



**Becoming
Human Together**

A theological
reflection
on migration

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Introduction



A little boy puts on wellies he has received from Christian Aid partner, Philanthropy, in Serbia.

The use of images has been instrumental in highlighting the migration of people into Europe, evoking a variety of responses. For example, the heart rending image of little Alan Kurdi's body being picked up from a Turkish beach on 2 September 2015¹, the widely criticised poster of those migrating used as part of the Brexit campaign² and the poignant image of a life raft suspended from the rafters of a church in London with three life jackets, two adult sized and one child, on the threshold of Christmas.³ These images have the power to humanise, to 'other' and to theologise. It is the intention of this paper, which sets out to be a 'theological reflection on migration', to reflect on the image of God present in every person who migrates. This divine image-bearing often gets lost in the vast statistics and party politics that surround this very natural phenomenon.

Migration is a part of life: not only for people and not only for living things. At the macro level we observe the migration of birds to warmer climes for winter, we experience the moderating climate brought by the circulation of the ocean currents, the movement of weather systems that draw in more rainfall than many of us would like. We watch the changing position of the sun in the sky across the seasons; the earth revolves around the sun, rotating on its axis. The surface of the earth is made up of tectonic plates constantly on the move; and no landscape remains static, always shifting and changing and being shaped by the elements. As you read these words, messages are being sent to and from your brain, blood is pumping around your body. If our bodies are in good enough health skin, hair and nails are growing and being shed.

Movement is in the very fabric of our being. The idea of remaining in one place, stagnant and static, is alien both to the natural world and, as we shall see, to the Christian faith.

The Old and New Testaments of the Bible are full of stories of forced and chosen migration because of natural disaster, exploitation, people-trafficking, war, famine, persecution, missionary journeys and as a discipline from God. Adam and Eve are sent from the Garden; Cain wanders to Nod, Noah and his family sail away from destruction. Abraham and Sarah follow God's call taking their nephew Lot with them, Hagar and Ishmael wander in the wilderness, Isaac and Rebekah become 'resident aliens' in Gerar, Jacob flees from the anger of his brother. Joseph is both trafficked and followed by his family to Egypt. Moses leads the children of Israel on a long wilderness journey. Judah is taken into exile in Babylon and Ezra and Nehemiah give an account of their return. In the New Testament we discover a Jesus who migrates three times: he makes the ultimate border crossing in the incarnation; he is an undocumented infant refugee to Egypt; he becomes an itinerant preacher, a healer with nowhere to lay his head.⁴ Jesus as the immigrant-God has been suggested as an appropriate image or icon for the current 'age of migration'.⁵ We follow the missionary journeys of the early Church, are intrigued by the wind of the Spirit blowing where it chooses and we witness a migration from the garden to the city that bookends the movement of God and God's people found in the Bible.

For Scotland, migration has been a significant and recurring episode in recent history.

'Between 1821 and 1915 it is estimated that over 44 million emigrants left Europe for North America, Australasia and other destinations. The scale and volume of this great exodus of people was unprecedented in human history... The specific Scottish contribution to the general European diaspora was very significant.'⁶

The 1850s, 1870s, the early 1900s and again between the World Wars were particular periods of Scottish exodus to the world. All parts of Scotland were affected by this migration, not only the more talked of western Highlands. The western Highlands did lose up to one third of its population between 1841 and 1861 but, during the rest of the nineteenth century, the overwhelming majority of those who left Scotland went from the towns and cities of the rural Lowlands.⁷ Cottars were moved on from townships in the lowlands as a result of the advance of agriculture. Tenants were moved from highland townships, first to coastal crofts and many then emigrated from Scotland. These are particular episodes of forced migration in the nineteenth century from which we can draw parallels to the forced migration to Europe and across the world today. Scotland also experienced immigration throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from Ireland, Italy and Lithuania amongst others and continues to attract workers from across Europe. I myself am a Northern Irish immigrant to Scotland. I moved to work for Christian Aid ten years ago, drawn also by the magnificence of the mountains and lochs.

Christian Aid has been invited to contribute these theological reflections in part because it was founded in response to the tens of millions displaced as a result of the Second World War, known then as Christian Reconstruction in Europe. The roots of the organisation run deep into the tragedy of forced migration. Along with addressing the symptoms of migration it has sought to raise a prophetic voice about accelerating rates of displacement in the 21st century. We raise awareness of the effects of climate change, the conflicts, natural disasters and development projects that drive displacement.

We believe forced migration is the most urgent threat facing people in developing countries and requires a holistic, joined up and comprehensive response both locally and globally.⁸

Today, 244 million people are on the move as international migrants.⁹ Of that number over 65 million people have been forced to move; and although 40.8 million of those forced migrants are still living within their own country they have had to leave the place they know as home.¹⁰ The overwhelming majority of those seeking refuge outside their country of origin are hosted in developing countries. Almost all are facing long term displacement. This movement of people is a 'transnational revolution that is reshaping societies and politics around the globe.'¹¹ Even though the camera lens of the media has largely moved away from the migration of people into Europe, the phenomenon of migration preceded, exceeded and succeeded that geographical context.

