

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> January - Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Like many of us I suppose, we watched some old films over the Christmas holidays. One of those was Casablanca – you can't get much older than that!

If you haven't seen it, or if it's been a while since you have seen it, it's a film set in World War Two, soon after the German occupation of Paris. Its focus is Casablanca, which had become a hub for refugees who wanted to get on a plane to Lisbon, and then onwards to the United States.

The film begins with a resume – in Pathe News reel tones – of what the situation is and shows pictures of refugees crossing the Mediterranean (but this time from Europe to Africa) trying to escape the German occupation and make it through North Africa to the freedom of the United States.

And, of course, the whole assumption of the film is that our sympathies lie with the refugees trying to reach places of safety.

Having watched the film, the next day, all over the news, were pictures and articles about the Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, cutting short his Christmas holidays to deal with the "major incident" of around 70 refugees arriving in boats on the Kent coast. Reading the news reports, the assumption in most seemed to be that our sympathies would definitely NOT lie with those struggling to make the channel crossings.

So what should our response be to this situation? What, as Christians, should we be saying.

The Bishop of Dover, Rt Rev Trevor Willmott, has said **"It is crucial that we all remember that we are dealing with human beings here. Across the nation, we have been celebrating the season of hope and goodwill as we remember Christ's birth — let's not forget so soon that every person is precious."**

How different from the comments from Charlie Elphick, Conservative MP for Dover - **"You don't deter burglars by leaving your front door open,"**

Today is the feast of the Epiphany – when, as in our reading today, we remember the visit of the Magi from the East to worship the child Jesus.

But first to remind ourselves of what is actually in scripture, and what is stuff that tradition has added over the years.

There is no mention of the Magi being Kings, no mention of there being three of them (simply three gifts), no mention of names. They didn't visit the stable but "the house", and Jesus is referred to as a "child", not a baby. Most likely a year or two after the birth

What we do have though is Magi, or wise men. The word Magi could mean magician or astrologer. The only other use of the word in the New Testament is in Acts referring to Elymas – who is clearly a magician. And what we know is that the Magi were "from the East" – in other words from a foreign land; not Jewish. People with a different nationality and different religion and different traditions. But people who came with the sole aim of worshipping Jesus as the King of the Jews.

The message Matthew is setting out at the start of his gospel is that this gospel message is for all peoples – not simply for the Jews. Jesus's rule and authority as King of the Jews would not be limited to the Jews but would be for all nations – the whole world.

And it was this that caused the early church such angst as it grew. As it struggled to realise that this message of Jesus – this new Christian faith – was for all people – not just the Jews. The apostle Paul saw himself as the apostle to the Gentiles, and as we read the words from our New testament reading today we can see how he understands that working out.

***the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.***

And

***this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,***

The word Epiphany in the dictionaries is defined first as the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles and second as a sudden realisation or revelation. It's easy to see the connection between the two.

Anyway, back to the gospel reading for a moment. Our reading finishes with the Magi deciding not to return to King Herod. Herod is not so impressed at there being a new King of the Jews – for where did that leave him?

He decided to order the killing of all children under two years old in the Bethlehem area (which of course gives us further evidence that Jesus would not have been a new born baby when the Magi visited). Joseph was warned about this in a dream and set off with Mary and the boy to Egypt. They became refugees. Fleeing a regime that was threatening them. Looking for a place of safety. And, we assume, were welcomed and given a home – a safe place – in Egypt.

So how does the message of the Epiphany help us as we read about refugees trying to cross the channel.

First it's important to realise that any teaching about God's concern for all peoples does not just come from the Epiphany story. It's teaching that comes right through the Bible.

Reading the OT, it might be easy to think that God is just concerned with Israel – his chosen people. Well, he is of course, but there are also clear instructions to his people about how to treat aliens and strangers. How to treat refugees. There are constant reminders to the people that they were themselves strangers or aliens (in fact we might say economic migrants in search of food) in Egypt after the time of Joseph, and that they should bear this in mind in their attitudes and actions.

Jesus breaks down barriers between tribes and nations by his example and by his teaching. Familiarity sometimes clouds us to the shocking truth of the story of the Good Samaritan – that it was the foreigner, the one you would least expect to – who helped the man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Then there was the incident when Jesus struck up a conversation with a Samaritan woman at the well (double shock here – as he talks not only to a Samaritan, but a Samaritan woman) and he makes it quite clear that his message of hope and salvation is for all.

In the great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel the command is to preach the gospel to all nations, not simply to the Jews. And the Pentecost story has the disciples speaking all languages.

And beyond this, the gospels are full of stories where Jesus takes the side of those on the edges, those with no voice, those who society has cast off. The leper, the blind, the prostitute, the tax collector and the foreigner.

What all this means, I think, is that we should be wary of making sweeping judgements. The Bishop of Dover is quite correct when he reminds us that these refugees are people too. People made in God's image, people Jesus died for, people who God loves – just as he loves us.

It also means that we need to be very careful that our use of language doesn't assume or judge. In the articles I read about the incidents, children were usually referred to by the word 'refugee', whereas for adults the term 'migrant' was applied. And each of those words carries different baggage and suggests different responses to us.

Javid referred to a migrant crisis. The church of England Chaplain and Refugee projects officer in Pas-de-Calais, Canon Kirrilee Reed, has said **The terms 'Migrant crisis' and 'major incident' are unhelpful. This situation is not new. There have been dangerous crossings for years. Many have died trying to cross the Channel by train, boat, and lorry. There has been an increase in those attempting to cross the English Channel by boat in recent weeks, and this is dangerous, but, sadly, indicative of the plight of desperate people**

Desperate people. Often fleeing oppression, danger or direct threats.

We also need to keep the whole thing in perspective.

The Home Secretary has declared that 220 refugees or migrants who have attempted to cross the channel in the last couple of months should be declared a major incident.

However.

There are more than 5000 people sleeping rough in the UK. The charity Shelter estimates over 300,000 are 'homeless', mostly in temporary accommodation provided by local authorities.

Over 100,000 3 day food parcels are being given out each month in the UK at the moment by foodbanks, like the one we support.

The independent Social Metrics Commission estimate that over 14 million people including over 4 million children are living in poverty in the UK.

But none of these have been talked about as crises or major incidents.

The cynic in me has wondered whether this is all a publicity stunt to raise the issue of migration ahead of the Government's Brexit vote.

Now, I am aware that the situation with refugees is complex. That there are unscrupulous people who seek to profit from them by providing perilous journeys across the Mediterranean and now the channel. And that to make the crossing easier might encourage more to attempt it. And I don't know what the solution should be.

But I am certain that a Christian response is to look at these refugees with love and compassion, to treat them as human beings and not to be so selfish with the wealth and resources that we have been blessed with. The very minimum we can do is to treat them with respect when we talk about them, to pray for them and to urge our leaders and authorities to show genuine compassion.

Otherwise my concern is that as a nation we may have the words of Jesus (again from Matthew's gospel) ringing in our ears. ***I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me***