

Christ Church, 18 June 2023, start of Refugee Week

Call to worship (psalm 146)

Come! Sing praise to God!

We will praise God as long as we live!

Blessed are those whose hope is in the Lord their God –
Creator of heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them.

Come! Sing praise to God!

We will praise God as long as we live!

God keeps every promise forever.
God gives justice to the oppressed,
and food to those who hunger.

Come! Sing praise to God!

We will praise God as long as we live!

God frees the prisoners,
and lifts the burdens of those bowed down.
God watches over the refugee,
and upholds the orphan and widow.

Come! Sing praise to God!

We will praise God as long as we live!

Hymn Here to the house of God we come (tune *Abingdon* at R&S 339)

Here to the house of God we come,
home of the people of the Way,
here to give thanks for all we have,
naming our needs for every day,
we who have roof and rent and bread,
sure of a place to rest our head.

God who is shelter, who is home,
in borrowed rooms you came to live,
pleaded to save the dispossessed,
crucified, lay in borrowed grave,
these are no strangers in your eyes,
this is your family who cries.

There is a knocking at our door,
sound of the homeless of the world,
voice of the frightened refugee,
cry of the children in the cold,
asking the least that is their right,
safety and shelter for the night.

Shelter us, tenants of your love,
gather us round a common fire,
warm us in company with Christ,
give us the heart to feel, to share
table and lodging without bond,
space in our living, in our land.

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Shirley Erena Murray

Children's Time

Gifts

God, receive these gifts by your grace.
Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

Hymn I'll praise my maker R&S 734

I'll praise my maker while I've breath,
and when my voice is lost in death,
praise shall employ my nobler powers;
my days of praise shall ne'er be past
while life and thought and being last
or immortality endures.

Happy the one whose hopes rely
on Israel's God! He made the sky,
and earth, the sea, with all their train:
his truth for ever stands secure,
he saves the oppressed; he feeds the poor,
and none shall find his promise vain.

Christ Church, 18 June 2023, start of Refugee Week

The Lord pours eyesight on the blind;
the Lord supports the fainting mind,
he sends the labouring conscience peace;
he helps the stranger in distress,
the widow and the fatherless,
and grants the prisoner sweet release.

I'll praise him while he lends me breath,
and when my voice is lost in death
praise shall employ my nobler powers;
my days of praise shall ne'er be past
while life and thought and being last
or immortality endures.

Isaac Watts

Opening Prayer

URC Prayer Handbook p37

Faithful God, you draw near to us in our joy and in our grief,
in our hope and in our despair.

When we are bowed down, you raise us anew.

We turn to you now in search of your healing touch.

God of compassion and love, move among us this hour.

Open our eyes, dispel our fears, and show us the real life you have to offer.

We pray this in the name of the Risen One, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Hymn Guide me, O thou great Jehovah R&S 345

Bible readings: **Genesis 1:1-15**
 Hebrews 13:2-3

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” as Abraham and Sarah did. The word used for refugee in the Bible is ‘stranger’. *Zar* is the most common Hebrew word used for stranger in the Old Testament – it appears 92 times in Biblical texts and the verb from which the noun comes appears 84 times. The command to ‘welcome the stranger’ appears many times in the Old Testament, because the Israelites had been strangers in Egypt and indeed entered the promised land of Canaan as strangers – as refugees and asylum seekers, for they were not from that land. The Biblical word for stranger denotes a person (or a group of people), who leaves his or her home, mostly for political or economic reasons, to stay and live in a foreign country or area, to which he or she does not belong – in other words, what we would today term a refugee or asylum seeker. In the Bible, they were not full citizens, but were nevertheless so integrated into their surroundings that they had political and religious status, which granted them certain rights and protection. The word was often used in reference to the patriarchs of the Jewish people and the Bible - Abraham (Gen 12:10; 20:1; 21:23, 34 and 35:27), Isaac (Gen 26:3; 35:27) and Jacob (Gen 32:5; 47:4; Ps 105:23). The patriarchs lived as strangers in Canaan and in Egypt.

Immigration seems to have been a pressing issue for years, at least in the media and for the government. Yet the church sometimes struggles to engage refugee issues in a distinctively biblical way, despite the Bible having plenty to say on the matter, and despite Jesus and his parents also having been refugees when they fled to Egypt to escape

Christ Church, 18 June 2023, start of Refugee Week

Herod's massacre of young children. Media rhetoric ("We're being swamped by refugees!") is as likely to be repeated in the church foyer as it is in coffee shops or people's homes. What is sometimes missing from our conversations is careful thought about what Scripture has to say on the topic. Not only is it specific mention of strangers that we need to listen for in scripture, but other concepts such as hospitality, compassion and loving our neighbour. This year's theme for Refugee Week is Compassion. You'll see at the back of the church, along with photos of refugees and an explanation of what the terms refugee and asylum seeker actually mean, some verses from the Bible about compassion. Indeed, if we had read the Gospel reading set for today from chapter 9 of Matthew's Gospel, we would have heard that Jesus "had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." In thinking about the pressing issues of our day, including immigration, we need to engage in 'double listening' - that is listening with one ear to Scripture and the other to culture. So how does the Bible speak to immigration and refugee issues, and how does it cause us to hear the surrounding culture differently?

