

Trinity 14 2015 – Refugees

Isaiah 35 vv 1-10 p719, Psalm 146, James 2 vv 1-17 p1214, Mark 7 vv 24-37 p1010

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come with singing unto Zion with songs and everlasting joy on their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Isaiah 35¹⁰.

What a contrast! The prophet's vision is of a time when God's people will come home rejoicing. Our news media are full of reports of refugees and would be migrants fleeing their homes, where there is war and persecution and terrible economic hardship, undertaking dangerous and dreadful journeys in the hope of making a new beginning here in Europe, where we are so blessed. We enjoy peace and security. Our shops are full of good things. Our children go to school. When we are sick, the NHS looks after us. When we retire, the state provides us with a pension. Yes, we complain; yes, we could have better public services and even more comfortable lives than we enjoy already, but, compared to much of the rest of the world, and especially the places these refugees are coming from, we are already living in paradise. They wouldn't run these appalling risks if they weren't desperate to get away from their homelands and to find somewhere safe to live and to bring up their families.

I haven't got the answers which have eluded our commentators and politicians. Nobody, presumably, would say that we shouldn't provide homes for any of these refugees. Nobody would say that we should take them all. So the question is quite simply, how many should we take? I don't know the answer to that one, but I do know that, in framing the answer, we must be guided by what S James calls in our epistle, the royal law of love. That means compassion for the would be immigrants and it also means proper consideration for the communities they will be coming to. It is too easy to create ghettos in what are already the poorest areas of our towns and cities. It isn't fair to bring more competition for housing, jobs and public services into areas where there is high unemployment, a shortage of affordable housing and already overflowing schools and hospitals. Neither does it make sense if the newly arrived are not made welcome and encouraged to integrate into British society. Government, local government, local communities – all of us in fact - have to plan wisely for the arrival of possibly large numbers of desperate people.

I am sure that our government is also right in providing assistance to the countries which border war torn regions and which are much poorer than we are and are having to deal with far greater numbers of refugees than we are. I am also sure that our government is right to target ruthless people traffickers who exploit the desperation of these people for their own profit, taking large sums of money off them, packing them into lorries or trains or unseaworthy boats and then, sometimes, just abandoning them to horrible deaths.

I am also sure that our government is right to talk about bringing peace and security to the Middle East and Africa and also economic development to end poverty in these places. If only! I fear that that is a very long term project indeed. 3,000 years ago, Moses said that the poor we would always have with us. 2,000 years ago, Jesus said the same. It is still true and the reason is that we do not keep the commandments of God. If we did, there would be no war, no need for people to flee their homes. If we obeyed God's commandments, we would be generous in sharing the good things He has given us and there would be more than enough for everyone. If we obeyed God's commandments, we would love one another and

there would be no more violence or dishonesty or infidelity, no more selfishness. What I am describing is the Kingdom of God – the Zion of Isaiah’s prophecy. Christians are the ransomed of the LORD, returning singing unto Zion. It is a hard journey. It requires repentance on our part, repentance from all the sins which hold us back from offering our lives wholeheartedly in service to God and to humanity. It means confronting all the evils in society. It means being prepared to give up our own personal comforts for the greater good. It may mean facing up to ridicule and even persecution. It means being bold enough to evangelise, to spread the Good News, to preach the Gospel to the whole of creation. It means taking up our cross to follow Christ and being prepared to suffer with Him. There are deep valleys to trudge through, hills and mountains to climb, crooked paths which are hard to follow, rough ground which it is difficult to cross. Yet the ransomed of the LORD come with singing unto Zion. Elsewhere (chapter 40⁴), Isaiah says *every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain*. At 55¹², he says, *For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands*. It is a hard road, but when we are working for the Kingdom of God, it is God’s work that we are doing. It is a road we tread rejoicing. He is our beginning, our companion on the journey and our end. The canonical version of Mark’s Gospel ends with the words, *and they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen*.

Our calling as Christians is clear. We are the light of the world, the salt of the earth, the leaven which leavens the lump. Our calling is to live God’s perfect law of love and to work with Jesus to bring the whole creation into obedience to that holy principle. You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. You can’t have one without the other. As Christians, our calling is both to embody and to share that royal law, that perfect law of love. Amen.

Creed 6 p148 CW

Intercessions 4 p284, Collect 6 p289.