Meanwhile, the need for an appropriate and sustained response has far from lessened. The year after the publication of the images of little Alan Kurdi, the number of deaths in the Mediterranean increased by over one thousand people.¹² Any line drawn in the sand by the shocking pictures of his death was washed away.

Just as such images have potential to humanise, words have the power to categorise. The terms 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', 'migrants' and 'displaced people' are categories of political status rather than human identity, often used interchangeably to legitimise oppression.¹³ These terms have only become problematic and contested in recent years as they have become subject to increased social pressure and scrutiny. Language and labels are partial and subject to change and erasure in times, like these, of change and upheaval.¹⁴ But reality is often much more complicated than these labels would suggest. The theological starting point for this paper is that we are all made in the image of God, not limited by categories or subject to inadequate and binary analysis of migration. Therefore, throughout this paper I will use the phrase, *those who are seeking refuge or asylum* and *those who are migrating or displaced* except in direct quotations.

This paper offers an invitation to not only see the image of God in those who are migrating, but also to pull wellies on to feet fitted with the readiness of the Gospel of peace: to recognise our own identity as migrants and walk with those who are migrating, becoming human together on the journey.

In the hope that reflection leads to, or sustains, action, this paper is structured into four practices for the Christian community. These are offered in the understanding that practices are sustained, cooperative patterns of human activity 'big enough, rich enough, and complex enough to address some fundamental feature of human existence... and through which people cooperate with God in addressing the needs of one another and creation.'¹⁵ The four practices offered include lament, wrestling, reciprocal hospitality and pilgrimage. Although intended for a Church context they are by no means an exhaustive list or unique to the Christian tradition. Given the changing nature and circumstances of migration, these practices will be expressed in different ways at different times by different communities. Biblical¹⁶ and contemporary stories of migration are included throughout the reflection, with a particular emphasis on young people who have been displaced, with all their hopes and dreams of the future, in this year of young people.¹⁷

The practice of lament

‘To lament means to call the bad bad, to protest against that which in any way contradicts or diminishes the good. Every act of lament is profoundly theological, in that every protest against what is bad is simultaneously a plea for what is good.’¹⁸

The installation of ‘Flight’, a capsized boat, complete with three lifejackets suspended from the nave of St. James’s Church in London in Advent 2015 was ‘a cry of anguish and an act of solidarity with refugees’ by artist Arabella Dorman. It was a visual expression of her lament after witnessing events on the shores of the Greek island of Lesbos. Curating a space for lament for communities and individuals who have experienced and witnessed the trauma of forced migration is a biblical, pastoral and political responsibility for the Church.¹⁹

We are given many reasons to lament the failed journeys of current and past migration: each capsized boat and associated drownings in the Mediterranean Sea;²⁰ each death from heat exposure of those crossing the Arizona desert from Mexico;²¹ each account of trauma and terror from those escaping Myanmar’s Rakhine State;²² each report from the ‘hell on earth’ that is eastern Ghouta, Syria at the time of writing²³ and the many more unreported stories of displacement that are not shocking enough to make the headlines are all reasons to turn to God in lament. Remembering the atrocities of genocide and forced mass displacement of people in Armenia, Cambodia, Srebrenica, Rwanda and during the Holocaust, we turn in ‘need, in trust, in indignation, in doubt and rage, in flattery and demand; but we do turn, deeply, utterly, viscerally, doxologically beyond ourselves.’²⁴ We turn to the One in whose image each person murdered, traumatised, drowned and displaced was made.

And while we might come with questions of why God has not intervened or why such suffering exists, our questions are silenced by the realisation that God is not absent but fully immersed in the pain of the world. Our practice of lament draws us into incarnational solidarity:

‘...the cross and resurrection stand as narrative reminders of [the] practical theological call to witness the suffering of the world. As creatures made in the image and likeness of God, we too are called to be witnesses, martyrs in the sense of not shrinking from one another’s cries of pain, but entering into the costly but godly vocation of being-with.’²⁵

Migration and biblical lament

Many of the laments in the Old Testament were written for those migrating in the context of the Israelite’s forty years of exodus and fifty years of exile. ‘We cannot have the Old Testament without migration’²⁶ and neither can we have the Old Testament without lament. Of the sixty-one Psalms of Lament²⁷ only one of them does not end in hope, Psalm 137:

‘By the rivers of Babylon-
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion....

...Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!’ Psalm 137:1 and 9

This is a Psalm that is surely a resource for those communities who have experienced trauma beyond what seems to be bearable. Jesus turned to the Psalms of the Lament in his time of suffering on the cross; ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.’²⁸ The laments of the book of Job were written to reassure a people traumatised by exile that their suffering was not punishment from God but a divine mystery. That despite all the loss, God is present. The book of Lamentations is given over entirely to individual and community laments in the context of exile. An intrinsic part of the laments of the Old Testament is the call to remember God’s faithfulness. Remembering that divine faithfulness is a vital part of our own practice of lament in response to migration.

Remembering and lament

These biblical examples may not be enough to instil a genuine empathy in those who have no experience equivalent to those with whom we seek to lament. It may require some personal and collective excavation to discover and remember our own stories of displacement that remind us that 'their histories matter in conjunction with ours, our stories of hope, compassion, struggle and confusion about the way the world is going.'²⁹ As the word itself suggests, remembering is an essential part of becoming human together.

