On Welcoming Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Our sessions today have the general title ‘On Welcoming Asylum Seekers and Refugees’, which is what I would like us to reflect on. In a moment or so, I will say more about what you can expect from our sessions, what we are going to cover, and how I would like us to approach this issue, but before I do so, I would like to begin with some general comments on why I think this is such an important issue for us to think and talk about. Also, I should say at the outset that my full notes and all the slides are available on my website, at http://karlmoeller.net/talks.

So why should we think about this issue? One of the most important features of our Christian faith, in my understanding at least, is our belief in the incarnation, in God entering into his creation and taking on the human form and nature himself. There is much that could be said about this, but what it certainly indicates is that our God is a God who meets us right where we are. That, in turn, has implications for the nature of Christianity, implications that, according to the New Testament writers, the early Christians were only too aware of, namely that, in reaching out to the people around them, they too were called to meet those people where they were.

We might describe this task and calling as mission, as long as we define it sufficiently broadly, and I think we would all agree that it is a task and calling for all Christians at all times and in all places. We happen to live in a time when the issue of migration, of unprecedented numbers of people being uprooted and displaced and seeking sanctuary in safer, less conflict-prone countries, including our own, has become one of the most pressing problems. According to predictions, this is an issue that is not going to go away any time soon but is expected to get far more serious and become perhaps the most essential challenge of the twenty-first century.

There are many things we could talk about in our sessions, such as the deeply problematic state of the asylum system in the UK, which is far from the soft touch that it is often made out to be;¹ the lamentable and often dehumanising ways in which certain politicians and media talk about asylum seekers and refugees; the ways in which terms, such as ‘migrants’ and ‘illegal’, tend to be applied inappropriately and without proper distinction; the general one-sidedness of the public discourse about these issues; or, more positively and constructively perhaps, what we, as Christians, can do, in very practical terms, in order to alleviate the suffering of those people who have been displaced and find themselves in great need of shelter, food, clothes, accommodation, help, love and care.

¹The UK is, of course, not alone in this, and so the only reason for singling out the UK is that this is the context within which we live and minister.
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All of these issues, and many others besides, are important to address, and yet I believe we need to begin elsewhere. As Christians, it is important that we reflect theologically on our calling, vocation, mission, whatever we might like to call it, and how that relates, in this case, to how we should respond to the current situation, in which so many people are seeking refuge in Western Europe. I would like us to tackle this in three steps, beginning, in this first session, with some reflections on the Old Testament (as time is limited, we shall have to be quite selective), before moving on to what we might learn from the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus, which will be the focus of our second session. Session three, then, will be devoted to some theological reflections on hospitality and embrace. Each of these sessions will be a combination of input from me and times for exploring particular aspects in conversation together, but our final, evening session, which will be chaired by Roger, is completely open to whatever you wish to reflect on or take further. But let’s start with the Old Testament.

Some Old Testament Perspectives

A Book by Migrants for Migrants

Migrants are ubiquitous in the Old Testament. They are (almost) everywhere, so much so that the Old Testament is, in large parts, ‘the story of people forced from and longing for a home’. Abraham and Sarah are probably the most famous example, but their descendants – Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and their families – all ended up sharing the same fate. Abraham himself, having followed God’s call and migrated to Canaan from southern Mesopotamia, soon was on the move again when famine struck, forcing him to flee to Egypt (Gen. 12). Isaac faced the same problem (Gen. 26:1) and ended up becoming an IDP, an ‘internally displaced person’, which in contemporary jargon denotes a refugee within their own national borders. Jacob, having grown up in Canaan, was forced to seek asylum in Mesopotamia after cheating his brother Esau out of his privileges as the first-born (Gen. 27).

It is rather illuminating to apply the terms used by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to the patriarchs more generally, as Casey Strine has done, concluding that:

Abraham begins as a voluntary migrant, but then lives in Egypt as an environmentally induced, externally displaced person. Isaac is born to immigrant parents, and he subsequently becomes an environmentally induced, internally displaced person. Finally, Jacob is a third generation migrant who involuntarily migrates to seek asylum for fear of physical harm.

