

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

This was written for The Dundee Courier

How far from your front door do you have to go to meet someone who is 'from somewhere else'? Probably not far at all. The truth is that we are all 'from somewhere else,' especially in these islands which overall, historically, have benefitted from many arrivals - be they Viking or Norman, Jamaican, Bangladeshi or European. It seems that currently some thirteen percent of Britain's population are foreign-born.

Dundee has a proud maritime and trading history and our region instinctively welcomes people from all over the world who contribute so richly to the economy and culture of contemporary Scotland.

So what are we to do about the unfolding refugee crisis? Nobody it seems has a clear, plausible answer. The image of a young boy from Syria drowned and washed up on a Turkish beach encapsulates the absolute human tragedy of the present humanitarian crisis. The Hungarian trains full of desperate people have a darker resonance with some of the worst forced movements of populations in a turbulent war-torn Europe.

Daily we watch as people who have nothing strive with a desperation borne of helplessness and fear to reach places of hope for a better life. In their shoes who of us wouldn't do the same for our family? What holds us back from readily offering the hand of friendship?

Surveys consistently tell us that half the UK population believes we should always welcome refugees into our midst. Drill down though into the detail and there is rather less enthusiasm for too much immigration. The UK situation is complex since we are a crowded island because of decades of openness to immigration long before joining the European Union. There is an understandable concern that we have finite resources to accommodate and support an unlimited freedom of movement.

Like many I struggle to get my head around what is the best thing to do. However I am reminded of something rather wise that St Augustine, a 5th century bishop, and immigrant to Italy from North Africa, once wrote: 'Since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special attention to those who, by the accidents of time, or place or circumstances, are brought into closer connection with you.'

How much further do today's refugees have to travel before the connection is made, before arousing our kindness and concern - surely the crisis is now on our doorstep?

We in the churches understand that questions on migration and immigration are among the major political issues of our times. We believe we need a serious and informed public debate about our response and the values that shape it.

The distinction between asylum seeker, refugee and economic migrant is often very difficult to untangle - so perhaps we should devise something more humane and workable. The sheer number of people on the move surely challenges us to find some inspirational and timely answers to break through the human misery.

There seems to be a gulf between ordinary local people on the front line in the arrival points in the Mediterranean coast, Calais and elsewhere, doing their best to shelter and feed a never ending queue of needy, vulnerable people and the European political leaders trading prejudices and recriminations. The present challenge is a real test of the ability of the European Community to behave as a welcoming family, at the very time some member states are questioning its shape and powers, indeed its very future.

At the same time we need a more concerted international effort to develop a coherent strategy to address the frightening and tragic sources of emigration in the Middle East. For many months now my prayers for peace and stability have been focussed on the terrible damage meted out by the politics of violence and repression. Indiscriminate beheadings and the enslavement of women, and expulsion of minorities and the barbaric destruction of antiquities are simply unacceptable within a civilised global family – enough is enough.

Christians and people of many faiths share a particular concern for the refugee and the homeless. We believe that the Prime Minister and our Westminster and devolved governments do recognise the scale and human cost of this crisis. However what we require urgently is a proportionate and deliverable response which places compassion ahead of short-term political considerations.

Jesus was once asked, 'who is my neighbour' and his reply was the now familiar story of the Good Samaritan, a foreign immigrant who, out of compassion went immediately to the assistance of a local man attacked by robbers, generously paying for the victim's care well beyond what might have been expected, thus shaming those who passed by on the other side of the road and those who thought better of themselves.

Jesus then told his questioner to 'go and do likewise'. Not without justification, Jesus's Great Commandment encourages us to love our neighbour as we ourselves would wish to be loved.

The Rt Rev Dr Nigel Peyton
Bishop of Brechin