Christ Church Cathedral Dublin,

23 June 2019

Sanctuary Sunday

INTRODUCTION

I greet you all in the Name of Christ and wish upon you all the blessings and peace of God.

It is an honour to be invited to preach here.

Today is Sanctuary Sunday, an opportunity to celebrate the contribution of refugees among us and to commit ourselves to welcome and work with them.

There are Sanctuary Sunday services taking place throughout Britain and Ireland.

I am here on behalf of Churches Refugee Network of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland to celebrate Sanctuary Sunday with you.

I want to thank Dr Damian Jackson, who is a member of the CTBI Churches Refugee Network for facilitating and finalising the arrangements with me, and your kind hospitality to me and my wife Kathy.

I love coming to Dublin.

I have a fondness for the City, and love the multi-cultural communities, cultures, and cuisine here.

My love for Dublin grew when I was Leader of Corrymeela Community and worked with the Irish Council of Churches in 2012 to arrange and establish the Dublin Interfaith Forum which was borne out of the desire to show that faith and the City can relate, to celebrate faith diversity, to honour Migrant diversity, and to promote integration by making welcome, hospitality and inclusion central to intercultural integration and wellbeing. I facilitated all the preparatory workshops, and chaired the launch event in the City Council offices.

I am very proud of the Dublin Interfaith Forum and assure them of my continuing prayerful solidarity.

At the launch event I talked about the City of Sanctuary initiative as an example of including people who come to live here from other countries, not least those who are seeking sanctuary, and refugees.

It is a delight to me that Dublin has a strong City of Sanctuary network and that Christ Church Cathedral is a Cathedral of Sanctuary.

Well done and congratulations to the Cathedral community.

Again, I assure you all of my prayerful solidarity.

Dublin is truly a City of many cultures, creeds and colours, and it has been a City of Migration for well over one thousand years.

It is a City of a hundred thousand welcomes.

Caed Mile Failte.

There is now a book with that name.

It is full of stories and reflections about experiences of journeys, struggles, challenges, hurt, welcomes, hospitality and sanctuary.

It has been compiled by Tiffy Allen.

Tiffy has been a key person in the City of Sanctuary movement for many years.

Through Tiffy the City of Sanctuary movement has grown hugely, and is part of a wider network of movements focussed on justice, mercy, welfare, welcome, wellbeing, inclusion of refugees and people seeking sanctuary.

I take this opportunity to publicly thank Tiffy for her contribution to City of sanctuary, and to commend her book to you.

It was launched in Dublin only last Thursday.

Well done on the book Tiffy, it's a great read.

YOU SHALL LOVE THE STRANGER AS YOURSELF

Let me now share a short reflection on Sanctuary.

Religious faith can be summarised in seven words:

Love God, love your neighbour, as yourself.

Jesus said, these words are the axis of prophetic wisdom.

Remarkably, these central words are stated only once in the Hebrew Scriptures, Leviticus 19:18.

However, there is an ethical command that is repeated again and again.

You shall also love the stranger, as yourself (Leviticus 19:34).

It has been noted by Jewish scholars that this instruction is repeated at least 37 times in the Bible in one way or another.

There is no other ethical requirement so forcefully enjoined in the Holy Bible.

Perhaps this is because people found it difficult to love the stranger, and had to be reminded again and again.

To love the neighbour includes loving the stranger.

The neighbour nearby is a bit like us.

A stranger is someone who is different, someone from another ethnicity, or skin colour, or nationality and identity.

The children of Israel were in the wilderness 40 years.

Did they have to be reminded annually of this requirement, to “love the stranger as yourself”?

Everyone was familiar with the command to love God and your neighbour as yourself, even the lawyer who came to Jesus for wisdom.

But how familiar was the lawyer and his community about the call to love the stranger as yourself?

We too need also an annual reminder of this ethical instruction, an annual Sanctuary Sunday.

The children of Israel were in the wilderness 40 years.

They began to quarrel and fall out over matters.

In the interest of good manners, they coined an ethical formula still in use today:

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Today this is called the “principle of proportionality”.

Do not use more force than is used against you.

Of course, there were people who would in revenge take your life if you knocked their tooth out.

To prevent such injustice, God commanded Moses to set up six Cities of Refuge, these would be cities people could resort to if their life was in danger, even if they had committed a crime, for safety while their case was processed (Numbers 35).

A City of Refuge was a place where you would be safe from harm and injustice.

This concept came to be enshrined in Jewish codes of conduct, as part of what it is to love and honour your neighbour and the stranger and to honour the holiness of God.