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It is no exaggeration, therefore, to say that the God we meet in the Bible’s early chapters is a migrants’ God, a God who acts like a welcoming host. This, too, is a God who is encountered in strange places by people who, as often as not, are on the run, with all the uncertainties and vulnerabilities that that brings. The good news is that this God can be found in those strange places, as Jacob discovered to his great relief: ‘Surely the LORD is in this place’, he delightedly declares, ‘and I did not know it’ (Gen. 28:16). This is a God who is present with his migrant people.

Equally importantly, we, the readers of these ancient stories, learn about this God, our God, through the often challenging and confusing experiences of displaced people. It is in the patriarchs’ ‘vulnerability, failures and trust that we begin to understand what faith in God is and what living a life built on such trust looks like’. As Ruth Worsley and Karen Rooms have pointed out, these stories offer us ‘a narrative of nomads, wanderers, strangers and exiles that are blessed by God and bless others in the midst of the mess of pain, unfaithfulness, oppression, injustice and alienation’. Throughout the book of Genesis, the patriarchs are referred to by the Hebrew term ger. This has been variously translated as ‘sojourner’, ‘alien’ or ‘resident alien’, ‘stranger’ or, more recently in the translation of the Common English Bible, as ‘immigrant’, which, recent scholarship has argued, is the most appropriate rendering. The term describes someone who is different from the host population but who, in contrast to the foreigner (Hebrew nokri), has assimilated into the host culture to a certain degree and enjoys particular legal protection. A degree of integration and assimilation of the ger are evident, for instance, in that the ger is expected to celebrate the Sabbath together with the Israelites (Exod. 20:10).

As we move through the Old Testament, there are many stories of displacement that we could and perhaps should explore, most notably, of course, the exodus from Egypt and the Assyrian and Babylonian exile. As our time is limited, however, and since I believe that it is important to give enough time to the many texts that talk about how the Israelites were expected to treat immigrants who had come to live with them, we shall have to move on to those texts soon.

However, before we do so, I would at least like to alert us to the fact that the Old Testament also features quite a few texts that rather powerfully express the deep trauma suffered by people who found themselves displaced from their homes and who recall the horrors of violence, war and loss which they experienced, horrors that are only too real

5 Ruth Worsley and Karen Rooms, Walking in Another’s Shoes: Ethical Perspectives on the Experience of Those Seeking Asylum (Grove Ethics Series, 158; Cambridge: Grove, 2010), p. 6.
6 Worsley and Rooms, Walking in Another’s Shoes, p. 6.
7 For this judgement, see e.g. Habel, The Land Is Mine, pp. 98, 107. It is also the translation adopted by Mark A. Awabdy, Immigrants and Innovative Law: Deuteronomy’s Theological and Social Vision for the (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).
to many of the displaced people of our times. Texts such as Psalm 137 come to mind, with its wailing and the dejection experienced at the loss of home and all it meant to them, its disbelief at being treated so shamefully by their new neighbours, its determination never to forget their true home and, yes, also its longing for revenge, for their tormentors to be punished. Or we might think of the book of Lamentations, arguably the most powerful and also the most shocking expression of such experiences found in the Bible, not an easy but perhaps an increasingly important read, if we are to learn to empathise with people who have experienced similar horrors. Before we move on, I want to leave you with just one more example, taken from Jeremiah 9, which speaks for itself:

The sound of sobbing is heard from Zion:
We're devastated!
We're so ashamed!
We have to leave the land
and abandon our homes!
...
Death has climbed through our windows;
it has entered our fortresses
to eliminate children from the streets,
the youth from the squares.
Declare what the Lord says:
Dead bodies will lie
like dung on the fields,
like bundles of grain after the harvest,
with no one to pick them up.
(Jer. 9:19-22)

Gift, Thanksgiving and Generosity

Reflecting the experience of migration and displacement at almost every level, it is hardly surprising that the Old Testament features an abundance of texts that express a deep concern for vulnerable outsiders and command the Israelites to care for them. That said, the presence of those constant reminders also indicates that, during those times when the Israelites were more securely settled in their own land, their former experiences of exile and displacement were apparently soon forgotten.

