

Mike's message



“Entertaining angels unaware”

We've all seen the images on our TV screens of the people in the camps at Calais. I'm sure we all have different ideas about what is happening and what should happen.

What has concerned me, and many others, is some of the language being used. For the Prime Minister of this country, or anyone else, to describe people as 'a swarm', or of migrants 'marauding', is irresponsible and dangerous. A statement by four churches, including The Methodist Church, warns that the danger of such language is that it “encourages people to see those in desperation as less than human, and so less deserving of sympathy, respect or dignity”.

I have been in Refugee camps twice in my life. In 1991, on a private visit to Hong Kong, I was able to visit 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). I visited because 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 Susan and I were 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. We visited the war area and 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 St Andrew's, 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.

In Calais there is a similar demographic with most of those in the camp being Muslim, but again with a sizeable Christian minority, from the Orthodox churches of north Africa and Syria.

What struck me on my visits to the camps, and of what I've seen of the Calais situation, is the dignity of the people there. Many relate to their experience and situation in terms of faith. For Christians and Muslims for example there is the common inheritance of tradition, recorded in Jewish scriptures, of Moses and the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. For Christians there is also the tradition that Jesus, Mary and Joseph, were themselves refugees in Egypt when they fled the tyranny of Herod. There they found safe refuge. Some of those in Calais, and others elsewhere, will need to find refuge here. As the writer to the Hebrews says in practicing hospitality we sometimes entertain angels unaware (Hebrews 13 .2). I learnt a lot about faith from my visits to the camps.

The abiding memory I have of my visits to the camps was of the dignity of the individuals and the hope that is embodied in their lives through faith, even when facing the most severe hardship. In response, as this week's statement from the churches says, we need to:

“Remember the importance and equal value God places on every human life, and to seek wisdom that we can challenge injustice and work for peace for the whole world”.

For the papers about my visits in Hong Kong and Sri Lanka, and the recent church statement, go to:
www.mjclaridge.co.uk