Just a few miles from where I write on the Isle of Mull stand the ruins of the township of Shiaba. Once a bustling population of 350, it dwindled to just three families within two years of an eviction notice issued by the Duke of Argyll in 1845. Despite petitions by the tenants to remain, they were moved to coastal crofts or overseas to make way for more profitable sheep. It is an account retold across Mull and the western Highlands and islands. The tenants who remained became crofters on meagre bits of coastal land insufficient for subsistence farming and after the potato famines of the 1840s and the collapse of the kelp industry there was little choice for those who had not already emigrated but to go. Whether forced by hunger, economic hardship or evicted by landlords, the Highland Clearances of the nineteenth century remain a vivid part of Scotland's cultural and political memory: 'For 200 years the highlander has been the man on Scotland's conscience'.³⁰ And the memory of the more violent evictions is not far from the surface in the cultural and political landscape of Scotland:

'Old men and women, too feeble to walk, were placed in carts; the younger members of the community on foot were carrying their bundles of clothes and household effects, while the children, with looks of alarm, walked alongside. When they set forth once more, a cry of grief went up to heaven, the long plaintive wail, like a funeral coronach, was resumed...the sound seemed to re-echo through the whole wide valley of Strath in one prolonged note of desolation.'³¹

And while some of those who left had a safe passage and made a better life for themselves, many did not survive the journey. And while some were received warmly, there were those who were treated as second class citizens and lived with a permanent homesickness despite an attempt to recreate a sense of home with Scottish place names. I was struck by the Scottish place names while visiting Canada a number of years ago; Gretna, Elgin, St. Andrews, Aberdeen, Cupar, Pitlochry and the list goes on.³² And as I explore Mull I hear an echo of lament yet from the land now left with little but wall steads, run rigs and the grazing of sheep.

'The emptiness of western Mull was like a lament at a pitch one could not hear:

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing...

Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage...

We cannot think of a time that is oceanless or of an ocean not littered with wastage...'³³

Remembering these stories of forced migration may help us enter into a louder lament with those seeking refuge now. Inspired by the Proclaimers Song 'Letter from America', The Unwritten letters project³⁴ curated by Church of Scotland minister, Reverend Carol Anne Parker, sought to bring those direct connections to life. She describes how the idea of the project unfolded:

*'...in a world where winners write the history, what might those denied power and possibility have said if only they'd been given opportunity? With so many people moving and migrating around the world still our question felt to be burning. What is the lived experience of those in-migrants who call this country home? What stories can be read between the red-topped lines, the reports of "swarms on our streets", the command to "halt the asylum tide"?' These questions soon turned into a project, the aim of which was to draw together artists, storytellers and musicians from near and far, with the intent to give voice to stories not yet heard, letters not yet written.'*³⁵

Lampedusa's story



On 3 October 2017 at the parish church of San Gerlando on the island of Lampedusa, Christians from many different traditions and countries came together with local inhabitants for a service of lament. This took place on the fourth anniversary of a shipwreck disaster and commemorated the loss of more than 360 lives. The deaths occurred when the vessel, less than a quarter of a mile off shore, capsized after the ship's engine failed. Most of the people on board were from Eritrea and were reported to have paid up to \$3,000 for safe passage.

During the service, at the front of the church, stood a wall of cardboard box bricks. On each brick was written a word describing the preventable injustices which caused the tragedy: security, selfishness, richness, militarisation, human trafficking, exploitation and slavery. These are not occasional or singular injustices. They are inflicted again and again on desperate, vulnerable people and culminate in tragedy in the seas around Lampedusa and in many other places. But, during the service the wall was slowly dismantled, as words from Scripture were read out proclaiming a Gospel of love, of liberation and of sanctuary.

Lament as protest

To lament is 'to protest so deep that it must become a prayer, for only God can provide the needed hope that justice will prevail and that the future will be different'.³⁶ Our prayers of lament are not confined within the walls of the church but are expressed in our effort for justice and reconciliation.³⁷

Our sisters and brothers from South Africa remind us that lament is its own form of resistance.³⁸ In the face of the inhumane treatment of all who are marginalised and oppressed by whatever means, we too will refuse to be comforted. We live in a time when Human Rights are under enormous attack, when refugees are being held in developing countries in exchange for arms or aid. As people of faith, we must recognise that this is an outrage to the Gospel, contrary to the spirit of the European Convention on Human Rights and an imperative for a loud and long lament of resistance.³⁹ Lament has been described as a 'dangerous practice...by a community that will not fudge on truth-telling in order to protect our mannered sensibilities or to protect the character and reputation of God'.⁴⁰ It is also a dangerous practice because in practicing lament we take our place in resisting the principalities and powers that exclude and deny the dignity of humanity made in the image of God.

