

Divonne, Holy Communion

Sun 22nd June 2025, 10h

Michael French

Exodus 1:8-13, Deuteronomy 10:17-19, Leviticus 19:33-34

Matthew 25:34-40

Refugee Sunday

‘Welcoming the Stranger’

- The border between Venezuela and Colombia is, in places, a river - not that wide, crossed in small boats
- Across that border people have been escaping, fleeing impossible economic conditions at home, taking a chance on a different future
- They are courageous, resilient, creative, hopeful, but vulnerable to extreme trauma, abuse, insecurity, and physical, emotional and mental suffering
- Some of them - young women - boys as well - get forced into sex work - I visited an organisation ‘*Renacer*’ (rebirth) working with survivors of that abuse, helping them to start again
- You can imagine the trauma, the hopes for a brighter future, turned into the horror of exploitation

*There was a time when men were kind
And eyes twinkled, and I was a child,
Until I crossed the border
And the world was cruel
And I was lost :
Twisted minds, harsh speech,
Innocence forced to evil ways,
Hands invading,
Bodies brute
And heavy*

*So please, now
Let us live kindly ...*

- You can imagine the longing for a genuinely kind face, a friendly welcome, a reminder that life is not always harsh but can be hopeful, that humans are not always hostile, but can be loving
- A longing for a welcome - a **Welcome for the stranger**
- The scene is repeated the world over - I’ve seen such scenes many times, maybe some of you have : the border between South Sudan and Northern Uganda, internally displaced people in the tragedy and chaos that is Haiti, in Afghanistan, on

the Jordan/Syria border, and those among us here in Switzerland/France, on our doorstep.

- Many of them have some kind of faith tradition or spirituality, which is a key part of their identity and will help them to interpret and survive the hardships they are living through
- That was the thrust of some work I led - working with Islamic Relief, Jewish NGO HIAS, and Christian and other faith actors, as well as those who don't identify with faith or religion, including the UNHCR, Red Cross - on 'faith-sensitivity in humanitarian response'



- This picture is taken from the cover of that work - it is of a young woman, full of dignity - she might be from any culture, any faith/spirituality - in a refugee camp, she is reading some sacred scripture - who knows which, it doesn't matter - that is going to be part of her survival mechanism
- Responding in such situations starts with people - a people-centred approach - so if you are going to

respond to her, whether you are 'religious' or not, you're going to have to take her faith identity seriously

- In other words, ***God is involved in this situation***
 - God always starts with people - not just with humanity in general, or with big 'issues', but with each precious person, a child in God's own image
 - with this young woman here.
- This is the same God incarnate, who becomes human, identifying with each one of us - who, in the baby Jesus, had to flee as a refugee himself to escape the persecution of Herod, taking refuge in Egypt - God knows what it is like
- So we start with people and we remind ourselves that those who find they are refugees, internally displaced, forced into migration, are the key actors and agents of their own future - often creative, and resourceful, often bringing all sorts of benefits to the places and communities they move to
- We have a poster still on the inside of a cupboard from when our son Tom was small - it says 'a bundle of belongings isn't the only thing a refugee brings to his or her new country' - then a picture of a well-known face- then 'Einstein was a refugee'

- People on the move bring immense richness to society, to the economy, to the community
- What about our response then ? - as nations, societies, communities, faith communities of whatever tradition, or just as plain ordinary human beings ?
- I think there are **3 messages** ...
- These messages draw on the scriptural imperative, deeply rooted in the Old Testament - therefore common to all the Abrahamic faiths - to remember that "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt" (Lev 19:33-34).
- I have deliberately included in today's readings references from the broad sweep of the Torah (first 5 books of OT, which is of course shared by all the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, Islam) - the references are to the people of Israel's experience of being aliens, refugees, outsiders - the message is: you know what it's like, therefore make sure you treat others well - the message is repeated and clear
- So 1. **there is a clear message for the current Israel-Palestine context:**
- It is: because you have suffered awful injustice yourself, should not let that turn you inward and dig your trench against the other ... treat the 'other' decently
- so, whilst we hang heads in shame at the evils of the Holocaust, the Shoah - and whilst we reject absolutely all forms of anti-semitism, and whilst we defend the existence of the State of Israel - we also recognise that to critique the actions of the State of Israel and its government is absolutely not anti-semitism - and we deplore what the WCC has called the 'flagrant violation of international law and morality, and threat of ethnic cleansing' currently being carried out in Gaza.
- The Torah reminds the people of Israel, Christians, all Abrahamic traditions that even though you may have suffered the deepest of horrors, even though you fear for your identity and survival, because you have been there, mistreated as aliens and outcasts, the only way forward is to build bridges to the 'other', the alien, to treat the one whom you consider to be a foreigner decently, as yourself
- (and of course, it is worth remembering that the Palestinians are not even aliens in that land, they were there already)