The commands to respect, love and care for immigrants and other vulnerable people (in Old Testament times, widows and orphans were particularly defenceless as well) deserve close attention. First though we need to look at the wider outlook on life which they reflect. Not only does that help us to understand the texts against the wider context of ancient Israel's worldview and self-understanding, it can also confront us with what may well turn out to be a valuable corrective to our modern outlook on life.

The framework within which the calls for care for vulnerable outsiders occur is one of gift, thanksgiving and generosity. The starting point is gift, the realisation that everything we have, the earth, the land and everything that comes from it, is God's gift to us. This awareness is expressed, for instance, in the Festival of the First Fruits (Deut. 26:1-
11). As the Israelites are told how to celebrate the festival, they are not only reminded of their former status as nomads and migrants but are also encouraged to affirm and celebrate that everything they now have, especially the land, is God’s gift. Underlying all this is the belief that there is a generous God at the heart of reality, an understanding that refutes the ‘myth of scarcity’, which paradoxically is so prevalent in our modern satiated culture.

Related to that perception of life, land and life's resources as gift is the even more radical idea that the Israelites themselves are immigrants and foreign guests\(^8\) of God in their own land (Lev. 25:23). Accordingly, the people have no ultimate claim to the land, which belongs to God and therefore, as the writers of Leviticus conclude, may not be sold permanently. But the concept of the land being God’s clearly has much more far-reaching implications. One is that, applied to today, it challenges the notion of sovereign nation states that can determine to close their borders at will, preventing vulnerable people from finding the sanctuary they are seeking.

Awareness of the giftedness of everything then leads to thanksgiving, the second element of the framework expressed in the biblical texts. When we receive gifts, it is only natural to be grateful. Unfortunately, however, it is also in our nature to forget all too quickly. It is for this reason that the biblical writers insist on the festivals being celebrated each year, knowing that only regular acts of thanksgiving can keep the awareness of gift alive. This dynamic of gift and thanksgiving is fundamental to ancient Israel’s life and faith, whose festivals provide the people with a seasonal rhythm of thanksgiving. Year on year on year, this rhythm reminded them that everything they had they owed to their God. And year on year on year, the festivals prompted them to give thanks to that God for all they had received.

What is at stake when we lose the awareness that life is gift has been well expressed by Henri Nouwen, who notes that ‘our human relationships easily become subject to violence and destruction when we treat our own and other people’s lives as properties to be defended or conquered and not as gifts to be received’.\(^9\) Sadly, however, we have not only lost that awareness but have replaced it with the dangerous myth of the ‘self-made’ man or woman. But that this is not just a modern problem can be seen from Paul asking his readers at Corinth: ‘What do you have that you didn’t receive? And if you received it, then why are you bragging as if you didn’t receive it?’ (1 Cor. 4:7).

But the myth of the ‘self-made’ man or woman not only leads to pride in our own achievements, it also encourages a self-securing, grasping attitude to life. Never satisfied, we need, and are constantly being encouraged, to consume more and more. As a result,

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\(^8\) Thus the Common English Bible. ‘Foreign guests’ is a translation of Hebrew toshab. According to Habel, *The Land Is Mine*, p. 98, the term seems to refer to a resident worker.

we have developed a lifestyle and an outlook on life that frequently denies those less fortunate than us even their basic means for survival.

And yet it is no less true today that even our very lives are pure gift, a gift we have not earned or secured by our own efforts, a gift to which the only proper response is gratitude. Ancient Israel’s dynamic of gift and thanksgiving, an attitude that trusts in a generous God at the heart of reality, can help us here and is rather sorely needed today, if we are to expose the myth of the ‘self-made’ man or woman for the lie that it is, if we are to receive gladly and gratefully, and perhaps most crucially, if we are to learn to share the gifts we have received with those most in need. What the biblical texts encourage us to develop is ‘a reaching out toward our neighbor whereby we perceive life as a gift not to possess but to share’. And as Lucien Richard has pointed out, commenting especially on hospitality to the stranger, such hospitality is not only ‘a statement about how we perceive ownership and possession’, it also protects us from abusing ownership and possession.

