

18 years ago, I met Nathan<sup>1</sup>, a young man from a small and very scenic and beautiful, land-locked African country.

Nathan was studying for a PhD when we met. We greeted each other regularly, until the day I sat next to him at lunch, when *my* life changed.

Nathan was a senior Church leader in his country, the priest of a large Church in a bustling town near the western border, when civil war broke out. As the atrocities between various tribes reached its horrible, evil crescendo, people fled their homes, seeking refuge and safety in churches, and seeking direction: what should they do?

Nathan offered shelter in the church building and on the extensive grounds, and shared food from dwindling supplies. When needed, Nathan gave families a small amount of cash from the church's meagre cash box. In small groups, he arranged for armed escort to the border, and onward to safety.

This went on day after day for several months until one day, someone arrived with the news, the opposing tribes were only a few hours away. The sound of gunfire and the drone of heavy trucks, could be heard in the distance.

The bearer of news disappeared, and with no one in sight to provide for, Nathan hopped into the last remaining Jeep and headed for the border.

On crossing the border, he was met by a family he had dispatched few days prior who said, *"You are a priest and you left the church?! What about those people who would run to the church and find no one there to help them?!"*

A few weeks later, people he knew, helped him obtain travel documents, and a student visa to the UK. Several months earlier, the Bishop suggested Nathan arrange for his wife and four children go to safety in a neighbouring country, where the Church would look after them. Now he was leaving his country, and had no way of contacting his family.

But the question, *"You are a priest and you left the church?! What about those people who would run to the church and find no one there to help them?!"*, haunted him every day.

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed to safeguard his identity

Had he done the “right thing”? Was he a coward to leave? Should he stayed? Did people come to the church after he left? Did they get away to safety, or were they tortured, or shot dead? Were the women folk raped?

A well-to-do man, a man of honour and compassion, now in a strange land, without his family, with meagre financial resources, now dependent on others for a small room in which to stay.

One day, the Bishop took Nathan to a charity shop to buy him some clothes. As Nathan narrated this incident, he broke down and wept. Not for the Bishop who bought clothes for him from the charity shop, but it triggered the memory of an incident back home, when a senior church leader from this country visited him and Nathan took him to the leading boutique in the city, where Nathan bought him a **brand new** set of priestly vestments in local colours and designs, and paid with his own money. Wiping away his tears Nathan asked, *“Am I too proud to accept used clothes from a charity shop, when from my own resources, I bought new clothes for the visiting Bishop?”* The pain was real; any response at that time would have been frivolous.

Then one day, walking down a main street in central London, on his way to preach at a local church, Nathan was certain he saw a man from another tribe, one responsible for the massacre of hundreds of his own tribes people. Their eyes met and fear ran a chill down Nathan’s spine. Later that evening, Nathan went into hiding for three months.

There, confronting God with his fears, he received God’s answer, *“I brought you out from your land into safety. Do you not think I will keep you safe?”*

Ten years from the day he arrived in the UK, the year Nathan earned his PhD, he went to Heathrow airport to receive his wife, and three of his four children, whom he could barely recognise!

This is only one story among many thousands of life stories of refugees in Britain and elsewhere; each refugee’s story is unique, because each refugee is a person who is unique.

How do we understand the narrative of people who have left their country in the midst of war or civil unrest? How do we relate to such people?

The UNHCR defines a **refugee** as, “someone who has been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence.”

A **migrant** on the other hand, chooses to move, not because of threat of death, but mainly to improve their lives, more frequently in recent times, as they cannot earn a living, because war and civil unrest prevent them from working.

There are also Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who cannot leave their country, but war, natural disasters and famine, sometimes politics, **forces** them to move to another part of their country. e.g. Three Gorges Dam in China.

