

Year C Proper 12, 22nd June 2025

1 Kings 19: 1-15a. Galatians 3: 23-29. Luke 8: 26-39

Sanctuary Sunday

Today is Sanctuary Sunday, a day when we do not hide from the sins of this world that have led to over 35 million people seeking sanctuary, having to flee their homes, their villages, towns and cities, and often countries, in order to find a place of safety. We have to shine a bright light on this horrendous situation in many parts of the world. It can be hard to read the personal stories of people seeking sanctuary; it is much easier to avoid the news, avoid hearing personal stories, and perhaps get caught up in the rhetoric of people who have to flee their land being called 'illegal' No-one is illegal. We can also be manipulated and swayed by alarmist newspaper headlines and articles as well as politicians' cries about 'swarms' and other words chosen to incite fear and loathing.

Our reading from 1 Kings 19 is a story of Elijah fearing for his life. Ahab had become powerful and corrupt and had killed many prophets. Ahab and Jezebel had got people to worship Baal and Asherah, not God. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah had called on the Lord to show he was the one powerful God, and through God's power Elijah was able to set ablaze a sacrificial bull and wood that was soaked in water, whereas the prophets of Baal and Asherah could not. In our reading this morning we learn that because of his demonstration of the power of God, Jezebel has vowed to have Elijah killed, and Elijah fled for his life. He got to such a low point, of real despair and unable to take another step away from danger, that he asked that God take his life.

Although a Biblical story from about 2,800 years ago, we know this story goes on to this day. Different circumstances, different countries, but basically the same. People threatened, people displaced, people killed, because they don't fit with what a despotic ruler wants, or because they have been identified as a group to vilify and draw the population's ire for imaginary slights, wrongs or traitorous acts.

In our reading we note that the Lord speaks with Elijah when he reaches safety. Elijah is asked why he was hiding in the cave. Elijah is able to tell his story, he is heard, his experiences are validated as he recounts them.

Our Gospel reading seems to have nothing to do with persecution, asylum-seeking and refugees. But look behind the story, and we can see a man trapped in his own poor mental health, ostracised by his community and banished from it. Jesus called him by name, and that seems to have broken through with the man. We can only speculate what names the local people called him! Through the man's healing in which a large herd of pigs was killed, Jesus was seen as a undesirable person. Was it because he healed a man that served as a hate figure for the community? Was it because Jesus had lost a local well-to-do landowner money when his pigs were killed in the lake? Or was it both? Luke's tells us that the people of the region asked Jesus to leave them.

I wonder how many of us have listened to an asylum-seeker or refugee's story? I have heard a few, in Aberdeen when we supported Syrian families in our area, and also on Iona when I spent some time with a family who fled their country because of political and religious persecution. The stories of their lives before persecution were so similar to our lives; with the same dreams and aspirations for themselves and their families. The stories of how their lives became threatened were horrifying and no one would have stayed put in their home in such circumstances. These people and millions like them have left their homes, some of them left family, left their culture and language. All these people are as fully human as we are, and where possible we need to understand and celebrate their lives and all they can bring into our communities.

What is our response to such stories, and why should we have a day dedicated to contemplating Sanctuary for those seeking safety?

As Christians who gather to create 'church' each Sunday as a community of faith, we are called to do more than recognise and acknowledge the suffering of so many people who are forced to leave their homes and seek sanctuary. As Christians we are called to 'seek justice' as Micah puts it. Many people are attracted to Christianity because it can bring about our own personal transformation as we seek to follow the way of Christ; what some people call being saved from sin and judgement, and the promise of eternal life with

Christ. This is a focus on our personal life and relationship with God. But, I contend, we are not just saved from something, but we are saved for something, otherwise our life of faith is just about ourselves and God and has little impact on the world – which doesn't align with the teachings and ministry of Jesus at all. We are saved for justice, mercy, healing, wholeness, community and most of all for loving others as Jesus loved. Our salvation has as much if not more to do with creating glimpses of heaven here on earth for others than it has to do with our destination after the end of this earthly life. Jesus' saving acts for us aren't solely for our benefit, but so we can share, with radical generosity, the love Jesus has for us. We can't claim to love Jesus then exclude the very people Jesus includes.

What can we do?

Locally – do we help asylum-seekers and refugees? What can we do to help people transition from a stranger in our midst to being a friend and neighbour, an integral part of our community? How does our community adapt and change to new people coming in?

What does sanctuary look like? What type of welcome would we want to experience as a refugee?

What can be offered to help people start a new life, and feel they have something to offer to their adopted community? What will help them feel valued, empowered, and have a sense of purpose?

What does it take to build a community of sanctuary in this district?

What one change or action can you take?

PS Over the page are some helpful definitions of terms used

Migrant

- Lives or intends to settle somewhere other than their place of origin.
- Could have many reasons for moving

Asylum Seeker

- Flees their homeland, and arrives in another country by whatever means they can
- Makes themselves known to the authorities and submits an application for asylum or other forms of international protection
- In the UK, has a legal right to stay in the country while awaiting a decision. They receive £49.18 pw to meet all bills. Are not allowed to work.

Refugee

- Has had their claim for asylum or another form of international protection accepted by the government of another country or has been resettled by the government of another country for humanitarian reasons.
- Can now stay either long-term or indefinitely

Internally-displaced person

- Has been forced to leave their home but remains within their own country
- Can have the same humanitarian needs as refugees, asylum-seekers or others crossing international boundaries

Economic Migrant

- Has moved to another country to work
- Could be legally or illegally resident
- May or may not have a legal work permit

Refused Asylum-seeker

- Has been unable to prove they would face persecution in their home country
- Must leave the country unless there are legitimate reasons for an appeal
- Has no right to accommodation, welfare or employment.