needed encouragement to rise above natural selfishness. Hebrews 13.1 "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." The Hebrew scriptures contain constant reminders that the people were once exiles in Egypt. Migrant protection is one of the most repeated commands in the Bible. The Hebrews text refers to the story in Genesis 18 of the visit of the Lord (at some points in the text identified as three strangers) to Abraham and Sarah at their tent by the oaks of Mamre. (It is the subject of a celebrated icon by Rublev, known as the 'Hospitality of Abraham' or 'The Old Testament Trinity'.) Abraham at the entrance of his tent looks up and sees three strangers standing near. He offers water to wash their feet and provides cakes, curds and milk and a calf to feed them. They enquire of his wife, Sarah, who is in the tent. She laughs when she hears one stranger promise that he will return in due season and that she will have a son. Abraham and Sarah are both well advanced in years, but the promise is fulfilled and Sarah bears a son, Isaac. Abraham has offered the gift of hospitality to strangers, but the strangers turn out to be angels (divine messengers) and the gift which Abraham and Sarah receive is greater by far than the gift they have offered. So, the salvation history begins.





## Stories of welcome and sanctuary

### **Hanna from Ukraine, now in Kent, writes:**

We are all very traumatised, even if it doesn't show. Every day we read news about our country, talk with relatives there, and try to help. We are also trying to work, study English, manage our home, raise children, and understand the UK culture. People in Ukraine are constantly in danger. Those who have left feel guilty and longing. It tires and exhausts.

Life has changed for everyone; the whole world feels the worsening economic situation due to the war, yet you continue to support us. It's incredible. I personally feel a bit surreal. My heart is torn in half. I am afraid for everyone who stayed in Ukraine: fighting at the front, working or going to school. I am angry with Russia for everything she is doing. I haven't read a single book since the war started. At the same time, I can laugh at a children's party and sing in a choir and I don't understand how I can do that, all things considered.

My anger will pass. What remains unchanged is a feeling of deepest gratitude to the British for opening their hearts and families to us. Your kindness and mercy help us not to despair. We understand that without you, we would not exist long ago. Perhaps this is how God created people.

### **Tasme's Story:**



Tasme knew she had to flee when she arrived for work and a Revolutionary guard ordered her away from her office and told her to go home.

She had already lost her husband in the unrest that engulfed Iran when the Shah was deposed, he'd been critically injured when Tasme was carrying their child, and died.

The guard told Tasme her clothing was an unIslamic colour - brown instead of black or grey.

As she left in tears, a woman stepped forward and asked if she could help and gave Tasme her card with the number of the Austrian Embassy.





That kindness was vital, helping Tasme on a journey to Britain and a home in Kent.

She spent a month in Austria until the British Embassy gave her a visa for Britain where her son was already studying.

“My son said to me - you speak French, Arabic and Farsi but English is the key - you must learn English but I will not help you - you must do it yourself!”

That was 40 years ago, Tasme gained permission to stay, going on to get a degree and a career in teaching.

Tasme, now 80, is grateful for the welcome she received - “People were fantastically kind and encouraging, especially my English teacher.

“Learning English is key, also working hard, being respectful and being loyal.”

And her son says of his own son: “He is a proper Englishman!”

### **Bishop Llewellyn writes:**

Using the traditional Arabic greeting, “Salaam alaikum; isme John” I said to this young man of 18, to whom I was being introduced, and who had arrived in this country from Chad in North Africa.

We met two years ago at Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN), where I had volunteered to befriend a young unaccompanied refugee who needed help with English. Since then, we have tried to meet weekly for about an hour to have a conversation over coffee. When we cannot understand each other, we are both able to speak in French. If this fails, we resort to Google Translate.

I don't know, and mustn't ask, why Adam became a refugee and arrived in England. I do know he's been granted permission to stay for five years and then may seek British citizenship. He wants to train as a plumber.

Adam is a devout Muslim, saying his prayers five times a day and going to the mosque on Friday. I told him I am a committed Christian and therefore we have something very important in common, in that we put our trust in the same God – the only God. I don't think he was entirely convinced but, for all our differences, we have remained good friends.

### **Canon Norman Woods tells the story of an Albanian refugee, whom he and his family have befriended for many years.**

Sergjio would be killed if he returned to Albania. One of his uncles had been murdered in an inter-family feud and, according to local custom, the relatives of the victim had a duty to seek revenge. Attempts at reconciliation failed and all the parties were in daily danger of reprisals.

At first, Sergjio was safe because he was a child, but once he turned 16, his life was in jeopardy and his mother arranged for his escape to the UK, via Belgium. She paid a lorry driver to take him. It was December, he had no warm clothes and stood for the 13 hour journey. He was taken to a reception centre in Ashford, attended English classes in Canterbury and was befriended by Norman and his wife, Patsy, who have kept in close touch ever since.

Sergjio washed cars and in the evening worked in a restaurant, to pay for training as an accountant





with the Open University. He was granted temporary asylum and was provided with social housing, when he was 18, but continued to fund himself by working for an engineering firm.