- **There is 2. a clear message here for all nations as they shape a response to refugees, migrants and the internally displaced** - in the New Testament (see the reading from Matthews' Gospel) we are called to 'welcome the stranger'
- This phrase 'Welcoming the Stranger' has formed the basis for many world faiths in making commitments regarding refugees, in dialogue with global actors such as the UNHCR - there was a seminal declaration back in 2014 with that title
- I have been impressed how nations and communities who remember what it is like to have to flee tend to provide a welcome - so that those in Colombia who had to flee the horrors of the internal conflict there and take refuge in neighbouring Venezuela, have in turn received those fleeing that country as the economy and society has gone into meltdown - similarly those in Northern Uganda who once had to flee from the Lord's Resistance Army into neighbouring South Sudan have in turn received the South Sudanese
- These are an example for us, where we are, about the quality of the response, the welcome, we give to those who find themselves among us : we are called to 'welcome the stranger'

- **There is 3. a clear message for us more generally** - this is not just about our response to an 'issue': refugees - it is about our own inner attitudes, which may surface in any sort of context
- We need to examine the fears, attitudes, opportunities which lie within, shaping our response to the 'other', that which is new, unsettling, different, unknown - it could be a person, a group, a situation, a relationship, an idea, an emotion ...
- In the face of the 'other' - do we bunker down in what is familiar and safe, hiding our own insecurities by identifying only with those who are 'like me' - shutting out those who are different ?
- That is not God's way. Instead we must start with our shared humanity, recognising the inherent dignity of each person, however different and 'other' superficially, each one a child of God.
- Maybe our fear about embracing the 'other', the unknown - increases with age ? I detect it in my own moments of fragility, the desire to retreat into my comfort zone - I have to remind myself to embrace the 'other', that which is different (people, ideas, experiences) - to remain curious, open, welcoming

- We have to resist defining ourselves too narrowly by 'my community', 'my sort of people'
- We can easily fall into a kind of tribalism as people of faith - 'Oh isn't it good that he/she is a Christian, one of us' - or churches which define 'you're in, you're not, saved/not saved - a clubbable kind of religion which is largely about bolstering our identity, our 'tribe' over against others in order to protect our fragile sense of self, in order to hide in our tribe
- We should look instead for our shared humanity with people of all faiths and spiritualities and of none
- Similarly, we can easily retreat into a narrow definition of what is normal in terms of national identity, what you have to be like to belong
- Or, in social contexts, who or what is acceptable: the sort of person we invite into our social circle, club, community
- We should look instead for our shared humanity with the one who is somehow 'other', recognise the spark of the divine, that each one is a child of God, precious
- Rather than withdraw (I have to remind myself, introvert that I am), we should *go to the other* -

not hide in our own introverted space, and ignore those who are different - learn to 'go to', to engage, to make a connection on the basis of common humanity

- Because our God is one who 'goes to' humanity, to transform and redeem
- That way, when you 'go to', when you choose to defy your own defensive inner logic, to welcome the stranger, that which is 'other', you see surprising (positive) things happen, you get a glimpse of what it is to align yourself with the counter-intuitive logic of what God the Holy Spirit is doing to transform and redeem the World, and you might just see good prevail, and beautiful, healing signs of hope
- I finish with some lines adapted from a poem I wrote, which touch on this:

*... Not in a clubbable hide-in-your-tribe,
Firmly and snugly enclenched in a nook
Of protected fragility, bunkering-down :
Your identity safely entrenched ...*

*... But in the fledgling
Rebel impulse
That flutters free
In search of self
And other*

*And truth
And hope ;
And in the movement
Of those
Who travel together
In diverse company,
In rainbow colours
Of shared humanity*

- Let us commit to celebrating that shared humanity with each and every one of God's precious, vulnerable children

Amen