

A Talk by Rachel Tanner, on the St Paul's Refugee Fund First given in church, 10 January 2021

Last Sunday we celebrated Epiphany, and heard about the arrival of the Three Wise Men in Bethlehem, bringing gifts to welcome the Baby Jesus.

We don't know much about the Wise Men: they may or may not have been kings, they probably were astrologers from the Middle East, but where exactly did they come from? They had seen the star rise in the East and followed it Westward to Bethlehem in Judea; they may have been travelling from modern day Iraq, or Iran, or Syria; some suggest they came from Yemen as the Kings of Yemen were Jewish at that time.

But what happened after the Wise Men left Bethlehem? They didn't return via the court of King Herod of Judea, as they had been warned in a dream that Herod would kill the new baby, jealous as he was of a potential rival.

Joseph was also warned about the threat from Herod as Matthew's Gospel tells us, in Chapter 2:

Now when the wise men had departed, look, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying; "Arise and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and stay there until I tell you, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him." And he arose and took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt and was there until the death of Herod; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet saying, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

So Jesus began his life as a refugee, fleeing violence and an imminent threat to his life. Sadly, many of the refugees in our modern world are also fleeing violence in the Middle East; travellers from Iraq, Syria and Yemen make up a significant proportion of those arriving in the UK as refugees and asylum seekers.

The fear and insecurity that Jesus' parents experienced is still a reality for so many people around the world. Many are forced to flee to escape persecution, often in the face of a real threat to their lives. Some of them, indeed, find themselves seeking refuge in our corner of West London.

Here at St Paul's, we are involved in efforts to support refugees and asylum seekers, and it is a cause that we often pray about in our Sunday worship together. About five years ago, Stephanie White, whom many of you will know, was volunteering at a North London drop-in centre and met some asylum seekers from Hounslow. She befriended them and this was the beginning of St Pauls' ongoing involvement with a group of people who are housed in a large hostel for women and children in Hounslow.

The people living there are waiting for a decision from the Home Office about whether they can stay in the UK or whether they will be sent back to the country they travelled from. While they are waiting, they are given accommodation but do not have access to benefits,

or the right to work. They receive a weekly subsistence allowance of £37.75, paid in the form of credit on a payment card that can be used at some, but not all, shops.

Cast your minds back to the beginning of the first lockdown in March. Panic-buying had emptied the supermarket shelves, essential medicines such as paracetamol and Calpol could not be found, and shocking scenes of chaos in hospitals in northern Italy had made many people fearful about what the coming weeks would bring. Stephanie recognised that the women and children in the hostel were particularly vulnerable because they could not travel to find food, and could not buy food from markets with their payment cards. If Covid had reached the hostel, it was likely that it would spread easily, with the shared bathroom and kitchen facilities.

At that time, we set up the **St Paul's Refugee Fund**, with contributions from regular monthly donors. Initially we thought the fund would run for perhaps four or six months, but as Covid has persisted and, in recent weeks become so dangerous once again, the fund has continued to operate. We give a small amount of money every week to each adult in the hostel, just £5 per person. We wondered if that was enough to make a difference, but time has shown that that small amount of extra cash has come to be a meaningful way to support the ladies; as well as the money, a weekly drop-off has built a strong bond between our support fund and the women. They have told us repeatedly over the last few months how much they value the fact that we are thinking of them and supporting them on a weekly basis. We were humbled recently when there was a delay in delivering the cash and we realised that some of the women were relying on that extra money but were too embarrassed to enquire about the delay.

In the sunnier summer months of the first lockdown, some of the extra funding went to preparing and planting a small vegetable garden, and improving the play space for the children. More recently, we were able to fund a Christmas party at the hostel, although sadly we could not attend and be with the families as we have done in previous years.

The lockdowns have affected us all and, as Stephanie noted, have made it easier for some people to empathise with refugees. Stephanie recently wrote:

I believe that lockdown has taught me to understand a little better what it really feels like to be an asylum seeker. Suddenly, I have no control over my own life: where I can live, whom I can see, how much I can travel, when, if ever, I will see my own family members again. There has been a pervading sense of dread, of not knowing what the future holds or what I am allowed to do.