He graduated in 2022, is now a British citizen and a fully-fledged accountant. He has bought his own home.



“And have there been any problems?” I asked Avril, who offered accommodation in her home to a Ukrainian family about nine months ago. “Only one problem,” she replied, “the kitchen! Svetlana and her parents cook their own meals, and then they consume them in the kitchen, and finally do their washing-up. I have suggested that they eat in the dining room, but they don’t have such a thing at home and so, understandably, they much prefer eating in the kitchen. That could mean that for a couple of hours in an evening I might have no access to my own kitchen. I have taken to preparing a meal in advance to allow for this.”

Avril’s son knew Svetlana from a visit that she and her husband had made to England the previous summer and before the start of the war in Ukraine. As we in England began to gear ourselves up to receiving refugees from the war-torn area, he telephoned his mother to ask if she knew of any accommodation being offered. After thinking about it, Avril decided that her own house was of the kind which could accommodate one or more refugees with reasonable ease, as she had two spare bedrooms and an extra living room and bathroom, but only a shared kitchen!

So it was that Svetlana and her parents came to live with Avril after a very difficult journey from a town in Ukraine near the Russian border, via Poland where obtaining an entry visa to the UK was a long drawn out and horrendous story of its own, full of administrative inefficiency. They arrived, exhausted and anxious, in the UK in July 2022.

Before they had met in person, Svetlana had explained to Avril that Ukrainians usually have a fairly serious countenance and don’t smile and laugh a great deal. Not so, as Avril greeted them off a coach. Svetlana’s mum rushed towards Avril and gave her an enormous hug, to be followed by hugs and kisses all round. They felt safe at last.







Bishop Richard Llewelin

## **The Revd Stephen Crofts tells us of his experience in Cheriton:**



Aziz came to us in the shadow of a friend, Habib, who was looking for a church to go to. They were running from Iran, because they dared support the unrest against the government in the days before the news broke about Mahsa Amini – the young woman who died in prison after her arrest for wearing her hijab improperly.

They had both left families behind. One day Aziz told us his family had arrived elsewhere in the UK but the migration system didn't seem to want to reunite them. We leaned on a charity who knew what to do. It took some weeks, but they managed to reunite the family. The day he showed me the letter authorising his move, the last day we would see him, I spotted him turn to the altar, head bowed, tears flowing.

A week later, he sent us photos of himself with his family, a smile on his face I had never seen in his time with us. He has now found a church and is encouraging others join him.

### **The Venerable John Barton met:**

Abdul is from Afghanistan, Efrata from Eritrea. They are 15 year old boys. One escaped capture by the Taliban, the other avoided conscription into an illegal army. We don't know where their parents are, how they got here, or what they have endured, though we understand their journeys took 18 months. It's wrong to ply refugees with questions which trigger the traumas of the recent past, and anyway they speak only a few words in English.

The boys are safe in Kent with the Revd Kirrilee Reid and her husband Ewan, temporary foster-carers who have opened their home to unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children.

After a few weeks, the boys will be moved on to a more permanent home, where they will start school. The Reids will then welcome two more boys, who could come from anywhere in the world.





Young refugees are bewildered by new surroundings, unfamiliar food and foreign customs. They may have suffered unspeakable deprivation.

Please pray for them and for those who, in Christ's name, are providing sanctuary.

## A community of compassion

I bookend this reflection with two images: first, the picture of a little boy, Aylan Kurdie, drowned in his attempt to reach the island of Kos, held tenderly in a Turkish policeman's arms as he was brought to shore in that summer of 2015. A migration of people moved across Europe as they sought refuge from the war in Syria, often finding borders closed. Older people stirred by compassion and memories of World War 2, others by images of biblical exodus thought that they would not see this again in their lifetime.

As a result of this, considering I was leading a benefice near Dover, I asked the people to think about becoming involved with helping refugees.

Some were hesitant, others apprehensive, others still held entrenched ideas about 'the other'. I invited a Rwandan refugee to come and speak with firsthand experience about the life of a refugee.

His quiet charm and dignity, coupled with his faith, won them over. So began our involvement with refugees. When Domenica Pecoraro was appointed as Diocesan Refugee Officer in 2016, she came to speak to us about her proposed work. We have been working alongside one another ever since. Liaising with Migrant Help (the statutory body assigned to Syrians who were settled on the Syrian resettlement programme) older people in the benefice used their winter heating allowance to buy tents for people in the Calais Jungle. The incarnation and exile had a meaningful relevance that Christmas.

In 2016, Syrian families began to arrive in our neighbouring area. We befriended two families giving them welcome baskets and baby bundles when the two mothers gave birth to two little boys. I was present with one mother in hospital as her husband looked after the family. Parishioners lent or bought baby requisites for the early lives of the newborn: Moses baskets, car seats, bikes for the fathers, the latter from members of the local community not attached to the church.

