

**“An Uncomfortable Challenge: London’s destitute asylum-seekers”
Talk given by The Rt Revd Sarah Mullally, Bishop of London**

London Churches Refugee Fund Annual Meeting
7th January 2020, St James’ Church Piccadilly, 6:30pm

Good evening – it is a delight to be with you this evening for this important event and I offer you blessings for Epiphany. Epiphany of course celebrates the journey of the Magi who travelled in search of hope.

It has been my privilege to meet a number of people seeking asylum over the last few months and without exception, on leaving them, I have felt an uncomfortable challenge – we need to do better.

It is hard to forget hearing the awful news that a lorry had been discovered with 39 dead bodies in the back. They were people, with their own stories, made in the image of God, who had been so desperate to make their way to the UK that they risked everything.

Tragically, last year 1,900 migrants arrived on the shores of the UK and on New Year’s Day 43 people including 8 children were picked up in a boat off the coast of Dover. They feared the land so much that they put their children on the sea, they were so desperate to leave their country and get to safety that they are prepared to risk their lives. And in light of an increasingly adversarial government systems facing asylum seekers, over 25,000 have either died or are missing around the world, having tried to find other ways of escape.

Sadly, people-traffickers ruthlessly exploit the desperation people experience. One such trafficker was interviewed undercover a few days after the lorry

tragedy was reported. He said that these deaths were simply the “luck of the draw,” and that £14,000 was still a good deal.¹

In the midst of this, the London Churches Refugee Fund points to a different story. A story of hope.

I was struck by the story of “Ms Z,” in your annual report, a Somali woman trafficked to the UK aged 16 and forced into prostitution. As you know, she escaped, and with the help of the African Refugee Community, which you support, was able to receive food, advocacy and healthcare. Now her mental, physical and social wellbeing are all improving.²

Thank you for all the work you do. Volunteers working sacrificially to enable other volunteers to love their neighbours and even strangers in extraordinary ways.

The Church, of course, should always have a special solidarity with displaced people. Abraham, Jacob and his family, Moses, David, Ruth and Naomi, Mary, Joseph and Christ were all displaced or refugees at points in their lives. The early Church spread in part through the displacement of refugees escaping persecution in Jerusalem. And the people of God, in the Old Testament as in the New, are called to think of themselves as 'aliens and strangers' (Leviticus 25:23; 1 Chronicles 29:15; 1 Peter 2:11).

¹ <https://metro.co.uk/2019/10/27/people-trafficker-says-lorry-deaths-39-migrants-just-luck-draw-10990694/>

² Ms Z from Somalia was trafficked to the UK as an unaccompanied minor aged 16, and kept in isolation for many years. She was raped and forced into prostitution by her agents, and advised not to try to escape otherwise her family back home would be in trouble. One day she ran away. She applied for asylum but when that was refused she lost her accommodation and financial support. She came to the African Refugee Community (ARC) homeless, disoriented and suffering from severe depression. ARC supported her with food vouchers, transport costs, hygiene packs and phone cards. She also received advocacy, and is now in contact with a GP, mental health counsellor and a solicitor to help with her Fresh Claim application. Her mental, social and physical well-being is improving gradually because of the support she receives.

But perhaps even more challenging than the history of salvation, is Jesus Christ's personal call to love the stranger and *even* our enemies (Matthew 5:44). It is a call that challenges the pretence that all those who we are called to serve, necessarily have our nations' best intentions in view.

Rabbi Sacks said that he used to think that the most important line in the Bible was "Love your neighbour as yourself". But *love the stranger* occurs no fewer than 36 times. He says that he realised that it is easy to love your neighbour because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose colour, culture or creed is different from yours.

From Genesis to Deuteronomy, the command to love or welcome the stranger—also termed "resident alien" or "foreigner"—was central in Israelite understanding and was linked with the care for widows and orphans, or "the least" of that society and context. God calls on Israel and therefore on us to extend a particular welcome to the outsider, the one not at home, the one who is vulnerable and thus in need of hospitality.

Jesus reaffirms and reinterprets the idea of welcoming the stranger: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." And when they wonder when it was that they offered him hospitality, he says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." In Jesus's interpretation, the "least" are to be viewed as the face of Christ himself, as God-with-us.

This poses hard questions for us, and yet the work you are enabling is a model for the whole church:

- Keeping them in our prayers.

- Seeking to draw international attention to their plight.
- Advocating for their needs to our government so that the resources they desperately need, especially the most dependent, are provided.

In your annual report one of your trustees, John Murphy, asks “How can we best help refugees become, and feel they have become, members of our communities?” He rightly suggests that encouraging the government to give permission to asylum seekers to work while they await a decision on their claim is one way forward. I know allowing people to work promotes their dignity and self-value, it increases their ability to become part of the community and it benefits that community.

I want to suggest three further ways that we might make progress in enabling that sense of belonging.

First, Christian churches and families can make a very practical difference if they are prepared to take refugees into their communities and homes.

Charities like [Home for Good](#) have been leading the way in this area, allowing Christians across the country to consider taking in asylum-seeking children.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has said that: “The people of these islands have a long and wonderful history of offering shelter and refuge, going back centuries – whether it be Huguenot Christians, Jewish refugees, Ugandan Asians, Vietnamese boat people or many, many more.” He also offered part of his own home for a refugee family.

Not only does it relieve some of the social burden but builds personal bonds with people in our nation rather than impersonal transactions with the state.

In 2016 St Paul's Cathedral was privileged to host the "I am a Refugee" campaign developed by the the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI). It invited us "to listen to the stories and celebrate the achievements of those who have entered the UK as refugees; our friends and neighbours, brothers and sisters who, through their unique contributions in a wide range of spheres, enhance our society and our lives."

It was a wonderful example of celebrating the friendships formed and societies transformed that I'm talking about.

Secondly, we need to recognise the opportunity for increasing the cultural diversity in our communities. The danger, even with our well-intentioned hospitality, can be that we expect other people to be assimilated into our cultural practices. Over time, cultural distinctives are gradually lost or at least unnoticed.

However, there is huge potential to enrich our own communities. Integrating people from other cultures into our communities should be a privilege we relish, to shape them more like the coming Kingdom, where people from every nation, tribe and tongue will gather to worship. This is not about ignoring or suppressing our own culture and heritage but learning what it looks like to celebrate the diversity we find on display among us. The agenda for supporting asylum-seekers is one for those of different faiths and for those of none and some good multi-faith work has been undertaken in this area.

Thirdly, we need to see our assistance of refugees and asylum seekers as an opportunity for discipleship – enabling them to journey with God and into God. The Revd Sally Smith is the vicar of St Mark's Church in Stoke-on-Trent.

The city is a dispersal center for the Home Office. Refugees are often placed there while their applications are looked at. In the four years she has been there she has baptised over 75 people.

All these three principles challenge us to move beyond mere humanitarian concern. It asks us to be concerned for the whole life and wellbeing of those we encounter, even at personal cost to ourselves. In the end this is what Christian love looks like. It is risky. In fact, it's impossible to love someone the way Christ loves us and not face a certain amount of risk. But just as Christ risked his life for others, so in turn we risk our lives for him.

To love the stranger and see them become kin is uncomfortable work which requires the perseverance and tenacity shown by many of those seeking refuge.