

## **Year C, Pentecost 3, Proper 13.**

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

Psalm 16

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9: 51-62

### **Sanctuary and Christian Freedom**

Yesterday was the last day of Refugee Week. Many churches assign today as Sanctuary Sunday.

According to my dictionary a sanctuary is 'a place affording immunity from arrest, persecution, etc., the privilege of refuge in such a place'. It is also, 'a place of worship; the most holy part of a temple, church, etc.' It comes from the same root word in Latin for holy and sacred; Sanctus and Sanctum. My Thesaurus includes words such as: asylum, harbourage, haven, protection, refuge, retreat, shelter...'

I wonder where you might consider your own personal sanctuary, the place you feel most safe and secure?

For most of us I guess it will be somewhere within our home. A place where we can retreat from 'the world', where we truly feel safe and at peace. I have a favourite comfy chair, with a view of the Rectory garden, with books close at hand, and Rublev's icon in sight. It is a place where I find it easy to pray, far too easy to have a snooze, and a place where it is easy to relax listening to music.

The Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, The Most Revd Mark Strange, Bishop of Moray, Ross and Caithness, in his address to the General Synod a few weeks ago, on St Columba's Day, mentioned Columba being exiled from his homeland of Ireland and travelling by small boat across stormy seas with twelve other people, to the shores of what we now call Scotland. Luckily for Columba and his followers, and for us as descendants of his evangelising energy, he safely made it ashore, and eventually set up a new home on Iona.

Columba was not your average refugee, admittedly, but all the same, he was exiled from his family and community, and undertook a risky journey by boat to reach our shores and create a new life, within a new place of sanctuary for him and his followers, and for countless others who came after.

In today's headlines, his journey may have received some very negative and hostile press. Would he have been labelled 'illegal'? As if anyone can be labelled 'illegal'!

Today, by international law, anyone can claim asylum in another country of their choice. It does not need to be the first 'safe' country they come to. Such an individual is called an 'asylum-seeker'. In the UK, their claim is investigated by the Home Office, and if accepted, the person is given refugee status.

In recent months many people in the UK have offered themselves as hosts for Ukrainian families. In West Linton and district I personally know of several families offering space in their homes. The necessary processes of vetting homes and vetting the hosts may seem slow and bureaucratic but they are necessary to ensure the destination for these vulnerable individuals and families are indeed safe. The response has shown that many people living happy, secure and privileged lives are compassionate and loving, showing kindness and goodness to those in need. I say 'privileged' not as a barb or to be critical, but to point out that almost everyone in the UK lives a privileged life compared to the majority of the world's population.

The process has been slow partly because the Visa system set up by the Home Office has made it so. But, at least there is a system, whereby Ukrainians can apply for a visa.

For many others who wish to seek asylum and safe refuge in the UK, there is no easy route to make an application. For this reason, many do choose to reach our shores and make a claim on arrival and have to use dangerous and life-threatening methods to do so.

So, what is pushing these people away from their homes, from the place they may have always thought of as safe, as providing them with their own form of sanctuary?

In the last twenty years, the majority of those seeking asylum in a different country have done so because of civil war, oppression of minorities (ethnic or based on religion), or other forms of intimidation, violence against the person etc., much of it state sponsored.

Can you now recall the place that you consider to be your own place of sanctuary? What would force you to leave it, leave your possessions, your friends and family, and flee? Where would you go? How far is it from your home?

How would you like to be treated, if you had to flee your home, with just a few possessions of sentimental value and those that identify you – a passport, credit and bank cards, professional accreditations – and any prescription medicines you need?

Our reading from Galatians helpfully lists the fruit of the Spirit that Paul understands are essential we live out if we wish to profess Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Paul says we are free but being free paradoxically calls us as followers of Christ's way, to desire to follow his example and be inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit.

As someone who has fled their home, has no safe place to lay their head, would you not want to meet someone who is guided by the fruit of the Spirit? Someone who shows love, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Would not such a person be likely to directly or indirectly support an asylum-seeker? To understand their distress and need to find sanctuary, a safe place out of harm's way?

Paul gives us a timely reminder in Galatians 5 v 14 of who refugees and asylum-seekers are... 'For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

The war in Ukraine has perhaps made the concept of neighbour easier to appreciate. Ukraine is relatively geographically close. It is part of the continent of Europe. The people look a lot like us... However, there is no limit in God's creation and in Christ's world on who our neighbour is, for all of us are made in the image of God.

On this Sanctuary Sunday we are challenged in a number of ways.

- ✝ We are challenged to put ourselves into the situation that so many millions of people in our world are in; forced from our own homes and communities to strange places and cultures, where we have little or no agency and resources. How does that help us show empathy and understand the situation of asylum-seekers and refugees?
- ✝ We are challenged to think how, as an asylum-seeker we would wish to be treated as we arrive in a relatively 'safe place'.
- ✝ We are challenged by our freedom in Christ to follow his example and be guided by the Holy Spirit in how we live out our faith to those who seek asylum or are refugees.
- ✝ We are challenged by Paul's reminder; 'Love our neighbour as yourself'.

Our gospel reading is a hard one. If nothing else, it reminds us that following the way of Jesus is not at all easy. It can be hard, and it can really be a challenge to our normal ways of living and interacting in the world. Our freedom to choose to live and follow the way of Christ gives us many a difficult challenge along that way. God knows us and loves us, knowing that we will not always get it right. God's love, grace and mercy endures for ever and surpasses all of our human understanding; thankfully.

Our gospel reading reminds us that we are asked to focus on looking ahead, to holding that wonderful vision of God's kingdom coming down to earth and seeking how we can be agents of God's will.

On Sanctuary Sunday, what might that look like?

## Some Facts

- ✚ In the UK, an asylum-seeker is not able to work and receives an allowance of £40.85 per week to live on.
- ✚ There are over 79.5 million refugees in the world.
- ✚ 26 million have fled from their country of origin, whilst 45 million are internally displaced.
- ✚ Over half of refugees are children.
- ✚ Two-thirds of refugees are hosted by the global south.
- ✚ Approximately 6% of refugees come to Europe.
- ✚ In 2021, the UK received 48,540 asylum applications compared to Germany's 127,730 applications.
- ✚ People who came to the UK originally seeking asylum made up only 0.6% of the UK's total resident population in 2019 – and that includes everyone who arrived in the UK seeking asylum over the last half-century.
- ✚ The most asylum seekers come from Iran, Albania and Iraq.
- ✚ Turkey has over 3.6 million refugees from Syria.