The practices of wrestling and reconciling

Jacob was on his way to seek reconciliation with his brother Esau. He was on his own in the dark and at his most vulnerable when he is set upon by and spends the night wrestling with God.⁴¹ It is a curious and fascinating encounter that marks Jacob with a limp, a new name and a blessing.⁴² The practice of wrestling is a costly but enriching one. Perhaps as surprising as Jacob's wrestling partner is the invitation in this section to wrestle with Scripture. We are urged not to let go of or avoid those passages which seem to contradict the familiar words of Jesus: 'I was a stranger and you invited me in'⁴³; 'love your neighbour as yourself.'⁴⁴

Although there are 37 commands to love the stranger in the Hebrew scriptures,⁴⁵ the biblical spectrum on how to respond to the stranger 'runs the gamut from obliterating the Other to living peaceably with her'.⁴⁶ The text central to our faith includes xenophobic passages and texts that are hostile towards and exclude the outsider. To wrestle with these passages is 'a matter of honesty, integrity and ethical credibility'⁴⁷.

To practice such wrestling is to choose to hold on through the division that is polarising our society, particularly around issues of migration. But we do not wrestle simply to prove our rightness or our righteousness. We wrestle to a place of understanding that equips us for reconciliation with those we disagree with or are fearful of. We hold on until the blessings of welcome, security and reconciliation are known by all.

Ezra and Nehemiah

Ezra and Nehemiah have been identified⁴⁸ as the clearest examples of passages which express hostility towards the 'foreigner'. These books are the final instalment of the long experience of exile of Israel. The Babylonians, who had taken some of the Israelites into exile, had been defeated by the Persians who took control of the area as part of their empire in 539 BCE. The Persian authorities sent Ezra, a scribe and priest, and Nehemiah, an appointed governor, home with others to rebuild and re-establish Jerusalem's Temple, walls, community and law. Ezra-Nehemiah is the story of their attempts to do so.⁴⁹ This returned community is adamant about the exclusion of foreign women:

'Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.'
(Ezra 10:11)

'In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab; and half their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples. And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves... Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?"'

(Nehemiah 13:23-27)

This expulsion of 'foreign women' was based on the belief that the traumatic exile of Israel had been punishment from God because of intermingling with outsiders and marrying foreigners (Ezra 10.2; cf. Exod. 34.15-16; Deut. 7.3-4). These policies were rooted in a fear of this punishment recurring and were established to maintain ethnic boundaries and reinforce separate identities. However, with further excavation it becomes clear that the hostility and disregard for the welfare of the 'foreign wives' is less about a conflict between the Israelites and any 'foreigners' and is more a result of intra-communal conflict between those Israelites who had returned from exile and those who had remained on the land. The 'foreign wives' - whether they were from other nations or simply those who had not been in exile - became the scapegoats for underlying religious, political and economic tensions.⁵⁰ This episode echoes exclusionary practices and attitudes today towards those regarded as 'foreigners', whether they have recently arrived or have been settled in Scotland for a long time. It also highlights the gendered nature of migration, that is, female asylum seekers usually face more obstacles and difficulties than their male counterparts and often face greater danger on the journey.⁵¹

In particular, those migrating have become scapegoats for the anger felt in communities which experience multiple levels of deprivation and political exclusion.⁵²

'Sharing an ever-shrinking social cake in these times of economic decline',⁵³ those immigrating are blamed for scarce jobs, housing, benefits and healthcare. Exclusionary practices and attitudes are not unique to one socio-economic group or to the United Kingdom - 'the flow of people is regarded with alarm in virtually every world capital'.⁵⁴ Those migrating are excluded from living in more middle class areas due to the limit of available housing and governments have continued to close borders more tightly, introducing legislation and procedures to deter those attempting to migrate who they would rather keep out.

The perceived threat of terrorism compounds the situation. 'There is a lurking fear that revenge is being sought on the West for real or perceived neo-colonial sins.'⁵⁵ Those migrating are also often perceived to be responsible for other criminal activity and can be unfairly regarded as dangerous. In short, those migrating have become, 'symbolic bearers of a complex pattern of change, diversification and "loss" for which they are only the most convenient scapegoats.'⁵⁶ And just as the foreign wives were sent out without provision or protection 'much misunderstanding and injustice occur when immigrants and immigration are perceived primarily as problems in themselves rather than as symptoms of deeper social ills and imbalances, as matters of national security rather than as responses to human insecurity, as social threats rather than as foreign neighbours.'⁵⁷

Churches have a role in engaging with those who are fearful and hostile towards those who are migrating. This includes challenging all of us to honestly face up to any tendency to have a narrow sense of national, racial, or psychological territoriality and 'to view life on much more expansive spiritual terrain consistent with the kingdom of God.'⁵⁸ This includes recognising the positive dimensions of globalization that foster interconnection and challenging any form of provincialism that prevents people from seeing how interrelated we are. Ultimately, the church is uniquely placed to recognise the intrinsic worth in every human being, made in the image of God.