Which takes us to the third aspect of Israel’s theology of giftedness. Awareness of the gift first leads to thanksgiving, but it does not stop there. It sparks generosity, hospitality, inclusion, and a form of justice that extends to the vulnerable outsiders who have come to live in Israel. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, focusing on the most important gift of the land, ‘land with [God] brings responsibility. The same land that is gift freely given is task sharply put.’ As recipients of God’s abundantly given gifts, the people were expected to be generous in relating to others. This is such an important concept that it is expressed again and again throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the Old Testament’s ‘law books’.

Do not oppress an immigrant, says Exodus 23:9. After all, you know what it is like to be an immigrant, having been immigrants yourself during your time in Egypt (see also Exod. 22:21). Make sure that these vulnerable people have enough to eat. When you harvest your crops, always leave something behind so they can help themselves (Lev. 19:10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19-22). Do not cheat immigrants but treat them as if they were one of your citizens. In fact, ‘you must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God’ (Lev. 19:33-34).

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13 The concept of ‘law’ is somewhat misleading, if it is understood in modern terms. In the Old Testament, the ‘law’ includes a wide range of religious instructions and motivational statements alongside material that we would more readily recognise as ‘law’. For a helpful discussion, see John Barton and Julia Bowden, The Original Story: God, Israel, and the World (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 245-256.
Texts such as these express Israel’s obligation towards vulnerable outsiders clearly and forcefully. The passages from Leviticus are particularly interesting because they need to be understood against the context of the Holiness Code, the law code in Leviticus 17–26 that calls Israel to a kind of holiness that matches God’s own holiness (Lev. 19:1-2). What is important for us to see is that this holiness here specifically includes the idea of justice and how the people are to relate to the most vulnerable among them.\(^\text{14}\)

That immigrants and other vulnerable members of society are to be provided for is underlined also in Deuteronomy 14:28-29. Here, it is the tithe that is to benefit them:

Every third year you must bring the tenth part of your produce from that year and leave it at your city gates. Then the Levites, who have no designated inheritance like you do, along with the immigrants, orphans, and widows who live in your cities, will come and feast until they are full. Do this so that the LORD your God might bless you in everything you do.

What is particularly remarkable is that those ‘on benefits’, to put it into our modern jargon, are not just given the bare minimum necessary for survival but are invited to ‘come and feast until they are full’. Another text in Deuteronomy makes it clear that the Israelites are to love immigrants, not only because they were themselves immigrants in Egypt, but, more crucially, because God himself loves immigrants and provides them with food and clothing (Deut. 10:18-19).

And, as we saw earlier, all of this is to be understood within the framework of gift, thanksgiving and generosity. While still in the wilderness, the people are told that upon entering the land they are to make the following declaration:

‘My father was a starving Aramean. He went down to Egypt, living as an immigrant there .... God saw our misery, our trouble, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt ... and gave us this land – a land full of milk and honey.’ ... celebrate all the good things the LORD your God has done for you and your family – each one of you along with the Levites and the immigrants who are among you. When you have finished paying the entire tenth part of your produce in the third year ... you will give it to the Levites, the immigrants, the orphans, and the widows so they can eat in your cities until they are full (Deut. 26:5-12).

This remarkable text shows a deep awareness of an immigrant past, remembered as a tough time, involving starvation, misery, trouble and oppression, much like the dire circumstances that many asylum seekers and refugees are facing today. But the text also remembers and celebrates God’s help and provision, ‘all the good things the LORD has done’. Importantly, it includes the immigrants themselves in the celebrations, which highlights their integration and assimilation into the host society. And once again it is specified that they are to be given from the tithe so they can eat until they are full. The whole framework of gift, thanksgiving and generosity is clearly expressed in this important text.

