

PENTECOST SUNDAY

In these times we are being asked by Pope Francis and our bishops to consider the terrible plight of many migrants and refugees and to face up to the challenge their desperate flight from home poses for us as followers of Christ.

This Pentecost Sunday perhaps we could take the opportunity to think about this as we celebrate the great gift of the Holy Spirit, who inspires us and gives us the courage to live out our calling as Christians.

The Holy Spirit enabled people of different languages and cultures to understand the one message of salvation.

Jesus' message of salvation is in the Gospel today: we are to keep his commandments. And the greatest of the commandments is to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Who is our neighbour?

There is a rich heritage in the church's teaching of welcome for the stranger. The Old Testament Patriarchs were nomads. In Exodus the Jews were clearly told 'You shall not oppress an alien since you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.' The Holy Family fleeing from Nazareth to Egypt were refugees. Many Catholics who make up today's congregations of UK parishes, are descendants of migrants who journeyed to escape war, persecution or simply desperate poverty. Many of us are not far from the experience of fear, loss and hunger three or four generations back.

John Paul II said in 2000: 'In many regions of the world today, people live in tragic situations of instability and uncertainty. It does not come as a surprise that in such contexts the poor and the destitute make plans to escape, to seek a new land that can offer them bread, dignity and peace. This is the migration of the desperate....' He told us that as Catholic Christians we are called to work 'so that every person's dignity is respected, the immigrant is welcomed as a brother or sister, and all humanity forms a united family.....'

Now in 2016, with migration growing and Europe feeling threatened, Pope Francis repeats the message of welcome for the stranger.

Refugees and people fleeing from their homes challenge us in our own way of life. At times they upset the society they encounter.

Often the newspapers and some TV programmes, stoke unwarranted fears and encourage stereotypes of those who are different to us as somehow inferior: less educated, dirty, or dangerous.

But this distracts from the tragic story of millions of men and women and children who daily face the result of humanitarian crises in different parts of the world.

Sarah Teather, (a Catholic convert from the age of 19 and a former MP) works with the Jesuit Refugee Service in London. She experiences at first hand the enrichment to be had from the acceptance of migrants. She says: 'We've got ourselves into a position on asylum where we imagine that everyone who comes to these shores is coming to take something from us. 'They' arrive in poverty and take 'our' resources.' Yet many of the volunteers at the centre are refugees themselves. Some have been helped by the service and come back to volunteer, but many of them are destitute, awaiting asylum themselves. Sarah says 'Think about the volunteers here. They are destitute and yet they give back with an abundance of generosity.

Pope Francis tells us the Gospel of Mercy troubles our conscience and prevents us from taking the suffering of others for granted. God's fatherly care extends to everyone, like the care of a shepherd for his flock, but it is particularly concerned for the needs of the sheep who are wounded, weary or ill.

In responding to the hungry, the thirsty and the stranger, the poor, the ill and the imprisoned, we open our doors to God, and in the faces of others we see the face of Christ himself.

Over the next few weeks there will be a note in the parish newsletter highlighting a work of mercy, and there will be a display on the notice board showing ways we can help those fleeing their homes.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten us and confirm us in our mission as Catholic Christians.