'Limiting compassion to the borders of one's nationality, one's family, or even one's self is a migration toward disintegration.... Israel was delivered not only from a specific national territory but also from a narrow way of thinking. Liberation at Sinai means more than simply taking off the shackles. It involves a cognitive migration, taking on a new mindset, adopting a new way of looking at the world, living out a different vision, and ultimately learning to love as God loves.'⁵⁹

There is a pastoral responsibility to listen and attend to the pain of those alienating themselves from others and from themselves, denying themselves the wholeness of becoming human together.⁶⁰

Ruth – a natural nomad

The degree to which Ruth is excluded and 'othered' in the book of her own name makes for uncomfortable reading. Not only does Naomi fail to mention her on arriving in Bethlehem, but Ruth herself remains silent (1:19-20) and she is identified as a 'foreigner' no less than seven times. What is more, Ruth comes from Moab and is pointedly labelled Ruth the 'Moabite' throughout (Ruth 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). The nation of Moab was considered the arch-enemy of Israel as its people had refused to help Israelite immigrants on their way to the Promised Land, and Moab was born as a result of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters (Gen 19:36-37). Moab was an anathema. Added to all this, Ruth is a woman and a barren widow.⁶¹

'Ruth is a sexually dangerous woman from a suspicious country with a foreign religion bringing a basket load of trouble. It turns out that she is the bringer of salvation: her son Obed is set to become the grandfather of David, Israel's greatest king.'⁶²

She could not have been more 'other' in Bethlehem. It is only when she marries Boaz that she is finally accepted by the elders and by those who had previously ignored her (Ruth 4:11-14). Ruth is portrayed as the ultimate stranger and yet is a great example of how those regarded as outsiders can be bearers of significant and extraordinary gifts.

The gifts she extended were not only for her own time and place. Ruth demonstrates how societies receiving those migrating are enriched for generations to come, and she sets a subversive example of how lightly we need hold to the national identities that so deeply divide. Ruth willingly transitions to becoming an Israelite and is surprisingly accepted as such. In the practice of wrestling this could be understood as a coercive and oppressive act and used by some to justify the forced assimilation and integration of those migrating. However, Ruth has made this transition willingly and with ease, demonstrating a 'nomadic becoming' that destabilises the rigid boundaries set up by nationality.⁶³

Her example gives me reason to consider the possibility that I might be able to call myself a Scot, and to question why I am hesitant to do so. The notion that our identity is nomadic, transitory and displaced is one that offers a world of possibility, while at the same time wrestling us from the certainty of who we are. But if we struggle to imagine ourselves as natural nomads Rowan Williams encourages us to at least consider ourselves to be natural neighbours:

'While it's certainly no part of the Church's job to pretend that people are better and nicer than they are, it is a crucial part of the Church's job to say that the natural, the homely, the obvious for the human race is neighbourhood, not suspicion. So that when we struggle to be neighbours and to encourage others to be neighbours, we're not inviting human beings to go against the grain, to make some great act of defiance in the face of an unjust and hostile fate. We are saying that the deepest condition of our humanity is recognition, interaction and the exchange of life. That in turn implies that when I identify somebody else as a stranger, an enemy, I am alienating some part of myself – I am making something of myself a stranger, and an enemy; I am losing something of who I am.'⁶⁴

Encounters between strangers do not have to be threatening: they can be, and are often, mutually transforming and enriching.⁶⁵ It is the churches' task to create a space where encounters may be rich blessings without negating the fears and concerns that are polarising society. For, while there are xenophobic passages with which we should wrestle in the Bible, these are far outweighed by the call and command of God to love and provide for those who are regarded as the stranger, alien and foreigner.



Shalika's story

Shakila Mosanafi, 17, fled Iraq with her parents and siblings and is now living in Bujanovac refugee camp in Serbia, near the Kosovo border. The family are originally from Iran, and they fled to Iraq when Shakila was 2 years old due to her father's political ties. They had a good life in Iraq. Shakila and her siblings went to school and her father worked in the family shop. But they remained refugees and didn't have passports. Realistically they didn't have a future.

On 27 September 2016, Shakila came home from school to find her parents packing suitcases and they left straight away. They travelled through Turkey, then to Greece in a cramped boat, then to Athens where they stayed in a smuggler's house for 14 days. They left there on foot, setting out on an odyssey which would take them to Albania, Montenegro and finally to Belgrade, where they squatted in the barracks for four days before they were sent to Presevo camp. Shortly afterwards, they were sent to Bujanovac camp. There Shakila works as a translator in the camp to help other refugees communicate.

The practice of reciprocal hospitality

‘Integration is a question of mutual, reciprocal hospitality.’⁶⁶

‘Reh’, the Hebrew word for neighbour also means friend. Friendship is a reciprocal relationship, not the object of duty. Reciprocal hospitality, as the word reciprocal suggests, is a two-way process between members of receiving communities and those who are newly arrived which may lead to integration. There are many wonderful examples of welcome and hospitality in Scotland and in communities around the world

To ensure that this welcome and hospitality is reciprocal is to move from charity to kinship, from neighbour to friend,⁶⁷ guarding against viewing those seeking refuge as objects of mercy but as people with agency. It moves us from seeing ‘New Scots’⁶⁸ only in terms of their need and in the context of our scarce resources. We in the Church miss something important when we consider those seeking refuge to be ‘passive beneficiaries of the Church’s charitable services at best, or excluded as a burden to an already impoverished ecclesial community, at worst.’⁶⁹ Rather, in welcoming those who are recently arrived here, the receiving community is provided with an opportunity to have our world view challenged, subverted and even transformed. And it is vital to never forget that Jesus himself was often described as an unrecognised stranger (John 1:10-11; 6:20; 8:14,25; 21:12; Luke 24:13-35). In the face of each person seeking refuge we encounter the divine image, we get to look upon the face of Jesus.

