

3 July 2022 – online circuit service – Immigration and Sanctuary

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Pre-Service: Beauty for brokenness – StF 693

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNFNJAwnjwA>

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Call to worship/Introduction

Hebrews 13:1-2

Longing for light – StF 706

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kt3Qc04ulOM>

Prayer of Confession

Quiz

For the Healing of the Nations – StF 696

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dc-2tiAfSyY>

Sermon

Let us build a house – StF 409

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhPnjA7wsIY>

All We Can case studies

Intercessions

Will you come and follow me – StF 673

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-Bq1YtpQL8&t=27s>

Closing liturgy

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

It’s a question that arises in the very beginning chapters of Genesis –
And it frames the discussion that continues to this day about how we are to live with
And protect and care for each other!

Our service today focusses on immigration and refugees –

How we are to care for the stranger –

And indeed, sometimes it seems the whole world is on the move –

United Nation statistics reveal that 84 million people
have had to leave their home over the past year...

That now 3% of world population lives in a country where they weren’t born...

What do 84 million people look like?

We hear of rubber dinghies arriving in Dover and Folkestone,

And immigrants from Hong Kong arriving in our towns,

We hear of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan and Ukraine

And tales from Myanmar and efforts to send folks we don’t want to Rwanda –

Interesting that the news broadcasts tend to use names of countries

Rather than names of people

Perhaps because it’s easier to assign labels rather than names –

Perhaps because we’d be even more overwhelmed if we knew their names...

We might realise that they actually are someone who could be our brother or sister...

Easier to regard them as a stranger whom we could ignore...

And yet, our faith tradition commands us to welcome the stranger –

Indeed, there is one commandment in the Hebrew Bible to love our neighbour,

But the most frequent ethical command in the Hebrew Bible

Is to love the stranger, the one who is different than we are.

Indeed, the very essence of the Jewish understanding of their identity as God’s people

Was that they had been strangers, refugees fleeing horrendous situations in Egypt –

And God had rescued them and led them on to safety and freedom.

For generations, millennia after they had settled in the Promised Land,

They were continually reminded – as they are today –

That not only had God brought them out of desperation,

But God had provided for them when they were strangers in a strange land,

And they were obliged to do the same – to always welcome the stranger.

That understanding of hospitality is not just in the Old Testament –

Early on in the Gospel traditions, we hear of Jesus and his parents becoming refugees

While Jesus was still an infant --

Fleeing to Egypt when there was a murderous tyrant ruling the land—

Sound familiar?

The Jewish understanding of hospitality for the stranger

Became an essential part of the Christian tradition as well.

Throughout the gospel stories, we hear of Jesus travelling from place to place –

Sometimes welcomed, sometimes not.

In Luke 9.58, he says, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests,

but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’

We might even think of that as meaning that Jesus was homeless –

No place to call his own.

But we can also recognize that Jesus was continually travelling,
Going places where he was a stranger, and providing opportunities
For his potential hosts to become enriched as they interacted with him.

There are hints here that the 'guest/host' or 'host/guest' relationship
Has the potential for enriching us all,
That God seems to think this mutuality is essential for our well-being.

There is a growing number of churches who call themselves Churches of Sanctuary –
Just as there are Cities of Sanctuary.

Groups that have a distinct ministry of 'hospitality' –
They have taken the risk – and there is considerable risk –
Of welcoming in the stranger

At least in part because that's what they have heard God calling them to do.
(If you'd like to know more about that programme, there is information available –
And recently a booklet has been published by CTBI
which provides some helpful Bible study materials on hospitality...)

I recall a church I knew some years ago that knew nothing of the Church of Sanctuary title
but had decided to welcome an immigrant family into their unused manse.

In their preparations, they set about making the manse a welcoming place –
New curtains, new carpets, fresh paint on the walls.

As they worked together, they imagined what the new family would be like:

The family names were a bit strange

They knew the family spoke some English –
would they be able to understand each other's accent?

They heard that the family had moved frequently over the past few years –
Lived in two different countries and changed houses 5 times –
How would they manage in yet another country?

There was a husband and a wife and two teenage sons
what would they be like?

The sons would need to get into schools –
How to find a school that would take them?
Would they be able to follow a new school syllabus?
Would they be able to make friends?
Would they stay out of trouble?

The wife had a job, but the husband did not have a work permit:
Would they have enough money to live on?
Would they be able to set up a bank account?
Would they need a car?
How would they pay for it?
Would they know how to drive on the left side of the road?

They wondered whether the family would be able to sign up with a doctor's surgery...
So many things to think about – as they prepared to welcome in strangers...

They finished up all the decorating, and they spruced up the garden,
They learned the exact date and time when the family was to arrive,
And they assigned one of their members to meet the family in her car
And take them to their new home.

I know the rest of the story particularly well,

Because the story is about me and my family,
 When we first arrived some 21 years ago to begin a one-year position
 As a minister in Birmingham with the British Methodist Connexion.
I am so very grateful for all that those faithful people did to welcome us in
 When we were strangers from a strange land...
I am grateful for the opportunity that I had to be their minister
 And to learn from them –

Now you might say, ‘Ah! But that’s different! You weren’t coming in illegally!’
 No, we were ‘legal’, but even the legal process was incredibly difficult –
 And we were, in that regard, very privileged,
 Because we had passports that were recognised,
 And we had the privilege of education and training
 That made us ‘eligible’/’legal’ to be welcomed in.
We were not fleeing war or famine or natural disaster.
 We did not have to bribe anyone with our life savings
 To smuggle us to safety.

