

Sermon on Sunday 26 June 2022

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

(Gospel reading: Luke 9:51-62)

Look kindly on the refugee

I've just returned from three weeks in America where we had a great holiday in a great country. Jenny and I spent a few days in New York; drove down south to Richmond, before renting a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Yes, you could write a song about that.

I've been lucky to visit New York many times over the years, but there is always something new to grab your attention. One of the highlights for me this time was visiting the Central Railroad Terminal of New Jersey. Historically, this was the landing point for millions of immigrants that arrived from all over the world during the 19th and 20th centuries.

They were processed on Ellis Island, just off the coast, close to the Statue of Liberty, that amazing and familiar symbol of freedom. It took less than a day to screen them for infectious diseases and give them their entry documents and they came to the railway station on the mainland and dispersed to towns and cities all over the United States. And they were, mostly, made very welcome. It was an easy entry.

Down in Richmond, Virginia, we studied more history. This was the Cradle of the American Civil War, which was fought for a number of reasons, but largely over the emancipation of another kind of immigrant, the black slaves who had been transported from Africa to work on the land.

We also visited Jamestown and James Island on the east coast, one of the first areas to be populated by Europeans in the 16th and 17th centuries. They turned up in their small boats, landed on the beach,

built houses and communities with no entry forms or visas required. They were welcomed by the native Indians in the region, whose own ancestors had arrived from Asia around 15,000 years earlier.

You can see where I'm going with this: immigrant welcomes immigrant.

So, we flew back from America just at the start, appropriately, of World Refugee Week, which comes to a close today (Sunday 26 June).

The issues of refugees and asylum seekers are never far from the news and we have been very close in Hertford recently to the crisis in Europe that has seen us welcome families from Ukraine. That has been a great reaction to a desperate situation close to home and it's been lovely to see our community respond first hand to help our neighbours.

But the issue of refugees is much wider and is getting worse. Did you know that, according to the United Nations, there are now an estimated 84 million displaced people in the world today?

The largest refugee camp in the world in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, which houses around 750,000 Muslim refugees from Myanmar. 750,000 is the population of the whole of Northamptonshire.

Lebanon hosts 1.5 million refugees, mostly from Syria. Here's a pub quiz question: what year did the Syrian civil war begin? 2011, 11 years ago, and refugees are still fleeing the country.

It seems to me that God has a soft spot for people who live an insecure existence, who have to flee conflict or leave their homes. So much so that when He took human form, God came among us as such a person.

Jesus was a refugee as a child and today's gospel reading reminds us that even during his ministry he would arrive in a new place with few contacts and resources, reliant on the kindness of strangers taking him in. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

The Bible is full of immigration and displaced-people stories, from Adam and Eve having to leave the Garden of Eden, to the Israelites leaving Egypt, to the story of Ruth and Naomi, who fled from one country and back again, relying on the generosity of Boaz and other strangers.

These days, you'd think, wouldn't you, that with such a widespread heritage of immigration the world over, the free movement of people would be easier now than it ever used to be. But the opposite seems to be true.

In some Western countries, if you have a stamp in your passport from another trip to a 'wrong' country, such as Sudan or Afghanistan, you'll find yourself on a plane immediately going back to where you came from, no explanation accepted. Imagine what it must be like for someone from Syria trying to get into Europe?

Things are getting worse in the world for refugees and displaced people and families fleeing violence and for those communities seeking safety or a more fertile place to live.

Politics are wrapped in this, of course, but the growing number of refugees in the world is a humanitarian issue and it's my hope that the love and understanding that communities in this country and Europe have shown towards families from Ukraine will not stop there but will spread; that we remain aware and hold in our prayers those 84 million refugees and asylum seekers and immigrants the world over. And we never stop doing what we can to support the organisations and

movements on the ground that are trying to cope with the crisis.

As our visit to the US proved, immigrants and refugees can enrich a country and bring a positive diversity that helps build caring and understanding communities. As Christians, we have a collective responsibility to care for the poor, the disadvantaged and vulnerable, wherever they be.

I leave you with two thoughts.

When the earth is seen from space there are no national borders visible. From God's perspective, there are no borders. People make borders, people draw lines on maps, build walls, erect fences



and create mountains of bureaucracy to hinder the movement of people in need. I wonder what God thinks about that?

I mentioned the story of Ruth earlier. She married Boaz, her protector. The son she and Boaz had was Obed. And Obed was the grandfather of King David – whose distant relative, some 12 generations later, was Joseph, human father of Jesus. So, it's worth remembering that the Saviour of the world that we believe in is related to a refugee!

Amen