It may not be politically correct to talk about refugees or internally displaced people in countries of the west, but during the war, the “railway children” were internally displaced young people; some in our own congregation who are no longer with us, moved from Wales to Oxfordshire in search of work, and they would be considered internally displaced persons (IDPs). Should Scotland cut ties with the Union and float away on their own, we may not have refugees fleeing persecution, but we would have to deal with IDPs!

The movement of people, forced or otherwise is the story of the human race. After the fall, after sin corrupts the human race, Adam and Eve are removed from the perfect garden God had created for us; their son Cain was on the run after he killed his brother Able; God placed Abraham on a journey of migration. Joseph, the one with the multi-coloured dream-coat, was a victim of human trafficking when his brothers sold him into slavery. The biography of Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, is one of forced migration caused by famine<sup>2</sup>, as was for Elijah<sup>3</sup>. Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel were moved from the country of their birth into forced exile.

Our own Baptist history was born through persecution, leaders fleeing into exile, being welcomed by people on the continent who were known by a derogatory name, “Re-Baptisers” or Anabaptists.

Not very different from Mary, Joseph and Jesus who left Nazareth for Bethlehem to register for the census, hoping to return when it was over, then having to flee Bethlehem for Egypt, because of persecution and ethnic cleansing.

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth 1:1

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 17:7-9

It is the shock-horror of being forced away from everything that defines “home”, which changes the a person’s life and turns their world, upside down.

This year during Advent, we shall use the life and experiences of refugees to inform us of the reality of **Emmanuel**, *God with us*, who journeys from Heaven and lived among us, or to use John’s lovely phrase, *pitches His tent among us*<sup>4</sup>!

What does it mean for God to come and live among us, as one of us?

One day soon, God’s ideal for us to enjoy the blessings of being settled in a place, will be reality, but until then, the corruption of the human heart, the depravity of the human soul, and the ignorance of the human mind, will continue to displace people from their “home”, into unknown time and space.

But God knows the human heart, and repeatedly says, *You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*<sup>5</sup>. *You shall love the alien as yourself...*<sup>6</sup> The writer of the letter to the Hebrew people adds, *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers; you might have entertained angels without knowing it!*<sup>7</sup>

The popular press often uses the word **Apocalyptic** to describe a cataclysmic event of complete, final destruction, but the dictionary also says, **apocalypse** means “**an uncovering**”, a disclosure of knowledge, or revelation of something hidden. One author describes it as, “*a vision of heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities*”.<sup>8</sup>

Our Christmas story is **apocalyptic**. Coming among us as His son Jesus, God reveals heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities.

Our popular culture distorts and prejudices our understanding of *earthly realities* when we do not have a relationship with the living God, who in the context of our relationship, lovingly reveals heavenly secrets.

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<sup>4</sup> John 1:14

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 10:19

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 19:34

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 13:1

<sup>8</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, "How Jesus Became God", pg. 59, ISBN 978-0-06-177818-6

So we have the temerity to ask the question in song, *Do they know its Christmas at all?* First, there are more people in Africa who know about **REAL** Christmas than we can imagine. Then, the first two lines of the song says,

It's Christmas time; there's no need to be afraid.  
At Christmas time, we let in light and we banish shade

In the heat of the continent of central Africa, the one thing people long for is shade, a respite from the blistering sun, and we merrily sing asking them not to be afraid of Christmastime, a time when we let in light and banish the shade?!

How ignorant, callous, careless and unsympathetic can we be?! When we don't have a relationship with God who reveals Heavenly secrets, our understanding of earthly realities are distorted and we say and do things which are not of God!

This Christmas, using the life and experiences of a refugee, we shall explore the Christmas narrative, trying to understand **belonging**, the loss of **Individuality** and the search for **Identity**, the desire for **inclusion**, the warmth of **affirmation** by strangers.

This understanding is **ONLY** possible through Jesus, who is God, clothed in our flesh, because only He can reveal heaven's mysteries to help understand earthly realities. So, lets' resolve to make Christ the focus of our Christmas celebrations. **AMEN**