

Year A Proper 12 Sanctuary Sunday

Genesis 21: 8-21

Romans 6: 1b-11

Matthew 10: 24-39

God Welcomes All?

In our reading from Genesis, we understand a little of what it must be like to be forced out of our homes with little or no possessions and told to go. Go where? With what?

Hagar was an Egyptian slave-girl that Sarah gave to Abraham as a wife. But, over time, an element of jealousy arose between Sarah and Hagar. When Hagar became pregnant, she acted arrogantly toward Sarah. Sarah reacted badly and Hagar fled to the desert. An angel persuaded Hagar to return to her mistress and told her that the child she was carrying was a boy, to be named Ishmael, which means 'God hears' in Hebrew. Hagar gives a name to God, 'El-roi', which means 'God sees' in Hebrew.

Hagar duly bore Abraham a son, and in accordance with the angel's instruction, named him Ishmael. And as we know, miraculously, in her old age, Sarah became pregnant and bore Abraham a son, Isaac. This created further tensions between Sarah and Hagar, and Sarah urged Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael from their household. This Abraham does, but only after God's reassurance to him that Hagar and Ishmael would come to no harm, and Ishmael's children would one day form a nation. Perhaps it was a pity that Abraham didn't share God's reassurance with Hagar.

In today's world, if Hagar had needed to flee persecution and feared for her life, she could have found herself on the Mediterranean coast, seeking safe passage away from the dangers she and her young son had faced. She may have paid someone to get her onto a boat with a promise of a safe passage to a distant land, where she could be free.

And in today's world, who would know if she would arrive safely, or be just one more person like in a dreadful story last week about hundreds dead, trapped inside a criminally overloaded and unseaworthy boat?

If Hagar had arrived at what she hoped was a place of safety, away from persecution, what would she face? Well international law and the UN's Convention on the Rights of Refugees is clear. Hagar would be classed in the broad category of 'migrant', and as she would have claimed asylum and she would be given legal protection as an asylum seeker (under the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention').

In the UK, as an asylum-seeker, Hagar would get a £45 per week for food, clothing and toiletries. She would be given housing, most likely in a hostel or an hotel. If her claim was approved, Hagar would receive refugee status. At this point she would be able to start putting down some roots and would be able to do things, like seek employment.

But let us take a step back from the legal issues, and even from the journey to safety. If you were given ten minutes to leave your house, what items would you want to take, that you could carry? Write them down and let us see what you decide is important to take with you.

Possible answers:

Prescription medicines, passport or other forms of identification, cash and bank cards, mobile phone and charger, coat, jumper, spare clothes, toiletries, food, water, photo of loved ones...?

Favourite toy, blanket, pram/buggy, nappies, baby food, warm clothes, book, pet...?

And now think about where would you go? How would you get there? Stay in country (what is called 'internally displaced'), move to neighbouring country (80% of migrants do this), move to a country where you have relatives, friends, or you speak the language? What countries do you have friends in or have a knowledge of? Can you enter the country without a visa, or know you can claim asylum at the border?

If you wished to claim asylum in the UK today, how might you achieve that? No airline would allow you to travel without a valid visa. UK immigration at ferry ports and at the Gare du Nord in Paris won't let you through or accept your claim. As reported in the recent Select Committee proceedings in the Houses of Parliament, there is no official way to claim refugee status just now. So, it pushes people to irregular means; maybe smuggled in and in danger of becoming slave labour or sex-trafficked or paying to hopefully survive a journey across the English Channel in a small boat.

You may know that I represent the Scottish Episcopal Church on the Co-ordinating group for Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees – a multi-faith group that supports work to help refugees in Scotland. The Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees, supported by our Primus and College of Bishops, is supporting a call to vote against the ‘Illegal Immigration Bill’ currently being debated in the Houses of Parliamentⁱⁱ. The UNHCR (the UN’s refugee agency) has stated that the ‘Illegal Migration Bill’, if passed, “would amount to an asylum ban - extinguishing the right to seek refugee protection in the UK for those who arrive irregularly, no matter how genuine and compelling their claim may be, and with no consideration of their individual circumstances. This would be a clear breach of the Refugee Convention and would undermine a longstanding humanitarian tradition of which the British people are rightly proud”.

Today there are many people, like Hagar. People who have had to flee their homes. A very small percentage of them have sought sanctuary in Scotland. They too may have been disowned, abused, had their home demolished, afraid for their life and for that of their child or children. For those that arrive on our shores, by whatever means, and are given refugee status, I wish that like Hagar, they can say, “God sees me. God knows my pain, is providing for my needs, and is offering me a place of sanctuary.”

How, as Christians, are we to respond to the current situation? There are many ways in which we can be the hands and feet of God and offer sanctuary to refugees and asylum seekers. The community in West Linton has proved itself willing and generous in supporting people displaced from Ukraine (not technically classed as refugees), and I hope the generosity of those acting as hosts as well as how the rest of the community treats them with compassion will continue. Jesus reminds us that we are to walk alongside, for that is what compassion means, all those who are suffering. We can pray for these people’s safety, their integration into our communities, and we can also pray that God will continue to transform us as we consider how best to respond, in love, with compassion.

The orange-coloured heart has become a symbol of welcome for refugees in recent years, and in this week of prayers and action for asylum seekers and refugees the theme has been ‘hospitality not hostility’. So may be drawing and colouring in an orange heart and writing a message in the heart – maybe ‘hospitality not hostility’ – and displaying it in a window of your house is a simple act of solidarity and visible welcome.

As Christians, we are people of welcome, and I wonder what else we can do to follow the example of Abraham's hospitality, of Jesus' example, and of Paul's call in our reading from Romans, to a new life through union with Jesus in baptism. That baptism wasn't simply for our own benefit, or to secure a get-into-heaven pass. That act of baptism was to equip us to turn to God and open our hearts in worship and in concern for those less fortunate than ourselves. Paul is very clear that we should consider ourselves as dead to sin; and today that is often the sin of failing to see the humanity of others who have been given a label which is used to distance us from them. Our faith challenges us to see each stranger as a blessing, from whom we may learn so much, and not someone who is a threat to us; instead, to find the hidden Christ in our midst.

Given the current climate in the UK around migrants, even the simple message that refugees are welcome is a good start. And maybe after prayerful thought, you may have some ideas. My initial thoughts were that we could offer a space here where refugees and displaced people from Ukraine who live in our area may feel welcome, to join us in worship, or use this space in some other way, including perhaps for their own worship?

Hold these issues in your own prayers before God, and see how God may guide or prompt you in how to respond, with love and compassion.

Let us pray.

May God bless us with encounters
That turn strangers into neighbours,
That turn fear into friendships,
That turn hatred into hospitality,
That turn pain into peace.

Amen



ⁱ <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention>

More facts and information on Refugees can be found at
<https://scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/factsheets-guides-toolkits/>

ⁱⁱ The Primus' statement as part of the campaign run by 'Together With Refugees' can be accessed here:
<https://www.scotland.anglican.org/primus-leads-joint-message-opposing-migration-bill/>