That immigrants were to be included in the people’s celebrations is evident from other passages as well. Examples include the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exod. 12:19), the harvest festival (also known as the Festival of Weeks; Deut. 16:11) and the Festival of Booths (Deut. 16:14). Because of its special nature, foreigners were not allowed to celebrate the Passover. That said, however, immigrants may eat the Passover meal, if they have become fully integrated into the religious community by letting themselves be circumcised (Exod. 12:43-49). Like everyone else, they do not have to work on the Sabbath (Exod. 23:12; Deut. 5:14), and they were included in the covenant renewal at Moab (Deut. 29:11) and in Moses’ final instruction to read the law out aloud every seven years in the presence of all Israel (Deut. 31:12).

At least as importantly, immigrants enjoyed much-needed legal protection. One text demands that the Israelites do not obstruct their legal rights (Deut. 24:17), while those who do are threatened with a curse (Deut. 27:19). And no one may take advantage of poor or needy workers, regardless of whether they are Israelites or immigrants (Deut. 24:14). Of course, integration comes with privileges and responsibilities, and so in case of breaches of the law, there are to be the same consequences for immigrants and natives alike (see Lev. 24:16, 22).

This survey indicates that openness to the migrant or refugee and the concern that they be treated with respect, mercy and generosity is especially evident in the texts that are part of the deuteronomistic and priestly traditions, which are deeply shaped by the writers’ own experience of exile. These were people who knew what it was like to be outsiders in a strange land, and they responded in a way that they knew their God to respond, which is to reach out and support the most vulnerable.

Concern for those seeking shelter among the Israelites is expressed also in the Old Testament’s prophetic writings. According to Jeremiah, God demands of his people to ‘do what is just and right; rescue the oppressed from the power of the oppressor. Don’t exploit or mistreat the refugee, the orphan, and the widow. Don’t spill the blood of the innocent in this place’ (Jer. 22:3; see also Zech. 7:9-10). In these two passages, the Common English Bible translates ger as ‘refugee’ (Jer. 22:3) or ‘stranger’ (Zech. 7:10). Indeed, God’s future presence with the people depends on their treatment of the most vulnerable, including once again the immigrants:

if you truly reform your ways and your actions; if you treat each other justly; if you stop taking advantage of the immigrant, orphan, or widow; if you don’t shed the blood of the innocent in this place, or go after other gods to your own ruin, only then will I dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave long ago to your ancestors for all time (Jer. 7:5-7).

That God himself protects the immigrants is expressed also in Ps. 146:9, a psalm that celebrates a God who establishes justice and provides for those most in need. Job, in turn, defending himself against the wrongful accusations of his ‘friends’, insists that the

15 In these two passages, the Common English Bible translates ger as ‘refugee’ (Jer. 22:3) or ‘stranger’ (Zech. 7:10).
strangers that came his way never had to spend the night in the street because he always opened his doors to them (Job 31:32).

Lessons from Jesus’ Life, Ministry and Teaching

In this session, I wish to focus on Jesus’ life, ministry and teaching. That is not to say, of course, that there is nothing of relevance in the rest of the New Testament. Far from it! My reason rather is that, apart from our time being limited, in this particular case, it seems especially important to go back to the example and the teaching of Jesus himself. After all, as Christians we believe that in Jesus we see the fullest revelation of what God is truly like. His life, his teaching, his death on the cross and his resurrection are at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. How Jesus responded to the vulnerable people of his day, the poor, the weak and those at the margins of society, is of particular importance if we are searching for an authentically Christian answer to the question of how we are to respond to the desperate plight of the many people that are seeking sanctuary in our midst.

The Most Famous of Refugees

So how might the story of Jesus speak to today’s world, a world of migration, asylum seekers and refugees? We saw that the Old Testament is, in large parts, a story about migrants and people who, in today’s language, found themselves either internally or externally displaced. Moving on to the New Testament, we find that story continuing. No sooner has Matthew told us about Jesus’ birth than Joseph, Mary and their new-born son are on the run from King Herod and his death squadrons (Matt. 2:13-15).