‘Many immigrants are people who are hungry in their homelands, thirsty in the deserts, naked after being robbed at gunpoint, sick in hospitals, imprisoned in detention centres, and, if they make it across the border, estranged... Seen in this light immigrants are not simply suffering people who depend on the charity of others, but people who manifest in their flesh the real presence of Christ. The eschatological reversals of the Gospel reveal that immigrants are not just passive recipients of the church’s mission, but, in a mysterious way, active agents in the world’s redemption. The face of Jesus, in whom we shall one day read our judgment, already mysteriously gazes on us, especially through the faces of those we see as the “other.”’⁷⁰

An example of this divine encounter and reciprocal hospitality is told in the story of Abraham and Sarah hosting three travelling strangers.

Abraham and Sarah

Perhaps it was because of their own migration experiences that Abraham was quick to offer a meal to the passers-by in Genesis 18. It is likely that travellers would have been a relatively common occurrence by the Oaks of Mamre and that Abraham was playing his part according to a well-established and understood code of hospitality. If the host offered the hospitality they could afford, the guest would accept whatever was offered and would, in turn, not overstay their welcome and offer a small gift in return.⁷¹ When Abraham says: “My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on,” he is practicing this established hospitality code. This was a balanced transaction between host and guest: neither felt exploited but all were on equal terms. This encounter is one of lavish and generous mutual hospitality. Abraham’s abundant hospitality is met in turn with a generous gift of news he could only have imagined in his wildest dreams: the promise of a son to be born to him and his wife, Sarah.

Shared vulnerability

We are reminded in Hebrews 13:1 to not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. We offer hospitality not because we are looking to benefit in some calculated way, but because to do so is civilized and kind. Nevertheless, one of the ways in which we encounter God in our lives is through meeting other people, and in particular through responding to the needs of people in vulnerable circumstances. And while we are living in different times from Abraham with our own set of hospitality codes, we may find that the gift we receive is greater than the gift we give.⁷² And it is in receiving the gift of encounter with neighbours and friends who have endured much that we not only encounter the divine and angelic but are confronted with our own shared human vulnerability and fragility. The recognition of our shared vulnerability nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion and enables us to become more fully human.⁷³

Practicing reciprocal hospitality with those who have been most marginalised and excluded is both an act of holiness and a means of our own wholeness.

‘If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time...But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.’⁷⁴

If the term ‘alien’ is to be used at all, it is descriptive not of those who lack political documentation but of those who have so disconnected themselves from God and others that they are incapable of seeing in the vulnerable stranger a mirror of themselves, a reflection of Christ, and an invitation to human solidarity.⁷⁵ Furthermore, perhaps it is in reclaiming our own identity as ‘aliens’ and ‘strangers’ and as pilgrims that we can enter into a greater solidarity and become human together with those who are migrating.

**The solidarity of sanctuary
Is ar scath a cheile a mhaireann na daoine
It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.**

Celtic Proverb

The reciprocal nature of hospitality is also practiced by providing sanctuary. Sanctuary is not only the place but the practice of our worship. We bring our lament, wrestle with Scripture, offer and receive hospitality and find shelter in the sanctuary of our Churches. Humanity first extended sanctuary to God in the tabernacle and then in the vulnerability and dependence of a child in the nativity.⁷⁶ The six cities of refuge described in the Old Testament (Numbers 35:6-34, Joshua 20:1-9, Deuteronomy 4:41-43) demonstrate that the provision of sanctuary is an ancient tradition rooted in the Bible and given expression in the Sanctuary laws that were largely discredited during the reformation.⁷⁷ As the Church rediscovers the true meaning of sanctuary, that is, ‘the prevention of revenge rather than the avoidance of law’,⁷⁸ it enters into the practice of communal solidarity with the oppressed. ‘Sanctuary is a verb demanding attention and deep commitment, not just an idea relegated to the pages of an ancient text.’⁷⁹

The practices of sanctuary are many beyond the few suggested in this paper, they are the concrete, habitual ways that we become human together. It is in offering meals and personal friendship, defending human rights, taking political action, providing settlement assistance, being welcoming multicultural churches, providing intercultural learning, sharing in interfaith dialogue, having an awareness of the ethics of welcome and, through all this, having an openness to a transforming divine presence.⁸⁰ In recent months, churches in the UK have started to organise themselves into networks and movements in order to be more deliberate and intentional about promoting sanctuary and encouraging a culture of welcome. In Scotland, Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees has created ‘With Refugees Scotland’, a resource for local congregations and faith groups to share ideas and work together.⁸¹ Across the UK, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland working with City of Sanctuary have developed the idea of ‘Sanctuary Churches’.⁸² Quakers in Britain have set up Sanctuary Meetings.⁸³ Welcome Churches is a new charity which aims to inspire, equip and empower local churches to welcome refugees.⁸⁴

Faraidoon and Farzad’s story

Faraidoon and Farzad arrived in Greece alone. They do not know where their parents or other siblings are; they were lost in Afghanistan. Faraidoon almost lost his brother, Farzad, when he fell overboard on the journey across the Aegean Sea. Before they left Afghanistan, Faraidoon was studying engineering and Farzad was still in school. Another family in the camp have taken Faraidoon and Farzad into their temporary home in Agios Andreas.



