

Impossible Situations

Immigration – February 28th 2024

This is the second of a series of reflections on ‘impossible situations.’ Usually reflections pose more questions than they answer, but that is also the way of faith, unless we doubt our faith, we won’t question it and if we don’t question, we can’t possibly grow our understanding.

One of the rather grandiose module titles one studies during training is, ‘theological reflection,’ which just asks one question, ‘where is God in all of this?’ This week we are looking at immigration, which given the changes in global weather patterns, is something unlikely I feel to go away as a topic of discussion. So what do I mean by ‘immigration?’ Well, it’s not just about the headlines and the ‘boat people,’ the illegal immigrants. It’s also about those who come here through the legalised process and become meaningful contributors to society.

Before asking where God might be in this, as with all theological questions we need to understand the context. Last available figures showed annual immigration at approximately 3.4mn, of these the majority 1.8mn, were for temporary visas for work, study and holidays, leaving a balance of 1.5mn. However, net immigration was only 745,000, meaning that 765,000 people must have emigrated over the period. In addition, there were 75,000 asylum applications, which with net immigration adds up to 1.2% of the UK population. For reference, asylum applications were 400,000 in Germany, over 200,000 in France and 175,000 in Spain. The most common nationalities claiming asylum in the UK are from Afghanistan, Iran, Albania and India.

Jesus knew what it was to be a refugee, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt with the infant, in order to escape Herod’s murderous decree to slaughter boys under two. (Matthew 2: 13-15). They fled a regime of tyranny and persecution, does that sound familiar? I suspect it might to those nationalities mentioned above. Equally, Jesus taught how we should treat the stranger, think of the parable of the Good Samaritan, or Matthew 25 when Jesus said, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.” And then of course we have those words from the letter to the Hebrews, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” So all very clear cut, biblically we are instructed to look after the stranger no matter what, because in the end we are all part of God’s family.

But, like everything in life nothing is binary, there is always context. What about those illegal immigrants that are convicted criminals and a danger to society, do we put them in prison, clothe, feed and visit them at the tax payers expense? Or send them to another country saying it’s your problem? Context is everything. It would be hard not to argue that the NHS, doctors, nurses and other staff hasn’t relied on immigration over

the last 70 years, and we've been the beneficiaries of that. The same could be said for the construction, agriculture and hospitality industries. Yet, immigration remains a political 'hot potato,' an 'impossible situation.'

However, there are societal issues as well. Many immigrants want to live with those of the same culture, or to put it another way, those already living here are not prepared to integrate, leaving those new to the country little choice but to live together. However, this creates enclaves of people with a different culture and a different language. One lady who lives around Haslemere in the same area for 60 years, told me how everything had changed and that immigrants from one country were now the majority residents. She said, "shops have signs that say no English spoken" and that, "all her neighbours might just as well have that same sign," so who is the immigrant now? Leading to the 'impossible situation' of being an immigrant in her own country.

She's not alone. I think we have 'impossible situations' in our own society. How do those relying on the food bank in Haslemere or those with mental health issues feel? I wonder if in some way they feel on the edge of society, a bit like immigrants in their own town.

So where is God in all of this? Where he always is, in the heart of humanity, in the heart of all human kind. He's in the boats as they cross the channel, he's in the hearts of the border force as they try and do their jobs, he's in the hearts of those trying to make new lives for themselves, he's in the hearts of those who feel marginalised or swamped by a different culture and he's in our hearts as we try to ensure social inclusion.

A chaplain friend of mine, talked about 'hospitality' and 'embassy.' She too was an immigrant in foreign land. 'Hospitality,' she said is a two-way street of welcoming the other and meeting their needs. Either 'established' or 'immigrant' can offer hospitality, the hand of friendship knows no bounds. 'Embassy,' is a going out and sharing the gospel, Christ like. Because Christ was the ultimate refugee, he didn't have his own space he was always in the space of the other, where he offered and actually expected to receive hospitality, as with Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 5-7)

Finally, theologically, because of the fall and our sinful nature, we are all exiles. Christ came to tell us what the kingdom of God looks and feels like. A place full of love, forgiveness and adoption. There is no immigration in heaven, we are all part of His inclusive family of love, something that we can offer to any immigrant regardless of their earthly status. However, I keep coming back to that word, 'hospitality.' As Christians we should offer hospitality readily and willingly like the good Samaritan and who knows when we might entertain an angel! However, like Jesus, we should always be ready to accept the hospitality of the other, who knows where that might lead.

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