The biblical word that most closely corresponds to our modern notion of refugee is variously translated as *stranger*, *foreigner*, or *sojourner*. In the Bible, the stranger is someone who is both ethnically displaced and economically vulnerable. These people do not have resources to survive on their own; they are dependent upon the generosity of the Israelites among whom they live. Perhaps the most famous biblical text regarding refugees is Deuteronomy 10:18-19: "[The Lord] executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and **loves** the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also **love** the stranger, for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt." Christian refugee activists rightly use this passage to demonstrate that vulnerable people who are seeking a home ought to be welcomed. But they sometimes miss out verses 15 and 17. In verse 15 we hear how God loves the people of Israel – "the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone, and chose you." Yet verse 17 says, "The Lord your God is God of gods...mighty and awesome, who is not partial..." In other words, God does not love his chosen people more than anyone else – God loves the chosen people and the foreigner and demands that we also love the stranger. The word **love** occurs three times in these verses. First it is used to note Yahweh's love for his people Israel. Then it notes God's love for the foreigner. The third time it talks of Israel's love for the stranger. This word Hebrew word for love (*ahav*) refers to God's covenant commitment that is expressed in action. And God's actioned covenant commitment for Israel is found pre-eminently in Exodus, in the story of God rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt. In Deuteronomy 10:18-19, this word for Yahweh's actioned covenant commitment is applied also to "the foreigner". The special covenant word that is

Christ Church, 18 June 2023, start of Refugee Week

used for Yahweh's commitment to his people Israel and his action on their behalf is used to express God's commitment to the refugee. God, time and again, executes justice for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. God has a fierce loyalty to the vulnerable foreigner. God is on the stranger's side. "The Lord loves the foreigner," and he will act for the refugee's sake.

Can a key covenant motif like this be applied to a people who have not necessarily heard God's law or confessed allegiance to God? On the one hand we know and celebrate God's commitment to vulnerable people, but on the other hand, is it right to express God's commitment to vulnerable people as a *covenant* commitment? One of the early liberation theologians, Gustavo Gutierrez says, "God is committed to the poor, not because the poor are good - but because God is good." God's commitment to refugees is grounded in God's goodness. God has created a world with enough blessing and bounty for every person to thrive, especially the most vulnerable. And God is committed to the thriving of the world's most vulnerable people. What a wonderful God we serve!

"Loving the stranger" in the Old Testament is not just a warm fuzzy feeling. Instead it involves a practical, lived out commitment to the stranger's thriving. In Old Testament times this meant that the stranger was included within the work and life of the family farm. A stranger would enter into a relationship with an Israelite family, joining in their daily activities and sharing in the produce of the farm. This shared life between the family and the refugee was highlighted during the festivals held three times a year which are described in Deuteronomy 16 – "Rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your sons and daughters, the Levite resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, orphans and the widows who are among you." As we consider our own response to refugees, we ought not miss the significance of Israel's responsibility to share their lives and wealth with the stranger. These practices teach us that there is no room for stinginess and parochialism in the kingdom of God, only for generosity and welcome.

The Israelites' practices of hospitality remind us of the radical welcome of Christ - in particular his practice of eating with all kinds of people, especially the marginalized. New Testament scholars have pointed out that Jesus "ate his way through the gospels" - sharing meals with those considered unclean, with prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners. Christ offers a radical welcome to all people.

So, what can we practically do to offer welcome and hospitality to refugees? There are not many, if any refugees living in Rayleigh, apart from some Ukrainians who are already taken care of. Refugees and asylum seekers are unlikely to walk through our doors here at Christ Church. But we can raise awareness of the plight of refugees. We can go to reliable

Christ Church, 18 June 2023, start of Refugee Week

sources of information about refugees and asylum seekers and not repeat the propaganda that comes out in some of the press. We can sign petitions and speak out against the appalling anti-immigration laws our government is trying to introduce, and we can pray – pray for all refugees, pray for those who help them, and pray that those in government will have their eyes and ears opened and will act with humanity, compassion and hospitality.

Hymn Be still for the presence of the Lord Red folder 9

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here ;
come bow before him now with reverence and fear :
in him no sin is found, we stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around ;
he burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned :
how awesome is the sight, our radiant King of light !
Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place ;
he comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace :
no work too hard for him, in faith receive from him.
Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

David J. Evans

Lord's Supper (Inclusive Church)

Strangers meet. Oil and grain turn to bread.
The sick are healed. The weary are lifted up.
The prisoners are set free. The refugees, widows and orphans cared for.
The everyday becomes a miracle. This is God's work.
We are its witnesses. So let us share in the holy meal; let us share bread and wine together.

The peace of Christ be always with you

And also with you

Let us celebrate this joyful feast.
People will come from east and west and north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God.

