

## **Wednesday 8th March**

### **Should we stop the boats?**

Gary Lineker is in trouble again. He has said that the language used by government to talk about refugees is similar to language used in Germany in the 1930's. Apparently, he is being spoken to by BBC bosses.

Yet there are links between what happened in parliament yesterday and events that shook Europe 80 years ago.

Some government MP's, while supporting the government's new measures on refugees, have called on the government to withdraw from the European Convention of Human Rights. And the United Nations Refugee Agency has condemned the government's proposals for effectively ending the right of asylum in this country.

What the European Convention of Human Rights and the United Nations Refugee Agency have in common is that they are international structures established after the second world war to protect people from the rise of totalitarianism and the denial of their human rights. They are based on values this country fought for in the second world war and our nation can be proud that it played an important role in the establishment of these international structures.

Much has been made of the numbers of people crossing the channel in small boats. The total for last year was 45,000. That is a lot. But not as much as the number of excess deaths in the UK during the pandemic. That figure is 130,000. And not as much as the number of asylum applications made in France last year. That number is 120,000.

And the extraordinary thing is that our economy is short of labour. There are over 1 million job vacancies at the moment and almost every sector of our economy is grappling with a labour shortage. Companies are not investing in this country because they cannot find the staff. But our government thinks that what worries us the most is people who are not like us coming to build their lives in this country. Playing to this fear we have of people who are not like us: this is a key part of their strategy to win the next election.

Jesus knew well the fear that Jewish people had of people who were not like them. While they were travelling in foreign parts, a foreign woman approached Jesus begging for help for her daughter. Jesus ignored her pleas. The disciples said, 'send her away.' Why? Surely it was no skin off their nose if Jesus healed the daughter. It wasn't as if Jesus' healing powers would be used up if they were wasted on this foreign woman's daughter. For the disciples this wasn't the issue. The principle they wanted to uphold was: we don't help people who are not like us. Or as Jesus put it, 'I have just been sent to the lost sheep of Israel.'

But the woman persisted. So much so that her phrase about the crumbs under the table has made it into the prayer we say before the Eucharistic prayer. And Jesus allowed her to win the argument. 'Great is your faith.' And the disciples learned a valuable lesson. And ever since the whole church has read this story, seeing itself in the role of the woman of Canaan, daring to approach the love of God through Jesus Christ, never mind the historical and cultural obstacles we may feel exist between us. But the church also needs to ask itself whether it needs to learn the lesson the disciples learned that day.

Our nation is at a critical spiritual point. It is about to embark on a journey based on hatred of outsiders that will place it outside the community of civilised nations and be to its own economic detriment. And in doing so, hatred of others will become an elevated and defining part of our national culture. We may be about to move a long way from the love of God and into a place of great spiritual danger.

Prayers are needed. Prayers and faith in the good news of Jesus Christ.