

Year B, Proper 12, 23rd June 2024

Job 38:1-11, 2 Corinthians 6: 1-13, Mark 4:35-41

Today, as well as being the fifth Sunday after Pentecost, it is the Sunday at the end of Refugee Week. Today is called Sanctuary Sunday. During this week there have been some interesting talks and stories told and re-told about the lives of those who came to this country seeking refuge from the horrors of their lives in their home country. These people have been given the term 'New Scots', a term full of promise and hope for the future. Unfortunately, given the rhetoric applied to people fleeing injustice, persecution, and civil wars, the terms 'refugee' and asylum-seeker', have, for many people, become negative labels to be used accusatively rather than compassionately.

Whilst it is true that a proportion of the people who arrive in the UK are economic migrants, the vast majority have been found to have legitimate reasons for leaving the place they call home, to seek safety in a foreign land and culture.

To clarify the terms used: an asylum-seeker is someone who makes a request to be given sanctuary in another country because they fear for their lives in their own country. About 80% of asylum-seekers seek sanctuary in a neighbouring country. A refugee is someone whose case for asylum has been investigated and approved and is given leave to remain in the country where they sought sanctuary. No one is 'an illegal' person or an 'illegal immigrant'. Sure, some people are economic migrants, desperate to find work and live a more comfortable life, not subsisting or living precariously in their home country. Whilst not a legitimate reason for seeking sanctuary and being granted refugee status, I can empathise with a desire to live in a country where the economic situation is better, where someone is more likely to be able to flourish and realise their potential.

Our epistle and gospel readings today can help us place the treatment, care and compassion for asylum-seekers, and yes, even economic migrants, in a theological and Christ-centred context.

In Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul is reminding the church community that God's kingdom is so different from the world created by man.

He reminds them of God's grace, and that God's kingdom is all around them, if only they would look and act in the ways of God. The kingdom of God is not concerned with status, appearance, power, or any other things that the 'world' seems to value so highly. Paul urges his readers 2,000 years ago, and also us today, to live a life of abundance, of God's grace, faith and love.

Today, there what is labelled 'Abundancy Theory' – that we do not hoard what we have but share our riches, or gifts and talents, and in the process we shall become even richer; not necessarily financially richer, but richer through what we receive back and how we grow further into God's kingdom of grace and generosity of spirit.

The opposite is 'Scarcity Theory', where we hold onto all we have for fear of sharing and losing what we have. Our world become closed down, narrow, grace-less, and we become a small group of 'us', with the rest of humankind being a large group of 'them'.

We know that in these difficult times, of much uncertainty about our economic position, about wars and threats to peace in our world, our first 'worldly' reaction is to move into the scarcity mode of living; of withdrawing inwards and holding fiercely to what we have. A very human and worldly reaction of the 'flesh', as Paul would say.

Jesus asks us to resist that temptation at such times, and be even more determined, in spite of all the signals we are receiving, to be more generous, to be more hospitable, to hold and interact with the world through the lens of abundancy. This is the countercultural message Paul gives to the church in Corinth.

In the Message translation of 2 Cor 11-13, it reads:

¹¹⁻¹³ Dear, dear Corinthians, I can't tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn't fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren't small, but you're living them in a small way. I'm speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!

Our Gospel reading is a timely reminder of the tremendous power of Jesus and God, in our world and in our lives. This passage can evoke several emotions. Firstly, the real sense of hopelessness, the forces of the natural world and of

the sinful human world being too great for us to bear. It can make us become fearful and give up hope, and to lose faith. We can shrink into a small narrow world.

Secondly, and after sitting with this passage for a short while it can bring us to a completely separate set of feelings. When the disciples' level the accusation at Jesus that he doesn't care if they drown, Jesus takes a decisive step to show just how much he cares: he calms the storm! Should that not bring us to a place of acknowledging God's love for us, of the power and authority of God, and of the faith we can put in God. It can help us grow into a more abundant and generous life, where we put out trust in God. Where we know God's grace operating in our lives, and where we wish to share that with others. Especially, others who are vulnerable, anxious, dispossessed, fleeing from desperate life-threatening situations. We are charged with being God's hands and feet in this imperfect world, and it should lead us to reflect on what we can do to do God's work, to help others who are fearful, who are so vulnerable, and exposed to threats to their lives?

What can we do for those who reach the UK and are processed through the frankly inhumane asylum processes? How could you survive on £8.50 per week allowance, as an asylum-seeker in Scotland? Could you buy clothes, access public transport, socialise with other people, on that amount?

What can we do for those who are given refugee status, and become 'New Scots'?

What can we do to influence a different approach to the issues to poverty and war in their own countries? Is the reduction in foreign aid contributing to the increase in economic migration, and the evil of people smuggling across the Mediterranean Sea, where so many people have drowned?

As you may know I represent the SEC on the Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees (SFAR) Group. We discuss and co-ordinate action in Scotland to support asylum-seekers and New Scots as they assimilate and settle in Scotland. There are many charities that support refugees. We also have refugees living in our community; Ukrainians hosted by families, Afghan families relocated here because they helped the British Army, Syrians who escaped the civil war, etc. At the PCDT Re-Cycle Project we give refurbished bikes to refugees for free, to enable them to travel and connect with others, and to let their children get to school and play with other children.

I hope that with some more information, each one of us would be equipped to challenge people who spout factually incorrect nonsense about refugees and migration.

Scotland particularly needs migration, as we are an aging population and there is a shortage of people willing to work in health and social care as well as in the hospitality sector.

The message from today's readings is that we are challenged by these readings to consider the awesome abundance that can be experienced in God's kingdom, and we are being asked to be abundant with our hope, with our compassion, our care, for those who are less fortunate. To know that God cares for us and for all others on this earth, and we are called to show God's love to all.

Showing God's love can take us to some challenging places, to supporting New Scots, to facilitating the support of refugees to understand the ways our society and culture are organised, as they move from being strangers in a foreign land to be sojourners in the land, at least for a while, or maybe for ever.

Eugene Peterson's translation of 1 Corinthians is the challenge for us all this week. I can find no better way to wrap up this sermon, by repeating his translation of 2 Cor 6: 11-13

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How might we, in respect of migration, open up our lives and live openly and expansively?

