



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Racial Justice Sunday

Exodus! Justice for God's People on the Move

Psalm 82:3

Proverbs 22:2

Proverbs 31:8-9

11th February 2024

The Revd. Sharon Quilter

Exodus! Justice for God's People on the Move, is the Racial Justice Sunday theme for this year.

In the foreword to the resources published by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, John Perumbalath, the Bishop of Liverpool says, *"Racial prejudice plays a dominant role in the hostile approach to refugees. Racism is at the root of the 'hostile environment' that is promoted as an official policy in our country. Therefore, on Racial Justice Sunday this year, it is appropriate that we focus on the justice dimension of our hospitality to those who are fleeing persecution."*

Whilst Racial Justice Sunday is an annual observance by Christian churches of different denominations that began in 1995, the matter of tackling racism towards a more racially and ethnically just society, is an everyday issue. As are the challenges faced by those fleeing war, poverty, violence, and persecution to seek sanctuary in a land often, far from home.

Richard Reddie, Director of Justice and Inclusion at Churches Together, and Coordinator of the Churches' Refugee Network working alongside +John, cites the alarming figures from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees that, *"At least 108.4 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. Among them are nearly 35.3 million refugees, around 41 per cent of whom are under the age of 18."* And *"70 per cent of refugees and other people in need of international protection lived in countries neighbouring their countries of origin', and that 20 per cent are now resident in the world's 'least developed countries'"*.

Britain with its indelible links to continental Europe *"is regarded as a 'destination' for many seeking refuge"* says Reddie, and that, he says *"is a racial justice issue because, apart from the Ukraine, most of those seeking sanctuary [in Britain] have Black and Brown faces"*. Our news headlines are full of the tensions on both sides of the argument regarding what is termed 'inward migration' and we do not have to look very far within the geography of our diocese to see how this is being played out in the political and social justice arenas. And here I offer up a prayer of thanks for those of you who have contributed to the resettling of refugees over recent years, be it those from Afghanistan, Syria or Ukraine.

For this reflection I have chosen a few verses from the Psalms and Proverbs, for they remind me that in doing kingdom work, participating in God's mission, we are charged with speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves; fighting for the rights of the destitute, the poor and the needy; and taking care of the lowly, the orphan and the widow. For as the Psalmist says, the rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.

What would our Christian heritage have been if the Holy Family were treated in the way many refugees are treated today? What if the gates were shut at the Egyptian border, or they were forced to take to the seas in search of somewhere that would give them refuge, only to be turned back at the shore, or threatened with deportation to an even more hostile land?

Well first, scripture would not have been fulfilled! And we would have missed out on the longer-term benefits derived from the hospitality of that African nation, that yet again in the first instance, welcomed God's people on the move. Because of the land of Egypt, Jesus escaped the wrath of Herod and through the will of God, survived to fulfil his destiny to set God's people free. The journey there and back into Palestine was fraught with danger, hardship, uncertainty, and no doubt, a huge amount of fear and trepidation for Jesus' earthly parents. How to keep themselves and their child safe from harm, shelter from the elements and avoid starvation, must have been a constant worry until they were able to settle in a place they could call home, even for a little while.

This is the situation faced by many today. Taking the decision to make a journey, not knowing where it will lead or even if they will get there; wherever there might be. Contending with not just the uncertainty, tinged with hope, but also the logistics of trusting the future to others, not all with a genuine concern for the welfare of the travellers. Exploitation, enforced slavery, oppression, imprisonment, are the likely outcomes for many seeking a better and safer life for themselves and their families. Certain death is the result for others.

Is this what justice looks like for God's people on the move? Is this the justice we would expect for ourselves? We are all on a journey of life. Some parts of our journey are easier than others; many are littered with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. But in the main, our journeys do not compare with those seeking refuge and sanctuary; a chance to repair and rebuild their lives and livelihoods; the opportunity to develop their God-given gifts and talents and to continue contributing to wider society; the space to breath and flourish as God intended. To just be, as we wish to be, in God's presence.

Going back to those verses from scripture from the Psalms and Proverbs. I believe they dovetail neatly with our diocesan values encouraging us to travel well together. We are invited to join in God's mission, embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, to share the good news, to serve our neighbours, all our neighbours, and to work for greater justice, especially for those who are most oppressed and marginalised. We are also commanded by our Lord to love one another. We do this by embodying the values of kindness, mutual respect, gentleness and humility; encouraging each other to practice these values intentionally, treating others as we would want to be treated ourselves and assuming the best of one another. And always keeping in mind that the rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.

We must not let fear, superstition, rhetoric, selfish ambition, prejudice or blind ignorance paralyse us from doing what is right by those in need of more than just our prayers. For we are all God's children.

The Holy Family were refugees, and we need to keep our eyes, hearts and minds open to the difficult challenges experienced by those on the move through no fault of their own. In the same way, only a couple of months ago, we celebrated welcoming the Christ-child into our hearts and homes, and travelled the refugee journey with him, let us extend the same welcome to the people he came to save; whose perilous journeys from other lands, brings them to our shores.

Justice for God's people on the move, is justice for us all

Amen