

TRINITY BAPTIST CHURCH
Sunday 25 October 2020
Andrew Harwood

EMBRACING THE REFUGEE

Isaiah 58: 6-11

(NIV UK)

Sara Harwood reads

EMBRACING THE REFUGEE

Outline:

- Setting the scene
- Biblical basis for mission to refugees
- Ministry to refugees in practice
- Prayer

Setting the scene

Let me introduce you to **Rahwa**.

- She's alone with her two-year old daughter in a damp, mouldy bedroom of a run-down Victorian terraced house.
- Two other women and their children have rooms in the house. They all share a small ill-equipped kitchen and leaky bathroom.
- The other two ladies are from the same country and only speak in their strange language.
- Rahwa's English is very weak and she doesn't have any friends as she's new to the area.
- She fled Eritrea in the horn of Africa because her life and that of her daughter was in danger.
- **It's March 2020**. Coronavirus. She's locked down for months. Alone, isolated, scared!
- Will her asylum case be believed? Will she be sent back home?

Rahwa could represent many asylum seekers in the UK. When the lockdown began many vulnerable asylum seekers were suddenly cut off, more isolated, more excluded, more marginalised. God's given me a heart for people like Rahwa.

In recent weeks, asylum seekers have been in the political spotlight. The interminable immigration debate rolls on. From the politicians I hear words like 'criminal', 'illegal', 'deportation', 'failed' asylum seekers.

I can't reconcile that to the image of Rawha and her pain and suffering. I remember that Jesus tells me I need 'compassion', 'love', 'mercy' for the dispossessed, for the asylum seekers and refugees. Because our Lord Jesus Christ had 'nowhere to lay his head' (Mt. 8: 20), that is, He knew the way of suffering and rejection, I reach out to refugees.

Biblical basis for mission to refugees

The command, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev 19:18) has often been taken as the basis of biblical morality. However, it's only part of the story. It only appears in the Old

Testament once but the command to love the stranger or foreigner appears many times. Many of the major characters in the Old Testament are presented as migrants or refugees, including the patriarchs. Some of these migrate voluntarily while others are forced to flee famine (e.g. Abraham), family aggression (e.g. Jacob), persecution (Moses as he led the people of Israel out of Egypt) or deported in military conflicts (e.g. Daniel and the Jews when defeated by Babylon).

The Israelites in their own country, the promised land, are instructed to treat the stranger or foreigner “living among you as one of your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt” (Lev 19: 34). Then in Exodus 22:21 we read, “Do not ill-treat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt”. However, we also need to recognise that there are other Biblical texts that instruct unequal treatment to protect the Israelites from compromising their faith. There is a creative tension here that is reflected in the political debate on migration in Britain today.

Even more compelling for me is the fact that Jesus as a baby was a refugee, as his parents, Mary and Joseph, fled to Egypt with Him to escape the fury and jealousy of King Herod who planned to kill Him. Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt (Matthew 2: 13-15) to save the life of Jesus. Then in the book of Acts, we see waves of persecution against the early Christians as the gospel spread. The apostles and followers of Jesus scattered as migrants to neighbouring countries and the good news of Jesus spread further. Some of the refugees I serve are passionate Christians, particularly from sub-Saharan Africa and Iran, and are being used by God as His witnesses in our country.

Sara read Isaiah 58: 6-11, which talks about the kind of obedience God is looking for in His followers, not observance of religious rituals but to “set the oppressed free” (verse 6). Last November at Trinity I spoke on what the sheep and goats represent in Matthew 25 and how “whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25: 40). Here in Isaiah 58 we see this same concern with feeding the hungry, housing the homeless and clothing the naked and how reaching out to and serving the poor pleases the Lord. If all we do as believers in the Lord Jesus is observe the ritual of worship on a Sunday in person (or these days on YouTube) then we miss the whole point of our faith which is sharing the love we’ve received with others and in particular with those who are oppressed and suffering. Generosity towards the poor. Isaiah 58 expresses how this delights and pleases God (verse 8). I love the promise at the end of verse 11, “You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail”.

One commentary expresses it like this, “The great paradox of the life of faith to which we are called is that blessing comes through self-denial, that we receive through giving, and that we gain our lives by laying them down. And the only repentance that counts with God is the sort that can be seen in the way we live, especially in how we treat other people” (Barry Webb in ‘The Message of Isaiah’).

Ministry to refugees in practice

I’ve called this talk, ‘Embracing the refugee’. During this coronavirus crisis we can’t physically hug or embrace each other. I’m not actually a big hugger anyway, but many times recently I’ve longed to gather together all the refugees our team has helped and embrace each one. But we can embrace refugees with love, compassion, prayer and generosity and I hope you’ll join me in doing that in Jesus’ name.