The practice of pilgrimage

‘The pilgrim seeks to transgress all artificial borders that impede the quest for communion with God and with other people...We are first members of the body of Christ, a body that crosses and transgresses national borders. We are Christians first, members of an international, not merely national, body. Our pilgrim status makes the church a liminal body in any bordered national-state.’⁸⁴

In July 2017, Scottish Faith Action for Refugees and Christian Aid Scotland organised a pilgrimage called ‘Shoulder to Shoulder’ on Ben Ledi, near Callander. We wanted to embody the practice of journeying together regardless of how long we had lived in Scotland, sharing stories and lives as we walked. The renewed interest and appreciation of pilgrimage within the Church of Scotland and wider society coincides with a growing realisation that migration has the potential for the renewal of the Church. We do need to exercise caution and sensitivity when making a direct connection between pilgrimage and migration. The migration that many are facing today is more gruelling and harrowing than some of us could possibly imagine. The frustration for those who are prevented from migrating by physical and political barriers is greater than most of us have known. However, the rediscovery of pilgrimage does also offer an opportunity to enter into a deeper solidarity with those walking long distances with the hope of finding a safe place to call home.

The word pilgrim, from *peregrinus* in the Latin, was the foreigner who abandoned the comfort of his or her home to literally wander through the fields. ‘Pilgrims are not simply foreigners because they often move through unfamiliar territories, but because they separate themselves from the ordinary.’⁸⁵ Pilgrimage is an inherent part of understanding the Church as part of the movement of people who are exiles on earth, strangers in the world and sojourners en route to another place.⁸⁶ We are on our way to God, moving forward with hope between ‘the borders of Christ’s first and second coming, between the present life and the life to come, between the earthly Jerusalem and the new Jerusalem.’⁸⁷ Migration is ‘a mark of the church,’ as being dispersed (diaspora), and as strangers and resident aliens on their way to a heavenly home (e.g. Heb. 13:14).⁸⁸

This is not aspirational but a description of our identity as pilgrims and sojourners. And in acknowledging this we are then called to enter into solidarity, to advocate for justice and inclusion with those who are experiencing equivalent or more extreme ‘alienation’.

‘The church is one, yet diverse; it is local yet in pilgrimage; it provides comfort for those who seek shelter yet it moves people to act prophetically. A church that is in pilgrimage is not static, but dynamic and “becoming” in nature.’⁸⁹

Prophetic pilgrimage

‘A pilgrim church calls for repentance from sustaining harmful myths out of fear or bias, from the greed of consumerism, and from what Pope Francis decries as the “globalization of indifference”’⁹⁰

Journeying together we speak truth to power together, confronting and transforming unjust, inhuman, discriminatory ideologies, cultures and realities, so that all are treated with the respect and dignity worthy of those made in the image of God. On pilgrimage we enter into a deeper solidarity and go beyond charity to justice in both action and attitude. The pilgrim church is a prophetic church, explicitly naming and addressing the sinful realities that are causing the displacement of millions of people within and beyond borders and working to eradicate them. These realities include years of inequality and injustice rooted in the slave trade, the exploitation of resources during colonisation, and the failure of powerful nations to establish peace with justice across the world today. Those seeking refuge bear the real cost of conflict, inequality and oppression. We must add our voices to theirs, amplifying the calls for justice and inclusion.

The gospel does not go from crucifixion to crucifixion. It goes from crucifixion to resurrection. We bear witness to this truth when we see, acknowledge, feel, take on, challenge, seek to eradicate and redeem suffering and injustice.’⁹¹

**One person
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and weather
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**That's an
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26 million
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every year.**

The issue of migration is currently riding high on the domestic political agenda. Media attention is focused on economic migrants and those seeking political asylum in Britain and Ireland, with the debate centring on whether these people have a 'right' to remain or bring benefits or dangers. 'Millions are escaping war and ethnic persecution, and millions more have literally had their homes swept away by the increasing number of natural disasters. A staggering number of people are being pushed aside to make way for dams, roads and other large-scale development projects. Most are in the world's poorest countries, often among their poorest people and many do not have the means to cross over the border remaining displaced within their own country. Their already harsh lives are made worse by being forced to move, sometimes repeatedly.'⁹² The need to put migration in this bigger and broader context and to address the underlying causes of such movement is essential if we are to realise the justice and reconciliation at the heart of the gospel.

Another world is on the horizon

The reasons for migration and displacement are many: natural disasters, climate change, conflict, and economic inequality are just some of the reasons people choose or are forced to leave their homes. But there are also many ways in which we can wrestle with, journey alongside and lament with those who are migrating.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), one person is displaced every second by climate and weather disasters. That's an average of 26 million people every year. The trend is likely to intensify in the immediate future as rural areas struggle to cope with warmer weather and more erratic rainfall.⁹³

Marcelin's story



Marcelin, pictured above, lost his home and livelihood when Hurricane Matthew hit Haiti in September 2016. He now lives in an old concrete shower block, a tiny space he shares with his teenage daughters. There are no windows or doors, and the only furniture is a single bed that the girls sleep on. Marcelin has shown incredible resilience in the face of such hardships and is working hard to raise his children alone.

