



The Church in the Modern World

Migration

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Susanna Snyder

Genesis 12: 1–10; 21: 8–15 Matthew 25: 31–46

'Migrant summer chaos: thousands are trying to sneak into Britain'
(*Daily Express*, 31 May 2017).

She clung onto her 2-year old son, trying to keep his mouth above water, as she dipped up and down in the waves in her lifejacket and watched the sea swallow one, then another, then another around her. Would the rescue boat come in time? She'd left home when the violence and bombing had become constant and brutal, and she'd sold her body to get a pass on the dinghy that had 63 people precariously crammed into it when it should have carried 20 – the dinghy that had sunk two hours before. Her only hope was that another boat would come in time, that she could help her child to shore – that they could find food and water – and perhaps, eventually, one day, a new life.

These two vignettes epitomise the two very different narratives about migration that fill our headlines at the moment – and that is not even to mention the wrangling about migration targets in manifestos and the media in the run up to the General Election. To say that migration is at the top of current public and political agendas is to state the obvious. But, given the barrage of different opinions on the issue, what are we to think and do? How might God be calling us to respond to migration today, or if we are a migrant, what might God be saying to us? Well, there are no simple answers and I am certainly not going to suggest any naïve, quick policy fixes this evening. What I do want to do, though, is suggest three insights into migration offered to us in our biblical readings – three insights that might help us to shape our responses to one of the most pressing issues of our day.

First of all, we are called to respond to migrants – and particularly those who are most vulnerable – with *compassion*. In our Gospel reading, we heard the well-known parable of the Last Judgment. Through it, Jesus explains that those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give water to the thirsty, visit those in prison and welcome strangers will be saved – they are the sheep – while those who do not will face punishment – they are the goats. And there are plenty of other passages in the Bible that specifically call us to respond with love and kindness to the needs of foreigners. In Leviticus, we are commanded, 'you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt' (Lev. 19.33–34), and in Hebrews, the writer tells the early Christians: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers' (Heb. 13:2). The Greek word used here for hospitality is *philoxenia*, which literally means love of foreigners or strangers.

Essentially, what God is doing is calling us to respond to migrants as *people* and not migration as an *issue*. Too often today, the humanity of those on the move is obscured in a morass of statistics, and we become anaesthetised to human pain in an abstract discussion of 'solutions' which assumes that migration is a theoretical puzzle to crack. When stories about refugees drowning appear in the news every day, they barely touch our consciousness. And, speaking personally, I know that it can feel hard to engage with these stories when there are multiple global crises from climate change to war in Syria demanding our attention, in addition to national shortages in the NHS and schools, the cruelty of cancer, and our own personal very real struggles and pain. And that's not even to mention the trauma caused by the terror attacks that took place in London last night and Manchester two weeks ago. It can be overwhelming. It can feel easier to retreat into numbness – to switch off – particularly when it can also feel that it is all beyond our control anyway, that we can't make a difference, that it is too big or too distant.

But every migrant has a name and story, and we are called to turn our faces to the faces of migrants – to see their uniqueness – and to enter into their pain. Many have fled to escape violence, which often coincides with food shortages, environmental devastation, and economic collapse. They do so to protect their children and in hope of survival and safety. They undertake long treacherous journeys, paying often life savings and more to unscrupulous smugglers to get them from A to B, only to be greeted by further challenges on arrival in Europe – not least ever-tightening border controls, hostility and racism. Even for those who make it, challenges and grief continue. Many have lost children, parents, friends, and siblings. They have to learn a new language, and navigate a new culture, and professionals often find themselves working long shifts in menial jobs to get by. Many migrants – while extraordinarily resilient and often hopeful against the odds – suffer physically, psychologically and spiritually as they make journeys thousands of miles away from their homes. Theologian Daniel Groody has referred to migration as a 'way of the cross'. People frequently experience crucifixion – a series of little deaths and sometimes, real death – en route and after they arrive in a new place. Migration, for those with fewest resources, represents a contemporary *via dolorosa* – their feet burn with exhaustion and sores on a road of grief – and we are called to help carry the cross and to do all that we can to provide space – literally and metaphorically – so that these fellow human beings can begin to rebuild their lives and flourish.

What does this mean in practice? Well, tears, words and action are all important. It could mean simply learning more about the situation – paying attention to what is going on rather than turning away – volunteering or giving to non-profit organisations that support migrants. It could mean making an effort to get to know and stand by those within our own communities who may be feeling anxious about their immigration status as the UK prepares to leave the EU. But being compassionate also means attending to structural issues that contribute to migrants' pain – from restrictive border controls and xenophobia to British involvement in war, politics and the oil and arms trades in the Middle East. Addressing these issues is complex, not least because there are real fears surrounding migration relating to jobs, social services, security and national identity – fears that should be listened to and understood – the kinds of fears that are likely amplified on a day when we awoke to news of death and maiming in London, however unrelated to migration

this may be. The needs and protection of those born in this country and the needs and protection of newcomers seem sadly all too often pitted against each other as if it was a zero sum game. There is an urgent need to engage in compassionate, honest, open and kind conversations about migration with all sorts of different people—from our friends and colleagues to those we have never met who live beyond our own echo chambers.