We were – and are – privileged.
 And I try to never forget that privilege.
Even though with privilege comes great responsibility –
 To ensure that others with less privilege
 Are also treated with the utmost respect for their basic human rights.

Earlier I referred to the scripture passage where Jesus tells his followers
 that he has no place to lay his head –
I’m reminded that the context for the story was Jesus telling his followers to *follow* him...
And nearly all of them had what they considered to be good reasons *not* to follow him –
They had business deals to finish, they had family matters to tend to,
 They had personal goals to accomplish...
But Jesus still said, “Follow me.”
 And when they asked what that might mean,
 He told them stories about the Good Samaritan taking care of people
 Who had historically exploited and despised his own people...
 Jesus told them about taking care of people who were naked and hungry,
 Those who were in prison or sick or had no place to call their own.

In Matthew 10:40, Jesus says, “whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”
In Matthew 25:35, he says to those whom he welcomes into God’s Kingdom:
 “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

A Celtic proverb says, “It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.”
In the S Africa there is a tradition of Ubuntu
 which roughly translates as each one’s survival depends on each other –
 even each one’s identity depending on the other...

As Nelson Mandela described it:

 “the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others;
 that if we are to accomplish anything in this world,
 it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievements of others”.

I remember Desmond Tutu explaining it as: “I am because you are.”

There is a certain mutuality about true hospitality –
When we allow ourselves to be both host and guest --
When both the guest and the host can offer each other hospitality –
The space to be themselves,
But a ‘self’ more fully understood because of being in relation to the other.
The guest offers the host an opportunity to see the world through another’s eyes,
Through another’s experience,
And the host can do the same for the guest...

Here’s a bit of what I mean:
Many of us really enjoy being the ‘host’ –
And indeed, feeding/helping/providing for people in need is good
It’s charitable, it helps the other when the other can’t help his/herself...
But being the ‘host’ is also about having the power and resources to provide –
And if one is *only* the host, one can begin to abuse one’s power –
Thinking of oneself more positively than the guest...
In effect, *using* the guest to make oneself feel better

On the other hand, some only want to be the ‘guest’ –
never taking full responsibility for themselves.
That can be dangerous as well.

True hospitality is about opening up a space between host and guest
So that both can give and both can receive.
So that both can grow and appreciate themselves and the other.

Just as both roles have some degree of power,
Both roles have some degree of vulnerability.
Where does my power begin and end?
Where does my vulnerability begin and end?

When we look again at Jesus, we see he took on both roles –
There is a line in the Wee Worship Communion liturgy that reminds us
That ‘in the homes of Peter and Jairus, Martha and Mary, Joanna and Susanna,
[Jesus] was always the guest.
At the meal tables of the wealth.
Where he pled the case of the poor,
[Jesus] was always the guest.
But here, at the [communion] table,
He is the host.
Those who wish to serve him must first be served by him,
Those who want to follow him must first be fed by him,
Those who would wash his feet must first let him make them clean...’

These words prompt us to consider our shared humanity –
And, through our understanding of Jesus, in his divinity,
Taking on our humanity,
And thus showing us the divinity within our humanity,
We begin to understand ourselves and God better.
We begin to recognize the vulnerabilities we each have

As well as the privileges and power we each have.
Each time I arrive at an airport, I have to find out which queue to join for immigration –
I have an American passport,
Which sometimes gets me into the fast lane,
And sometimes puts me at the back of the slowest...
What about those who have no passport –
Who, for whatever reason, are left to the ‘mercy’ or devices
Of unscrupulous persons merely seeking profit for themselves?

So the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” remains,
And the answer is not so much a responsibility but an opportunity –
To connect with those who are different from ourselves...
To explore in practical ways our shared humanity
Our shared vulnerabilities, our shared powers
So that together we might be stronger, we might be wiser,
We might become more divine – as we are meant to be.
So be it with us. Amen.

“We saw a stranger yesterday.
We put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place,
And with the sacred Name of the triune God,
He blesses us and our house,
Our cattle and our dear ones,
As the Lark says in her song,
Often, often, often goes the Christ,
In the stranger’s guise.

■ *The Gaelic Rune of Hospitality, from the Carmen Gadelica*

Sanctuary closing liturgy:

Jesus said, "I was hungry, and you gave me food."A
Made in the image of God, **we see the face of Christ in all.**

Jesus said, "I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink."
Made in the image of God, **we see the face of Christ in all.**

Jesus said, "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me."
Made in the image of God, **we see the face of Christ in all.**

Jesus said, "I was naked, and you gave me clothing."
Made in the image of God, **we see the face of Christ in all.**

Jesus said, "I was sick, and you took care of me."
Made in the image of God, **we see the face of Christ in all.**

Jesus said, "I was in prison, and you visited me."
Made in the image of God, **we see the face of Christ in all.**

Jesus said, "In as much as you did to one of those considered to be the least important,
You did it to me."
Made in the image of God, **we see the face of Christ in all.**