CITY OF SANCTUARY

And this code came into Christian codes of behaviour, and is at the root of the idea of City of Sanctuary and Church or Cathedral of Sanctuary.

Every monastery in ancient Ireland included a safe space, a sanctuary, where even an “enemy”, or a stranger, fleeing danger would be afforded protection.

Glendalough, in the Wicklow Garden of Ireland, is one of the earliest Christian Monastic Settlements in Europe. It houses an iconic round tower and sanctuary around 1000 years old. It was a place of worship, learning and sanctuary. At the doorway to the settlement is what is termed Sanctuary Cross. A person seeking refuge only had to touch this Cross to be given sanctuary by the community there.

The Celtic term *An Tearmann* refers to an area in and around Churches and Monasteries that was to be free of political, religious and feudal conflict, and people would have sanctuary and be safe. Ireland still has villages called An Tearmann.

The idea of City of Sanctuary, or Church or Cathedral of Sanctuary is not new.

A thousand years ago, many of the Cathedrals were Sanctuary Cathedrals. People in danger found safety in them.

Cathedrals of Sanctuary today are reviving this ancient wisdom and principle and practice.

CITY OF SANCTUARY TODAY

City of Sanctuary is a contemporary expression of the City of Refuge idea. It progresses the idea to providing safety and hospitality to vulnerable people, for example – Refugees, Asylum Seekers who are not criminals, people seeking sanctuary, children whose lives are in danger, victims of domestic abuse and older people who suffer indignity, and indeed people whose lives are in danger from knife crime.

As in the past, it is about respectful manners, behaving well towards others with welcome and hospitality, and being safe to be with. Good manners precede law. It is only when manners fail that we have to create laws to provide protection.

22 June is the anniversary of the arrival in London of the ship Empire Windrush from the West Indies in 1948.

People have come to Britain and Ireland as migrants for many years.

Today 65 million people have lost the protection of their countries and are seeking sanctuary elsewhere.

Each year up to 1 billion people cross a border.

Every two seconds, a person is forced to flee for safety.

Every day 44,000 more people are driven from their homes.

Many take treacherous journeys on unseaworthy boats.

Thousands perish on the way.

I got on board an abandoned broken refugee boat in Lampadusa, Italy. Many on board had drowned.

I picked up some wood and this rope from the boat.

From the wood I made a cross.

The Rope I now use as my Stole.

What stories would this rope tell if it could speak?

People from these Islands have benefitted from the hospitality of other nations and people when we have travelled abroad, and continue to do so.

There are some 70 million people around the world who claim to have roots in Ireland.

The Titanic which sailed from these shores a hundred years ago was the biggest Ship of the day.

Why did it have to be so big?

Because so many people were wanting to escape hunger and famine and conflict and go away to find security and build a better life.

Today, “Brexit” has come to symbolise a focus across Britain, Ireland and Europe on immigration and the freedom of movement.

This is an important conversation, and requires open, honest, informed and respectful discussion.

The City of Sanctuary idea is a contribution to this debate. It calls for hospitality as a way of challenging hatred and hostility.

There is a human, legal, moral and spiritual obligation on us all to provide safety and sanctuary to each other, and especially to those whose lives are in danger. This is important and urgent in our times of open hostility and hatred particularly towards people from other countries seeking security and sanctuary among us.

The goal of building good communities remains incomplete without the inclusion and integration of those whose lives are in most danger.

An old Celtic proverb reads: It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.
Human warmth and welcome and friendship are the best form of sanctuary, and we can all be sanctuary to each other.

The children of Israel needed an annual reminder to love the stranger as yourself.

CTBI and City of Sanctuary have initiated an annual Sanctuary Sunday.

It is the Sunday at the end of Refugee Week.

This is opportunity to annually commit ourselves to celebrate and continue to build hospitality and sanctuary for all, especially those whose lives are most vulnerable, and most in danger.

There are resources available on the CTBI website, and on the City of Sanctuary website that provide examples of good work, and resources to support you.

I close with some words written over 200 years ago by an African man who had been enslaved, who achieved freedom, and then wrote a book.

It is a book called, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by himself.

It is his story of seeking freedom, resisting oppression.

He concludes the long and detailed book with these words, “what makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser and learn to do justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly before God?”

The values of justice, mercy and humility will inform our behaviour as we live our lives.
We commit ourselves to this today.
We will renew the commitment at least annually on Sanctuary Sunday.

As a Cathedral of Sanctuary, share your story and commitment with pride as an example to others, and may God bless and make your efforts fruitful.

Thank you and bless you.

Inderjit Bhogal

23 June 2019

We are in Refugee Week

Big Boats:

- Empire Windrush (22 June 1948)