Sharing picnics, tasting different food, and playing games with the children were highlights of getting to know one another and beginning to understand a little of each other's cultures.

In 2018 I took a sabbatical, volunteering for a week at a safe house in France, visiting a Greek island and a refugee camp, Cities of Sanctuary in the UK. Not least I talked to locals and the impact of an influx of refugees and their reaction to their arrival. Often beneath reservations and sometimes resentment there was compassion.

Since August 2021 we have Afghans living with us. Volunteering amongst them is a privilege as we constantly learn more about each other, our ways of worshipping God and for many of them learning a difficult new language. Now since 2022 we have Ukrainians living amongst us too and teaching us much about hospitality and different traditions. Our lives are enriched.

The other bookend is a young man, an Afghan, who separated from his family. Arriving in the UK, he has had to make his own life. Settled with a family, he gives freely of himself to help others, being a translator and helping them to navigate complex systems of bureaucracy. He needs to apply for a





costly visa every two and a half years in order to stay with his family. The generosity of those living in a community of compassion who have little but give it to others.

Reverend Diane Fawcett





## Compassion through Community Sponsorship

In November 2019 a Syrian family arrived at Gatwick airport from Egypt. The family of six had a couple of suitcases and a precious bag with all their important documents, from birth and school certificates to passports and vaccination books. They were greeted by a small group of people from Canterbury, expectantly standing at the arrivals gate with flowers, chocolates and a welcome banner. Volunteers from Canterbury Welcomes Refugees had been preparing for months to welcome this refugee family into their community. I remember a spontaneous embrace with the mother of the Syrian family. I had been clutching two small cuddly toy rabbits, which I gave to the two younger children, whose tired faces changed to big smiles. It was a moment that created a bond between strangers that would change all our lives.

In 2015, in response to the Syrian conflict, the then Prime Minister announced that 20,000 people would be brought to Britain as part of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. Like many in our community, I saw the pictures of hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the destruction of their homes and cities in Syria but felt powerless to help. Then in 2016 the Home Office and civil society organisations came together to launch The Community Sponsorship of Refugees scheme. This was our opportunity to come together as a community group to directly support refugee families. It was our opportunity to ‘welcome the stranger’.

Families, resettled under the Community Sponsorship scheme, submit their details to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in the country they have fled initially to be considered for resettlement by the UK Home Office. Families are chosen because of their particular vulnerability, in many cases due to experience of torture and violence as well as disability and health or mental health needs that cannot be met in a refugee camp.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37), Jesus is asked “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answers: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” However, in the reply to the next question, “Who is my neighbour”, Jesus tells us of a Samaritan man who looks after a complete stranger, not his neighbour at all. What I see in these Bible verses is that our love for others flows out of our love for God and His love for us. His love does not differentiate between those who live close to us and those who do not. We are to have mercy for and care for people in need that we come across in our lives. In my mind, that also includes those that we are given opportunity to help even if they are not local to us. This does not mean I have to help everyone (I clearly couldn’t and the thought is overwhelming), I just need to help the ones that God gives me opportunity to help. Community Sponsorship of refugees has opened one such opportunity that I am very grateful for. Another aspect of the parable is that the good Samaritan carried on with his travels after helping the man in need. Volunteering through Community Sponsorship does not have to take over your life, it can be spending an hour a week being available to help a newcomer get to know the local shops or helping them to practice their newly learned English language skills.

It is a joy and a privilege to see parents start to relax when they feel their family is now safe; to see children able to go to school for the first time in years and young adults attend further and higher education to work towards qualifications that will open employment opportunities. Everything we do is aimed at empowering the family to become self-sufficient as they settle into their new lives and become part of the community. I thank God for such opportunities. Svenja Powell, Project Lead, Canterbury Welcomes Refugees





## **Prayers for those in need of urgent international protection**

Almighty God, whose power is made perfect in weakness, have mercy on newcomers among us who have been exiled from their own countries by war or persecution. May they find friendship, healing and liberation while they are here, that together we may help to build your Kingdom on earth, as in heaven. Amen.

Lord God, your love overwhelms me. Awaken the compassion you have put in my heart, that I may share it with people who are poor and needy, persecuted, and facing an unknown future. Help me to reach out today to refugees and asylum-seekers, that I may play some part in fulfilling their hopes for a new life. Amen.

Compassionate God, it's hard to imagine what it is like to escape from danger and then risk perils on land and sea to get to safety. Grant us the sensitivity to greet and care for traumatised newcomers in our midst, and to create for them an atmosphere of calm and confidence where they may begin to rebuild their lives; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

God our Father, who love all people equally and without discrimination, we find it hard to love our neighbours, especially when we know so few of them and are inclined to be suspicious of strangers. Help us to look at them in the way Jesus looked at Samaritans, lepers, and others whom his community avoided or ostracised. Give us eyes to see that they, too, are made in your image, for Jesus' sake. Amen.





Illustrations: Dr Ted Harrison

With many thanks to The Venerable John Barton for his support with the development of this document.