The lockdown has made it hard for all of us, but especially the very poorest in our society. The drop-in centres and community English groups they had been attending have closed; only a skeleton service has been maintained at certain food banks. Our St Paul's fund has donated money to an excellent charity based in Hammersmith, called **West London Welcome** which has stayed open in a limited form throughout.

Our church has also been involved for the last three years or so with a **Refugee Welcome** group in Hounslow, which was set up under the umbrella of Hounslow Friends of Faith. Recently they have been contacted by a growing number of asylum seekers, some of whom are virtually destitute. One of the ongoing effects of Covid is that people arriving in the UK over the past few months have not been housed in temporary accommodation such as the hostel in Hounslow. Instead, the Home Office is using empty hotels, including one in Chiswick and two further afield in Hounslow as emergency accommodation. As these people are not eligible for the weekly subsistence amount, they have very little money, sometimes none at all. Some of the people we have met have been in hotel rooms since August and particularly for those with children, the situation is stressful.

Several local charities and churches, including **Refugees Welcome Hounslow**, have been offering practical support such as fresh food, winter clothing and shoes, and engaging with Hounslow Council over school and nursery places. Often the approach is very direct; just yesterday we were contacted on behalf of a man who is newly arrived in Hounslow. It read:

Someone we support is currently in Hounslow and is in need of shoes and clothing fairly urgently. He needs: shoes, a large coat, jeans, a t-shirt, jumper and pants. He is 35 years old, for reference. We will be putting out a call to our network for these items; please let me know if you have anything to donate or can help with collection and delivery.

Also over the last few weeks we have been supporting a young woman in one of the hotels who is expecting a baby boy next month. Shelagh Allsop is in touch with her and is arranging to provide a suitable pram or pushchair as well as other items she may need; please contact Shelagh if you can help.

Which brings me back to where we started: a homeless baby born into an uncertain world.

The challenges facing the refugees are complex, but their situation is also confronting for us, as citizens and as Christians. Society at large is often not on the side of refugees; why, people wonder, are we providing free food and accommodation, and access to health care, for people who have chosen to come to the UK but do not as yet have a legal right to live here? Especially now, with the economic fallout of Covid leaving people facing real financial hardship for an uncertain period ahead.

We are, rightly concerned about homeless people living in our own community and in recent weeks some members of our congregation have gone to great lengths to secure shelter for a young man sleeping on the streets in our parish.

Even people who work to support refugees can feel conflicted; are their efforts only reinforcing the impression that the UK offers a rosier future to would-be asylum seekers than in fact it does? Should we be, unwittingly, encouraging more people to make dangerous journeys and overloading a system that is already failing in many areas? How can we as a society humanely deal with the pressures of immigration? There are legitimate questions about whether people claiming asylum are genuinely in fear for their lives or travelling as economic migrants, looking for a better future for themselves and their families. And can we really blame them for that?

But the concept of asylum goes back to ancient times, certainly before the birth of Jesus and is enshrined in modern legislation such as the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, and in the UK, the Immigration and Asylum Act.

And in fact, as Christians, our response can be a relatively simple one. When we meet people who have risked their lives and left everything behind because they felt they had no choice, it is hard not to do what we can. Jesus always directed his ministry towards the most marginalised people in society. He challenges us to overcome prejudice and self-interest in the way we respond to situations that we cannot ignore. He asks us to open our minds and our hearts to connect with other people whose lives are so different to our own.

A prayer to finish

Lord, please be with refugees and asylum seekers around the world. Help them to know your steady presence as they face uncertainty and fear. Comfort them for the loss of all that they have left behind, especially their family members whom they fear they will never see again. Help them to process and come to terms with the violence and distress that many of them have encountered. Give them hope for their future.

Lord, we recognise that we are privileged to live in a peaceful society. We thank you that we are able to live in safety in our home country, with our friends and families around us and a hopeful future ahead of us. We thank you for our community, our sense of belonging and the security that we derive from this.

Help us to respond where we can to the suffering of those in our local area who have been displaced by experiences that we will never have to endure, and who have lost their own deep sense of belonging. Give us the strength and compassion to offer what help we can, as we put our trust in you.

Amen

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