

SANCTUARY SUNDAY SERMON 2021

INTRODUCTION

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

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

Thank you for all you are doing.

You are a congregation and church committed to “being a place of sanctuary and affirming the value of each individual human being as made in the image of God”.

I assure you all of my prayerful solidarity as you continue and sustain your good work which is as important and urgent as ever.

I want to focus my words to you around a sentence from the Bible.

YOU SHALL ALSO LOVE THE STRANGER AS YOURSELF (Deuteronomy 10:19)

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 36 times in the Bible in one way or another (Sacks, J. 2002. *The Dignity of Difference*. Continuum, London. Page 58).

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 instruction to love your neighbour as yourself goes on to state (Leviticus 19:33): “You shall love the stranger as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”.

The neighbour nearby is a bit like us, and loveable. If neighbours have to be challenged (Leviticus 19:17), this can be done in neighbourly ways.

A stranger is someone who is different, someone from another ethnicity, or skin colour, or nationality and identity, often vilified, more difficult to love, “Strangers” are looked upon with suspicion and fear.

We are all prone to regarding those who are different from us as strangers. They are not like us, not “one of us”.

But we all know what it is to be a stranger. We are all strangers to many others. In some ways we are strangers to ourselves.

Biblical wisdom is that “you shall love the stranger”, because you know what it is like to be a stranger (Deuteronomy 10:19).

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”?

We too need also a regular reminder of this ethical instruction, an annual Sanctuary Sunday, an annual Racial Justice Sunday.

The children of Israel were in the wilderness 40 years.

They began to quarrel, and fall out over matters, as people do.

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 excessive force, more force than is used against you.

Of course, there were people who would in revenge take life if someone 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 anyone would be safe from harm and injustice while their case was being processed.

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.

At the core of this ethic is to see the image of God in the “other”, in someone different from you.

CITY OF SANCTUARY

And this code came into Christian codes of morality, 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 which is 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 idea of City of Sanctuary, or Church or cathedral of Sanctuary is not new.

A thousand years ago there were Cities and Churches and Cathedrals of Sanctuary in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. They offered safety and shelter to people whose life was in danger, even if they had committed a crime.

There are many ancient Churches and Cathedrals that still retain their Sanctuary Kocker, the symbol of sanctuary.

Churches and 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 good and 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 80 million people have lost the protection of their countries.

30 million of them 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. More than 1200 people died in the Mediterranean Sea in 2020.

Many refugees land on the Italian Lampedusa Island in the Mediterranean.

I got on board an abandoned broken refugee boat in Lampedusa. Many of the passengers travelling on this boat had drowned.

I picked up some wood and a 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. How many people around the world have their roots in England, Scotland and Wales?

The Titanic which sailed from these shores in 1912 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.

Governments have to work together to provide safe routes for refugees.

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.

SANCTUARY CHURCH, SANCTUARY SUNDAY

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 a constant reminder to “love the stranger as yourself”.

The Refugee Council, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 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 reflect, pray, and commit ourselves to celebrate and continue to build hospitality and sanctuary for all, especially those whose lives are most vulnerable, and most in danger.

Build hospitality as a clear challenge to hostility.

Build Churches and Cathedrals of Sanctuary.

Play your part to make this house of prayer a sanctuary where all are treated with warm welcome, generous hospitality and protection from harm. Do this with pride as part of your Christian discipleship and spirituality.

A Christian symbol of this is Holy Communion, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, and a revelation of the world as it is meant to be, where all are welcome and valued equally, and where no one is excluded or made to feel like an outsider.

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.

CONCLUSION

I have gathered my thoughts on these challenges in the book *Hospitality and Sanctuary for All* (CTBI, 2021).

The book offers resources for congregations to study the challenge of sanctuary in the light of scripture. It offers material for Biblical reflection, and prayer, and can be used by small study groups.

It is available from CTBI and me for a donation.

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 and to building sanctuary today.

We will review and renew the commitment at least annually on Sanctuary Sunday.

As a congregation committed to building sanctuary share your story and dedication with pride as an example to others, and may God bless and make your efforts fruitful.

Thank you and bless you.

Inderjit Bhogal, 20 June 2021