

A Call to Prayer

A year ago today, fifteen people broke into Stansted Airport to try and stop a chartered night flight bound for Nigeria. The aeroplane was chartered by the Government in order to deport people who it was deemed were staying in this country illegally. Having laid on the tarmac near to the private terminal in high visibility jackets for 10 hours, they were arrested. On Monday 19 March their hearings began at Chelmsford Crown Court. That evening I met three of them to find out why they took this action and how we, the Church of Jesus Christ, should respond.

First of all, they told me that they acted knowing they would be arrested. They did not deny their actions. They did not try to escape. They offered no resistance. It was a peaceful act of civil disobedience. Some disruption to traffic at the airport was caused, but their clear intention was to halt a single aeroplane in order to draw attention to the secretive and questionable nature of these chartered flights. Neither were they alone in raising these questions, because it appeared that people were being deported from our country without having due opportunity to appeal. The use of restraint and the 'stereotyping of detainees according to nationality' by some individuals on some chartered flights had been noted by HM Inspector of Prisons, and the Home Affairs Select Committee endorsed the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons' comment that the practice of taking 'reserve' detainees to the airport in order to fill any last minute vacant spaces was 'objectionable and distressing' and 'inhumane'. In June 2017 – just three months after their protest - the Supreme Court ruled the Government's 'deport first, appeal later' policy to be unlawful.

Whether or not you view the group's non-violent methods as justified – and I'm sure if I had been catching a flight from Stansted that night and had my holiday delayed I would have been annoyed to hear what had caused it - their deep concern over the denial of human dignity and failure to give access to due legal process is a concern that all of us should share, especially those who this week walk in the footsteps of Christ to the cross.

Having already been charged with aggravated trespass, in summer 2017 an additional charge of 'endangering an airport' was brought against the group. This is a serious charge made under a law brought in following the Lockerbie bombing. It has never before been used against people taking non-violent direct action. If found guilty the group could face many years in prison. They are in danger of paying a very high price for drawing our attention to this issue.

Although it is not appropriate to comment in detail on a case which is about to be heard, whatever view the courts come to on how their action should be dealt with in law, these people stand in a long tradition of civil disobedience which has close ties to Christianity through figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. And whatever view we may have on the action itself or the outcome of the trial, these people should be listened to because in breaking one law they have drawn attention to an injustice which damages us all.

This is happening on our doorstep here in Chelmsford. The courts are almost next door to the Cathedral. The trial will begin in the coming months. In our parishes and in the work we are doing with refugees in this diocese we are well aware of the complexities of these issues and the grave human need in those seeking asylum in our country. I therefore invite the clergy and people of our churches in Essex and East London to join me in praying for these fifteen people; for all involved in the case, especially the judge and jury; for justice in this matter; and for the protection of human dignity and access to justice for everyone in our society.

+ Stephen

Rt Rev'd Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford