

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DIOCESAN SYNOD

17 JUNE 2023

As we meet, Greece is in three days of national mourning following the sinking of a boat containing 750 people seeking asylum. It is thought around 500 people, including 100 children perished. It's hard to imagine the panic and suffering that took place as it sank. This is the stuff of nightmares.

The latest report from the United Nations on migration this week estimates that the number of displaced people worldwide had reached a record high of 110 million. The causes of this displacement are many: war, persecution, violence and human rights abuse. There are no signs that the rate of displacement is slowing down; indeed, most commentators and academics think the numbers will rise. What is significant is the vast majority of refugees do not seek entry into Europe but have sought refuge in neighbouring poor nations.

Meanwhile, here in the United Kingdom 554 migrants crossed the channel on Monday, which takes the total this year to 8858. Migration is at the top of the political agenda and it evokes strong passions. I have no doubt that there will be a wide range of opinions in this synod.

Similar strong views and passions are being expressed by politicians and at the moment the Illegal Migration Bill is making its way through the House of Lords. Bishops have been very outspoken and have received criticism, especially from some parts of the media. Despite the claims of some newspapers, I've not heard a single bishop claim that we should have totally open borders or that we should not prosecute criminal gangs who are smuggling people into the country. What has been argued is that we need to find a better way to address this problem, which is not going away. Sadly, the bible does not provide us or the government with a set of principles to apply to policing national borders.

You may not know, but some of our churches have welcomed significant numbers of asylum seekers into our midst and some of our clergy and congregations have been at the forefront of giving assistance to those who have arrived on our shores with no possession.

On Easter Monday, just before the festival pilgrimage procession in the cathedral, we hosted a lunch for eighty Iranians. It was a deeply moving occasion.

A diocesan synod Presidential Address is not the place to set out the political issues. What is appropriate is to note one of the very strong threads that runs through scripture. Whatever our political persuasion, we need to honour and protect the stranger in our midst, because like us they are made in the image and likeness of God.

But first a personal anecdote. Back in the mid 1980's I took time off between jobs as I wanted to make my first visit to Africa. I arranged an itinerary, linking up with various missionaries I'd been praying for. I organised the trip on a shoestring, so I travelled around on busses and coaches. It was all going well until on one of the journeys the coach broke down. We sat there, squashed in tightly, for a couple of hours in the oppressive heat.

Eventually it became clear this particular vehicle wasn't going anywhere and people began to get off and start walking towards a nearby village. I asked the driver when the replacement coach would be arriving. He laughed. 'There's no other bus coming this way today. You will have to walk'. So I trudged along the road, following all the other passengers.

When I arrived in the village I found I was the only white face in a sea of black faces. I felt very insecure as I walked down the street with people looking at me, wondering what I was doing there. I asked a stall holder by the side of the road if there was a hotel or hostel. Again, there was a look of astonishment as she explained that the nearest hotel was miles away and it was getting dark. 'You come and stay with us', she said. I was rather dubious but didn't have much choice. When she's packed up her remaining produce, she took me back to her home. That family gave me food, they invited me to stay in their home, sleeping on a mat on the floor. The next morning they gave me breakfast and told me when the next bus was coming.

As I was leaving I thanked them profusely. 'Ah', came the reply, 'in our culture it is a blessing when we can care for the traveller!' That poor Kenyan family taught me a lesson about hospitality, which shamed my English reticence and reserve.

Now, throughout the scriptures you find the theme of protecting the stranger and the alien. For example, Leviticus 19: ³³ *'And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. ³⁴ The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as ^[h]one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*

In Isaiah 60. 10-11 we read: *Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you ... Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nations shall bring you their wealth.*

Treat the stranger in your midst as an ally, says the prophet, as a gift; open your hearts as they may well be messengers from God with new insights.

You find this thought in Hebrews 13. 2: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

It is almost definitely referring back to a famous episode in the Book of Genesis where three strangers turn up one day at Abraham's tent. Abraham immediately calls for water so they can wash and food so they can eat. He offers them hospitality. It turns out they are angels and they have a message for Abraham, which he could easily have missed if he'd turned the unexpected visitors away.

And then we find Jesus saying much the same thing in Matthew 25 speaking of the last judgement: ³⁴ *"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, ...
³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' ³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we ... [do these things]? ... ⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

When we come across people who are different from ourselves we have a choice. We can pull back in fear or we can open our hearts to them. Such hospitality may even open ourselves up more deeply to God himself.

Alan Jones, in his book *Soul Making*, tells of the times when he visited a monastery in the Egyptian desert. His host, he wrote was Father Jeremiah. It's impossible to tell the age of a bearded Egyptian monk, but Jeremiah seemed very old indeed. The first thing he did was bring me tea and something to eat. Then he said with a deep laugh 'Father, we always treat guests as angels – just in case!'

So we need to pray for our government as they struggle with getting the legislation right; we need to do all we can to support those parts of the world where drought, famine and war are driving people out of the lands; and we need to offer hospitality to those who find their ways to these shores.