

THE GOOD SAMARITAN – 10th July 2016

Our Gospel today – the Parable of the Good Samaritan- was a deeply controversial and challenging piece of teaching to those who gathered around Jesus as he taught in Galilee.

And that same parable – and the question which prompted it, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ – is as deeply controversial and challenging today for the citizens of Europe, and perhaps more particularly in Brexit Britain.

Immigration, perhaps more than anything, dominated the whole Referendum debate about whether to leave or remain in Europe, and it continues to be an emotive and divisive issue for politicians and people alike.

Indeed, the Vicar of St. Martin in the Fields in London, Sam Wells, has remarked that “there is no issue where the Church’s understanding of God and the momentum of public opinion are as far apart”. It is sad reflection on how emotive and divisive is the whole topic of immigration that those who want to give out a positive message to migrants have taken to wearing a safety pin in their lapels to say that they are safe people to be around.

So, what is the Church’s understanding and position on this issue of immigration?

As Anglicans we look first of all at Scripture, and when we do we see that one of the major themes in the Old Testament is how God’s people were formed and moulded by migration.

Their founding father Abraham was called by God to move from the city of Ur (in present day Iraq) to go to Canaan.

Joseph, son of Jacob, who became Prime Minister in Egypt, was a trafficked slave. When a severe famine hit Canaan Joseph’s family all migrated to Egypt, as we would say today, for economic reasons.

Later, Moses, again commissioned by God, led those self-same Jews, now oppressed and enslaved in Egypt to freedom and much better conditions – to the Promised Land – ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’. They were fleeing persecution on racial and religious grounds. Later on there was a further migration to Babylon and back.

But migration for the people of God was not always a one-way traffic.

It’s interesting, and indeed very significant, that only once in the Old Testament do you find the commandment ‘Love your neighbour’ but there are 36 verses where you find the command to love the stranger and care for the alien. Something God’s people were not always very good at.

Perhaps nowhere are the benefits and blessing of welcoming and loving the stranger and alien better epitomised than in the story of Ruth in the Old Testament.

Ruth was a foreigner, from the tribe of Moab, a people hated by the Jews. In Israel Ruth was a foreign immigrant from a despised country. But Ruth married a Jewish man and they had a son who became the grandfather of the great King David.

And when we turn to the New Testament we very soon read that the young Jesus and his family had to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's massacre of young male children. Jesus was a refugee and asylum seeker.

To give a few modern examples: The Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, fled to this country from Uganda to escape threats from Idi Amin who had had him imprisoned. The Mayor of London is of Pakistani origin, and even the Royal Family have their roots in the House of Hanover. There may even be the odd vicar who claims Irish heritage!

So what does the lawyer's question, 'Who is my neighbour' mean for us today. And the answer in the parable of the Good Samaritan is still controversial and challenging because it turns the conventions and expectations of the day upside down.

The Establishment figures – the priest and the Levite – are found wanting when measured against God's commands of welcoming and caring for the alien, and it is the despised, the Samaritan, who actually fulfils God's law in going to the aid of the mugged traveller, administering not only first aid but on-going care.

There is a huge 'Ouch' factor in the parable. Not only is the Samaritan doing the right thing, religiously and humanly, unlike the priest and the Levite, but the despised and rejected has become God's instrument of compassion.

Most of today's migrants are fleeing persecution, like the Jews were in Egypt and like Jesus was, or they are fleeing from situations of poverty, like Joseph's family and Naomi's family.

It's not something chosen lightly – to be uprooted from family and familiar surroundings and homeland. Many are highly educated yet they are treated as the flotsam and jetsam of the world, sometimes quite literally, as they bob on the seas in dangerously unsafe boats.

How to handle this phenomenon poses a huge challenge to nations and governments – and to the citizens of host countries. Of course there have to be border controls, security checks and quota policies.

But what today's parable and indeed the whole of the Bible, challenges us about is a change of attitude towards migrants and immigrants. So many are a gift rather than a threat, and further we are commanded by God, to care for them and to be compassionate towards them.

We are called to love our neighbour as ourselves and in our global village our neighbour includes people from many nations. And as Jesus went out of his way to minister and show compassion to the marginalised, so are we.

His love embraced all, and we in the Church, his Body on earth, are called to do the same.

In today's parable, Jesus asked, 'Who was neighbour to the man who fell among thieves. It was the one who showed mercy. And Jesus added 'Go and do likewise'.

Someone has translated 'to love your neighbour as yourself' as 'to love others as God would love them'.

We cannot be like the priest and Levite and walk by on the other side, even if runs contrary to convention and public opinion.

Let us seek to see the positive rather than the negative, to see immigrants as potential gifts rather than threats, to remember God's command to care for the alien and to 'Go and do likewise'.

And as we now baptise Sebastian maybe a great way to start is to be the kind of example in word and deed that children will learn the true meaning of compassion and love for our neighbour.