

Bishop John Perumbalath response at Annual Speaker Meeting, May 2023

A Response from the Rt Revd Dr John Perumbalath, Bishop of Liverpool and Chair of Churches Refugee Network for Britain and Ireland.

Thank you, Bishop Paul, for that presentation which is comprehensive and rich in both theological and practical terms. My job is to respond to that presentation. I would like to do it by emphasising and extending four emphases that I found worth examining further.

Firstly, personal experience. Our individual personal experience always influences our personal understanding and worldview. As Bishop Paul spoke about personal experience, I began to think about our collective experience and heritage. What if we claimed collectively the experience of our community in the past? Why do we often forget the experience that our community has gone through or the very ways in which our community or tradition was shaped? In one way or another all our communities are migrant communities! This nation has seen and developed through various invasions and migrations.

This is how the people of God in the Old Testament were expected to understand their own identity. There was a reminder in the recital that was almost part of the creed, "A wandering Aramean was my father." The image 'pilgrims' for the people of God was meant to remind them that they were never to be settled. If we claim this collective and historic experience, we will probably stop describing ourselves as 'hosts' and the newcomers as 'guests'. We are all travelling together. At the best we are guests and hosts at the same time – all of us!

Secondly, importance of encounter. Meeting the stranger is not an optional extra business for the people of God. It is a commandment. In the Old Testament, people were commanded to care for the strangers and aliens who landed in their midst. They were not to be driven away but to be cared for. It is not a coincidence that the same terminology of 'aliens and strangers' is used in the New Testament for us, the new people of God.

The Old Testament gives us examples of such strangers becoming part of the community. Ruth is a case in point – a foreigner who became part of the Jewish community. Such inclusion happens when there are sponsors like Boaz. We are called to encounter the strangers and become their sponsors. Welcome and hospitality are the Christian virtues we need to promote in an uncaring world. In a Christian context, our rules and actions are governed by Christian values and virtues. How would our policy of hostile environment or legislations like the New Immigration Bill stand the scrutiny of Christian values in this so called 'Christian' country?

Thirdly, Imago Dei. Where do we see the image of God? I remember the story of a young boy who was asked to go out in to the dark one evening with a gentle reminder from his mother that he should not be afraid of the dark because God was with him. He came back in quickly being afraid of the dark. When his mother was about to repeat the sermon he said, "I know that mum, but sometimes I need to see some one with skin on."

As we speak about the image of God, I want to draw you attention to a God with skin on, which is Jesus of Nazareth. If we look for the image of God in Jesus, what do you see there? Among many other things, we will find the face of a refugee. A face of someone who had to flee from Middle East Asia to North Africa. Let us not seek the image of God in an invisible vision of God but in the God who became flesh and dwelt among us like one of us.

Fourthly, Wider support of the people for refugees today. Bishop Paul spoke about how churches and communities are responding to the crises of people movement. My first thought here was about the gap between this support on the ground and the dominant

political narrative today which is hostile to the refugees. Where do we go from here? Our challenge is to give voice to the support or action on the ground and develop a loud counter narrative. A narrative of welcome, compassion and justice that can make the current dominant hostile narrative look silly and unacceptable.

Churches, charities and community organizations should come together to develop this narrative. Our task cannot be achieved by each of us individuals or organizations working in isolation.