So, there is a call to respond with compassion. But, our readings invite us to see that migration isn't just something out there – something that we respond *to* because we have a moral duty to do so. The second insight our readings offer us is that we are called to respond to migrants with compassion out of *empathy* – because we, the people of God, know what it means to be strangers ourselves. Migration is an intrinsic part of our identity as Christians and as human beings. In our reading from Genesis, we heard that Abraham gathered his family and possessions, and that they left their home in Haran to go to Shechem in response to a command from God (12.1). From Shechem, they travel onto Bethel and Ai, and then onto the Negeb and later Egypt. The life of Abraham is one of journeying, uprooting, constant movement – and he is referred to repeatedly using the Hebrew word *ger*, which means sojourner or resident alien. So, uprootedness defines or suffuses the identity of the forefather of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Hagar, too, becomes a migrant as she is cast out into the desert by Sarah and Abraham – she is forced to wander around as a nomad in the 'wilderness of Beer-sheba'. And if we glance at the rest of the Bible, we discover a recurring pattern of uprooting, resettling in a new land, and then uprooting again. Just think of the exodus – when the people of Israel fled Egypt and then wandered around the promised land for forty years, or the exile when Judahites were forcibly displaced to Babylon. Jesus fled to Egypt as a baby to escape Herod's death threats, and the early Christians addressed each other as 'exiles and aliens' in this world. This isn't to say that home and dwelling are not important – they are, and most biblical movement as today is in pursuit of a new home – but it is to say that, somehow, we can never get too settled or comfortable; that exile, uprootedness, being willing to be challenged and changed and to be on the outside is something that Christians cannot escape. I wonder what it might mean for those of us who are not currently migrating to stop thinking of ourselves as 'us' and migrants as 'them' – and instead for us all to imagine ourselves together as a new 'we' – a 'we' simultaneously on the move and seeking dwelling in a home?

This points to the third and final insight I think our readings offer us this evening. They suggest that we actually have a chance to meet God in and through those who seem new or strange to us. Engaging with migrants can offer those of us who are not currently migrating with an opportunity to grow. We can receive *blessing through encounter*. In our Gospel reading, Jesus says that he is present in those who are hungry, thirsty, in prison and those who are strangers – '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' (25.40). So, in offering us an encounter with the living Christ, migrants and refugees have the potential to transform us and bring us new life. As Jewish mystic Martin Buber put it, 'For through contact with every *Thou* we are stirred with a breath of the *Thou*, that is of eternal life ... Where there is no sharing, there is no reality.' (Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1937), 18, 63). My own encounters have certainly shown this to be true. I'm not going to regale you with trite examples about how I've enjoyed Afghani food or Cameroonian dancing, though I have.

And I'm not going to give you examples of how migrants have contributed to our national life socially, culturally, politically and economically, which again they have and for centuries. What I'm really talking about is a much deeper transformation, one which is less tangible and hard to articulate. It's about a shift in attitude, a gentle way in which my assumptions have been challenged and my faith stretched. I've seen new things in myself, been moved by extraordinary human courage and love and surprised by people's stoical faith in a God who seems to have abandoned them. I've encountered different perspectives and enjoyed relationships which have enriched the fabric of who I am. And this possibility of growth doesn't just apply to us as individuals: it's also true for communities. The Church, the university, the college will discover its true self *in* and *through* its activity with those it does not know.

Let's take our minds back to the sheep and goats for a moment, because this parable is a mystery story as much as it is one of moral command. Within every one of us, there will be an urge to protect and defend some thing or place that feels threatened, to exclude and to objectify. Headlines like that one I started with always find ears to hear them, and not simply because some people somewhere else (not us) are just nasty goatish people. We are each of us sheep and goat in our heart. Part of the blessing promised us through encounter is that we may make peace with the stranger in our own heart, and that we may be freed from anything that would bind our compassion and suffocate our empathy. In 1934, TS Eliot wrote a poem called *Choruses from The Rock*. It contains this line, 'O my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger. Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.' Strangers – whether migrants, refugees or others who are different from us – can ask us questions we never dreamed of, they can stretch our understanding and challenge our assumptions. They can inspire us to see ourselves and the world in an entirely new way. Strangers can offer us an encounter with the divine.