

## **You Shall Love the Alien as Yourself**

Foremost in the news this week has been the situation of refugees in France: the closing and bulldozing of the so-called Jungle near Calais and the dispersal of the refugees to camps all over other parts of France. The whole issue of refugees from Syria and other war-torn countries is an emotive one and yet a pressing one. For we are talking about a large number of people in great need.

Of course there will always be individuals who take advantage of such situations for their own ends. Yet the majority of the refugees are surely genuine. You do not lightly leave your family, home, livelihood and country without good reason. If anything the situation in Syria, Iraq and other places of conflict is getting worse rather than better. I imagine many of the refugees would rather remain in their home country but at the moment they have no option but to flee it, and at great personal cost.

But what sort of welcome do the refugees receive? On the whole, one has to concede, not a particularly good one. They are so often seen as a problem, not as fellow human beings, particularly by politicians but also by sections of the general public – or am I being unfair?

The book of Leviticus is not the best known or most read book of the Old Testament. But the verses we heard just now are particularly apposite (Leviticus 19.33-34, 36b-37). The Hebrews are reminded not to oppress aliens, foreigners, refugees who live in their land. These people are to be treated not differently but as fellow citizens. The Hebrews are to love them as themselves. For they themselves were aliens, foreigners, refugees in Egypt. They too were effectively stateless migrants. They should thus understand from their first-hand experience the plight of others in a similar position.

For the writer of Leviticus this is not an optional extra but one of the commandments of God. And Jesus himself reminds us to love our neighbour as ourselves, and it is clear from his teaching that he understands neighbour in the widest possible sense. We are to stretch out our hand to others in need irrespective of their race, nationality, faith or political affiliation.

That is of course a great challenge and raises many questions. We may well feel that there is not much that we can do in practical terms to help in such situations. At the same time we cannot become complacent. We should not be afraid to challenge views which embody hatred of refugees and people from other countries - a trend that we have sadly seen in our country particularly since the EU referendum.

We pray that with God's help common sense and compassion may prevail.

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