I'd now like to update you on what I'm doing with OM and particularly through the charity that I'm seconded to and lead, Welcome Group Halesowen, to reach out to refugees.

This has been a momentous year and one in which my ministry has been truly transformed, both negatively and positively. Let's go back to March when for all of us it seems that the old order of things passed away. We faced the shock of a lockdown and my OM leaders even proposed that I should go on the government's furlough scheme.

I thank God that I had a choice, either to lockdown or to open up! I saw the gaping need of my asylum seeker and refugee friends and was convinced by the Lord that more than ever they needed people to care for them as so many services, charities and organisations shut up shop. Many of my volunteers were self-isolating or shielding, being mainly older people, but I still had a core of committed volunteers willing and able to serve.

So, in April we started reaching out again to our friends, seeking creative new ways of reaching them. In fact, I'd say we have deeper more trusting relationships with many of them now than when we met them at our weekly drop-in centre.

We divided up over a hundred households into 10 lists and 10 volunteers phone each person on their list every month. We now have in excess of 110 families and individuals that we're keeping in touch with. We started providing £10 per month phone top-ups to all our asylum seekers to ensure they avoided social isolation and could access the digital world during lockdown. A few of us started regular deliveries of baby supplies, toiletries, hygiene products, school uniform, face masks, food and household goods.

With Sara being furloughed from her OM roles she was able to join me regularly and continues to help with shopping and deliveries, traversing some of the least desirable areas of Birmingham and the Black Country. We've made foodbank referrals, helped asylum seekers access free school meals, provided bus passes, signposted to other agencies. As each month passes demand for our services increases and more help goes out. A few more settled refugees who we've helped in the past have lost their jobs and find themselves in food poverty.

As lockdown ended more of our volunteers have come back on board, particularly to help with deliveries. And God has mightily blessed us with unexpected and generous funding to enable us to expand the help we give. Trusts, churches and individuals have provided funding. One trust we applied for doubled the amount we asked for because we'd stepped up our support to refugees during the pandemic when many charities had pulled back.

We've received specific funding for relieving food poverty of asylum seekers and for household appliances for families who've gained refugee status. In the next few days, we'll be delivering fruit and veg packs to 40 asylum seeker families with children, with funds from Tesco!

Most of our refugee friends know that we're a Christian-based charity and they see Christian love and compassion in action. We seek to be the hands and feet of Jesus. I sometimes get to pray for people and pass on gospel literature to them. All our volunteers receive messages of gratitude from grateful recipients of help.

Before we pray, I'd like to share a happy ending for one of our asylum seekers, Dileepa, from Sri Lanka.

In June he was granted leave to remain in the UK as a refugee after 13 years in the asylum system, struggling with repeated rejection of his claim, long periods of destitution without asylum support, depending on churches and charities, often depressed and distressed. The Lord reminded him of this scripture, *Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer* (Romans 12: 12).

Prayer

As I finish, I'd like to ask you to join me in prayer for a few people and situations, which will appear on the powerpoint. (Names of refugees changed.)

- **Cherry (Nigeria)** – a delightful Christian lady with 3 children, one with disabilities. She was granted refugee status earlier in the year after a seven-year struggle. Since June they've been housed in one room in a Travelodge with no cooking facilities, awaiting council housing. She has to travel across Birmingham to take her children to school. We've recently connected her to a specialist adviser with another charity to help her get rehoused. Pray she gets a place soon.
- **Suleiman (Iran)** – another Christian, 11 years as an asylum seeker. Refused multiple times and we can't understand why. He was homeless and sofa-surfing until in July he applied to the government's coronavirus scheme for homeless refused asylum seekers and they put him in a Holiday Inn hotel in Vauxhall, South London. Although housed and fed, he's isolated from his friends and faces an uncertain future.
- **Timon (Syria)** – Muslim man, same age as me, who's shown lots of interest in Christian faith since last year. He has an Arabic bible and in the summer I took an Arabic speaking ex-OM missionary to visit him and explore more about following Jesus. Need for more follow-up, but difficult with Covid-19 restrictions.
- **Anne West** – a founder and stalwart of the Welcome Group in Halesowen for 13 years. Diagnosed with brain cancer last month and had to step down.
- **Sara** – more demanding and responsible role in HR with OM.
- **Clara** – A-levels next summer and applying for conservatoires and universities to study music, specialising in double bass performance
- **Patrick** – first year of GCSEs and volunteering with our refugee ministry for his silver Duke of Edinburgh Award