

Last Sunday, several people asked, *What happened to Omar?* I promised, *Tune in next week to find out!*

A quick recap: Omar came to Oxford from a west African country, leaving behind his wife and two sons, having received a partial scholarship to study for a Master's degree, hoping the degree and the University's name would improve his chances of employment with an international aid agency. Two months into his studies, the additional financial assistance he was counting on, had not materialised. Back home, the loss of his income was quickly racking up unpaid bills. His wife was getting increasingly agitated as bill collectors came to the door, offering to "settle" the account if she would agree to their personal demands. Added to this, an increase in armed conflict between tribes, drove his wife to tell Omar she was moving back to her country until he returned. Omar panicked. We met for an evening meal the day Evelyn his wife phoned. Throughout the evening Omar kept saying, *I don't know where I belong!*, which I finally understood him saying, *"To whom can I turn for help, when I don't belong anywhere?"*

It was a difficult time for Omar. At times like this, the Church practices what it preaches. People gathered around to help him focus on, and complete his studies. Three families stepped in: one offered free room and board, another agreed to pay the balance of his fees, and the third paid for weekly phone calls to his wife and sons, who had relocated to her country. Omar finished his studies with high honours; as he had hoped, he was offered a job with an international aid agency. A few years after his return, Omar wrote saying, *I **know** to whom I belong! I belong in the family of the Living God who stirred the hearts and minds of other members of His family to reach out and help when I was in difficulty. I am **SO** privileged to belong to such a wonderful family! One day, I too will help, as I have been helped.*

The real-life stories of Nathan and Omar speak volumes into our understanding of the Christmas story. Nathan's shock of being driven out from his own country, and the horror of realising he could not return, the fear of feeling he was being followed, not knowing details about his family, except that they were safe, all these are real emotions that Joseph and Mary would have also felt, when they left Nazareth. First, not knowing when they would return as Mary

might have to deliver her baby whilst in Bethlehem. Other than his skill as a carpenter and stone mason, Joseph would not have had resources put away for a rainy day. Arriving in Bethlehem, they felt helpless unable to find a place to stay. Not knowing whom to go for help, as they did not belong to Bethlehem; these are real emotions of a person who begins to feel out of place, and displaced.

Then, some time after Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary were on the run to Egypt, fleeing the slaughter of infants by a deranged king, perhaps wondering as they fled, if fellow travellers going the other way, might report a couple with a small child, hurrying to the Egyptian border.

Fear is a terrible and horrible thing. Blanket in darkness, fear paralyses people from thinking and acting properly; fear haunts; fear destroys life and causes mental, emotional and social breakdown, and fear distances people from God, and their worship of God.

I have often heard it said that **one** of the reasons for the absence of men in the church in Britain today is, they were the generation who went to war and returned with experiences of fear in the extreme, they bottled up their damaged spirits, and gave up on God and the Church, blaming God for not acting to stop the horror they experienced.

Fear also deprives people of their individual identity. The nameless and faceless hoards of people running, fleeing in fear, find odd comfort in being together.

The French news agency AFP, reports on churches across Germany seeing an upward trend in baptisms. **The reason?** Taking God at His word, that **all** "*foreigners*" should be cared for as a native-born person would, and not be taken advantage of in any way<sup>1</sup>, Churches in Germany are reaching out with Christ-like compassion to look after and care for those who have become refugees.<sup>2</sup> People from all over the Middle East, who have experienced terrorist acts in the name of religion, want to know more about the religion of their hosts, who welcome and care for them in very personal and practical ways.

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<sup>1</sup> **Leviticus** 19:34; **Deuteronomy** 5:15, 15:15, 16:12, 24:18, 23:15 and 10:18; **Psalms** 146:9; **Jeremiah** 7:6 and 22:3; **Zechariah** 7:10; **Malachi** 3:5.

<sup>2</sup> AFP - 10 December, 2016.

They see Christians living their faith, as people who have experienced the love of God, and share this love with those who need it to experience God.

The most interesting development is this, when an individual expresses their desire to know more about the Christian faith, or wants baptism, they are enrolled in a course which lasts nearly a year, during which time they "are encouraged to weigh their own motivations, ... examine their original religion, Islam, and the reasons why they want to change it".

We the Church cannot ignore God's clear instruction, "*Bring **ALL** who claim me as their God, for I have made them for my glory. It was I who created them.*"<sup>3</sup>

This is our duty and responsibility, because God has poured out His grace to those who have become refugees. "*Listen to Me*", He says. *I am the Lord who created you...The one who formed you says, "Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. ... because you are precious to me, you are honoured, and I love you. Do not be afraid, for I am with you."*<sup>4</sup>

Joseph and Mary received God's assurance, they were central to God's plan of salvation. To Joseph who was shocked by the news of Mary's pregnancy, God addresses him by name, "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit.*"

To Mary, who was shocked to learn she would conceive a child before she moved in with Joseph, God addresses her by name, "*Don't be afraid Mary, for you have found favour with God!*"

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 43:7

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 43:1-2

To each of us, when life seems to impose difficult, even unbearable demands, Jesus renews God's assurance of love and care, *"Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*<sup>5</sup>

When we find ourselves in situations that are neither of our making, nor of our liking, Jesus' invitation is very personal, and very compelling. *You **must** make every effort to approach/come to me. Make this your personal effort. Once with me, I offer you my yoke which is much lighter than the one you are carrying, and you **will** find rest for your soul.*

Jesus is not just offering you a panacea, a magic bullet which offers temporary relief: take two tablets and phone me in the morning. Jesus wants to restore your dignity. He wants you to trust Him and He will help restore your faith in God.

As we journey into Christmas, towards the celebration of Jesus' birthday, and we listen again to the familiar story of a young couple stuck in the commotion of a busy town, made busier with the census in progress, who were stressed, hassled, agitated by the demands of life itself, **and** confused by the events which led them there. But God reaches into their lives and provides a place for Jesus' safe delivery. The noisy group of shepherds were not an intrusion into a *Silent night, a Holy night*. They brought comforting news that all Heaven was rejoicing at the obedience of a man and woman to accept all that was not socially normal and become parents to the Son of God.

If you think God has become distant or abandoned you, because the difficulties in your life have not been resolved, or you are waiting too long for an answer to prayer, or the answer to prayer you have received is not what you wanted or thought you deserved, allow me remind you, God knows you by name; He knows every hair on your head; He brought you into this world and He **WILL** see you through to the end and into God's Kingdom. All you have to do is to accept Jesus' invitation and make every effort to go to Him and He **WILL** give you rest. You are after all, His child, created in eternity, for eternity!

**AMEN.**

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:28-30