God is here. **Her Spirit is with us.**

Blessed be the names of Love. **They touch our hearts with grace.**

We open our hands in thanks. **Our song is one of welcome.**

We thank you, Holy God,

For being a fool in the eyes of the world.

We thank you for abandoning control,
for creating a universe, new and strange.

We thank you for nurturing life, diverse, evolving, surprising and strange.

We thank you for calling a people who did not walk straight or know their limits.

We thank you for different bodies and desires

for different ways of thinking and speaking

for different ways of belonging and believing.

May our thanks cut a path through dividing walls to free the Spirit's song:

Holy, holy, holy One

God of life and love.

The world overflows with your glory.

Christ Church, 18 June 2023, start of Refugee Week

One came who upset the rules:
who accepted the grace of the outsider,
who looked for wisdom in those who did not count,
who took his food in the company of the rejected.
One came who walked a strange path:
who did not think anyone was unclean,
who did not look for scapegoats
who refused to put a price on anyone's head.
The tables of the moneychangers he threw over.
The tables of liberation he threw open.
On the night before he gave himself up,
He ate and drank to the end of slavery.
He took the bread and broke it, and said:
'This is my body. Do this to remember me'.
He took the wine and poured it, and said:
'This is my blood. Do this to remember me.'
May the Spirit of creation take these earthly things and show us in their brokenness,
the life-giving plenty, the end of all poverty, the body and blood of Christ.

This is the mystery of faith:

Christ took the form of a slave

Christ took the cross of shame

Christ gives the free gift of life.

Into our hands he delivers himself, Jesus, the Victim, the Excluded One,
who is now a sign of hope for all.
So we celebrate this event of love; this rising from death,
unpredictable and full of wonder.
We pray that we will be a community defined by what it is open to
not by what it fears; by the excess of its love not the walls along its borders.
May our prayer be welcome to you, the God who is in all, and with all and for all. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it
and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way
he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as
you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you
proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us.
You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service.
Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom,
and that our love may be your love
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

Holy God, You are our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble.
Thank you for your unconditional love and your unfailing hospitality.
At the start of Refugee Week, we rededicate ourselves to embody your compassion
and commit to intentionally demonstrating neighbourly love to your children in need of sanctuary.
Teach us what it looks like to be the perfect host, to build bigger tables in our communities and to
welcome and include those who are different from us.
We pray for all those who have been forced to flee their homes.
Lord, keep them safe. Give them courage, resilience, and tangible hope.

Christ Church, 18 June 2023, start of Refugee Week

Guide their feet to people and places who will honour them and uphold their dignity. Work in and through all those with the power to address the situations from which people have fled, whether war, famine, persecution, or climate change. Help us to understand what part we can play in alleviating the suffering of our neighbours. In the face of hostility towards refugees and people seeking asylum, help us to model kindness, listening and compassion towards all human beings, even those with whom we disagree. Keep us strong in our resolve to resist policies and structures that work against your Kingdom of compassion.

Gracious God, we pray today with all those living in poverty. We pray especially for those in our own country who are suffering greatly due to the cost-of-living crisis, and for asylum seekers who are not allowed to work. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for unity and equality and an end to discrimination and prejudice of all kind. This Pride month, we pray for those who have experienced discrimination because of their sexuality. Help us to truly remember that in Christ we are all one, created in God's image. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for all those who go hungry and for the people who help them, through volunteering at foodbanks, by donating food and money, or by speaking out and raising awareness of issues. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for scientists, for doctors, nurses, porters and cleaners, carers and their families, as they care for our health and wellbeing and we pray for the NHS. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for world leaders and democratic systems. Let them not be abused and help us not to be overtaken by apathy and despair when it seems that democracy is flawed. We pray for elected officials and MPs, that they may conduct their lives with decency and honesty. We pray for journalists who risk their lives to bring us the truth and for aid workers in challenging conditions. We pray for peace in all places, especially in Ukraine, Sudan and the Middle East. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for and with all who feel lonely and sad. For the homeless, those with addictions, those with mental health conditions and those who are neurodivergent. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for all those who are ill and those who care for them; for those awaiting test results or treatment, for the dying and those who mourn. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn Now let us from this table rise - R&S 463

Now let us from this table rise
renewed in body, mind, and soul;
with Christ we die and rise again,
his selfless love has made us whole.

To fill each human house with love,
it is sacrament of care;
the work that Christ began to do
we humbly pledge ourselves to share.

With minds alert, upheld by grace,
to spread the Word in speech and deed
we follow in the steps of Christ,
at one with all in hope and need.

Then grant us grace, Companion-God,
to choose again the pilgrim way,
and help us to accept with joy
the challenge of tomorrow's day.

Blessing

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,
so that we will work for justice, equity and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation
and war, so that we will reach out to comfort them and change their pain to joy.

And may God bless us with the foolishness to think that we can make a difference in the
world, so that we will do the things which others tell you cannot be done.

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and ever more. Amen

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