

Mike's message

“City of Sanctuary”

At the time of writing the news is focussing on ‘Aquarius’, a rescue boat in the Mediterranean that had up to 900 people crowded on it after they were saved from smaller, fragile vessels. Italy and Malta, refused to allow it to dock. Now Spain has offered them safe haven. But thousands more are still at risk, and thousands more have already perished.



In 2005 a movement called ‘City of Sanctuary’ was started. It holds the vision that the UK will be a welcoming place of safety for all and proud to offer sanctuary to people fleeing violence and persecution. This year 24th June was observed as ‘Sanctuary Sunday’ although we focussed on it a week earlier at the beginning of ‘Refugee Week’

A ‘refugee’ is someone seeking refuge, looking for a place of safety, of sanctuary or asylum, away from harm. It is an age-old concept and ever present need. Sadly some groups want to portray refugees and asylum seekers in negative ways and seek to stir up hatred and suspicion.

I have been in Refugee camps twice. In 1991, on a visit to Hong Kong, I visited RAF Sek Kong Detention Centre. There 9000 men, women and children were crammed into an area 900 metres by 150 metres on a disused runway. They were Vietnamese ‘Boat People’, most were Buddhist but a sizeable minority were Christian (mainly Roman Catholic). Back in the UK, as part of my theological training, I was involved with a placement in Handsworth helping Vietnamese Roman Catholics to settle here and learn English.

In 1994 I was in Sri Lanka for a month where I was studying the role of the church in reconciliation, in the context of the civil war that was raging there. On a visit to the war area I saw many displaced people but it was in Colombo, the capital, where we visited a camp. That one was in a hall, barely bigger than The Cotteridge Church’s Malvern Room, and was ‘home’ to 450 people comprising 149 families, each family being allocated a 2 metre by 2 metre ‘booth’. They were Tamils who had fled from the war torn north of Sri Lanka. Most were Hindu but again there were a minority who were Christian (again mainly Roman Catholic) and also a few Muslims.

Those who we see today in boats trying to cross The Mediterranean, are often of many different nationalities and faiths, even in the same boat. They all have different stories to tell. Some are fleeing war and violence, some have been victims of extortionate ‘promises’ of wealth across the sea - ripped off by those who have cast them adrift after taking their money for ‘safe passage’. Others are being trafficked and sold into slavery.

One of the glories of Britain is that, throughout the centuries, it has offered a haven to those seeking safety and sanctuary. Many of them have gone on to make valuable contributions to the life of this country; in science, art, technology, medicine and within the communities in which they have settled. As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13 .2)

For the papers about my visits in Hong Kong and Sri Lanka, and more about City of Sanctuary, go to:
www.mjclaridge.co.uk