The changing climate means that hurricanes are likely to get stronger and more destructive in the Caribbean. Marcelin's family know what failure to tackle climate change looks like.

As prophetic pilgrims we can journey with those on the sharp end of climate change by amplifying our calls for climate justice. As pilgrims look out for others on the way, we can work to ensure that communities facing the brunt of an already changing climate are given the shelter and support they need rather than being forced to leave their homes and way of life.

Communities are also leaving their homelands due to the conflict and violence which affects one fifth of the world's population. Prophetic pilgrims can support the government and NGO initiatives which are striving for peace and reconciliation in countries devastated by war and the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities. Christian Aid partners work alongside communities in Nicaragua to build routes out of violence; in South Sudan we facilitate conflict resolution and reconciliation; in Myanmar we train community leaders to monitor human rights violations by armed groups and to facilitate dialogue in Kachin state; in El Salvador we are improving access to justice for women survivors of violence.

We can continue to walk and work towards a world where trade is fair, where taxes are paid and where the systems and structures that work to benefit only a few are challenged and changed. We can continue to raise our voices for the humane and dignified treatment of those seeking refuge across the world, for safe passage and family reunification. And we can add our voice to the call for the 73% of internally displaced people who do not live in refugee camps. We can ensure that they don't miss out on the support and help that they might need by calling for them to be included in the new UN compacts which address the changing needs of displaced persons.⁹⁴

As prophetic pilgrims locally we can continue to add our voices and actions to the need for humane treatment for those seeking refuge in the United Kingdom. We can challenge newspapers to change the story⁹⁵ of hate and fear-mongering to one of acceptance and celebration of the enrichment that those migrating bring to societies.⁹⁶ We can challenge the Home Office policies that deny human dignity in the asylum process.

Moving from a personal pilgrimage of devotion to God to a prophetic pilgrimage which speaks out on the justice issues underpinning the cause of mass migration is not to separate the inner and external worlds of the pilgrim. Pilgrimage is not simply about moving bodies but about transformed lives at work in the world. Indian theologian Deenabandhu Manchalal brings these inner and outer worlds together, encouraging the pilgrim journeying towards justice and peace to 'begin by confessing his or her complicity with structures, cultures and systems that cause, nurture and legitimize injustice and human aggression'⁹⁷

The prophetic pilgrimage is not about accusing others but acknowledging that we are all in need of repentance as we work and journey together towards the world God intended. Through lament and prophetic pilgrimage we can 'effect... transformation of structures and cultures that deny life and keep many in endless cycles of oppression and exploitation, poverty and misery [in particular the]...victims of racism, casteism and patriarchy...and many others who remain nameless and faceless, existing only as categories.'⁹⁸ This is about becoming human together.

Conclusion

‘He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”.’

Matthew 22:37-39

Jesus makes clear that our love for God is expressed in the love for our neighbour. Our neighbour, according to the story of the good Samaritan, is the one treated with suspicion, even regarded as an enemy. Yet, it is this ‘other’ who demonstrates mercy, who brings healing and restoration. The Good Samaritan is a story as radical and subversive for our own times as it was for those first listeners. A ‘story not just about who we’re supposed to love – it’s a story about how we become loveable; it’s a story about how we move from the passive to the active; it’s a story about how we recognize our life as bound up with the act of being a stranger.’⁹⁹ It is a story about becoming human together, beyond status and categories. The practices of lament, wrestling, reciprocal hospitality and pilgrimage are just a few suggestions as to how we might best love our neighbour as ourselves, whoever they are.

The practice of lament leads us to pause before taking action, to momentarily bear the weight of the scandal of inequality and atrocities of injustice that have forced many to migrate. Remembering our own stories and experiences of migration softens our heart to those who have gone to extreme lengths for a perceived better life. And in the remembering and bearing we hear the heart of God who weeps too and who calls us to act. The place of lament is not a slough of despond, but a launch pad to resistance and protest. From this place we will fly against the systemic injustice that contravenes and denies the justice of God for all people.

Inspired by the wrestling prayer, we grapple with the passages of Scripture that may encourage or justify xenophobia. It is by wrestling with these passages that we start to understand the fear and anger that makes a scapegoat out of those who are most disadvantaged and excluded in society. We gain a new understanding of how, exemplified by Ruth, the foreigner can be an incredible source of transformation and blessing.

From wrestling we move to the practice of reciprocal hospitality, which inspires deeper solidarity; a move from charity to justice, from victimisation to agency, and the recognition that we all share the vulnerability of being human.

This age of migration coincides with the rediscovery of the practice of pilgrimage and the Church’s identity as pilgrims walking together towards the home of another possible world. ‘The Kingdom of God is where we belong. It is home, and whether we realize it or not, I think we are all of us homesick for it.’¹⁰⁰



Paris's story

This is Paris, her real name is Parvaneh, which means butterfly. She and her family fled from Afghanistan in 2016. This photo was taken in a camp in Greece and she longs to live in Paris, hence her chosen name. When asked what she hopes for, Paris says she dreams of being free.

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