The world’s refugees, as Christopher Hays has pointed out, know this ‘experience of fleeing with backwards glances and fear of pursuit, ... the overwhelming and daunting necessity of starting anew in a strange place’.16 Stephen Burns quotes very similar words, uttered by Fernando, a Jesuit priest, who, when preaching on Matthew’s story to Nicaraguan campesino families that had been forced to leave their homes by President Somoza’s National Guard, said:

How often have I read that Saint Joseph and the Virgin fled to Egypt. But only now, when an army patrol has just come, have I really understood that very real and harsh circumstance that the gospel presents to us here: repression. We can imagine what that means: leaving at night, hiding with great fear, leaving everything behind, and having to reach the border because they are being pursued.17

It can be illuminating to read this well-known story through the eyes of the displaced, but there is a dark side to the story, which it would be dishonest to ignore. And once again,

that dark side might be more readily apparent to those who have themselves suffered traumatic violence, as many of today’s refugees have.

The disturbing part of Matthew’s story is that, while Joseph, Mary and Jesus get out, others do not. ‘When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry’, we read. ‘He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger’ (Matt. 2:16). How can it be that God saves his own son while leaving other children to die? New Testament scholars like to side-step this question by regarding Matthew’s story, with its parallels in Moses’ birth and rescue and Pharaoh’s killing of Israel’s baby boys (Exod. 1:22–2:10), as mythological. But that does little to address the problem that God is portrayed in Matthew’s Gospel as intervening in the lives of three lucky individuals while ignoring the trauma of the many.

This is one of those texts that would seem to defy satisfactory explanation. Yet that may just be as much of a strength as it is a weakness in that the story clearly touches upon the experience of so many. For, aside from telling us about Jesus’ miraculous escape, this story does not shrink away from the fact that deep trauma can at times be part of our lives. The story reflects the reality, not only that such trauma is not always prevented by God, but also that there may be no answer as to why it has been allowed to happen.

But Joseph and Mary had found themselves on the road even before they had had to flee to Egypt. As we learn from Luke’s Gospel, even though Mary had been in an advanced stage of her pregnancy, she and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem in order to be enrolled in Caesar Augustus’s tax lists. Jesus thus ends up being born in Bethlehem and, as the story goes, is put in a manger as there was no room in the inn (Luke 2:1-7). This story has been told all over the world for two thousand years. Perhaps it is not surprising then that it has acquired some additional features and characters that are not mentioned by the evangelists. These typically include at least a stable, conjured up by the manger; an ox and a donkey, imported from Isaiah 1:3; and an assortment of sheep, assumed to have accompanied the shepherds – though the list doesn’t stop there.

We also know it as a story of hospitality refused (even Jesus, the new-born king of the Jews, ends up in a lowly stable, as there is no room for him elsewhere), when it may actually be a story of hospitality generously given, as would have been the custom in that society. The story that is etched in our minds is that of Joseph and Mary arriving in Bethlehem where, due to the sudden onset of her labour pains, they soon rush to an inn, only to be refused, which is how Mary ends up giving birth in a stable. Luke, however, tells us that they had already been in Bethlehem, apparently for some time, and that, ‘while they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby’ (Luke 2:6).

They must already have been staying somewhere when Mary’s birth pangs began, which eliminates the need for the desperate search for an inn. In fact, kataluma, the word used by Luke most likely refers to a guestroom. This is how Luke uses it in 22:11, the only
other place where the word occurs in his Gospel. There Jesus tells the disciples to find a room for them to celebrate the Passover meal together. Having met some man, they are to follow him to the house he enters and tell him: ‘The teacher says to you, “Where is the guestroom [kataluma] where I can eat the Passover meal with my disciples?”’ When Luke does want to talk about an inn, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, he uses the Greek word *pandocheion* instead (Luke 10:34).

Perhaps Mary and Joseph were staying with Joseph’s own relatives. Bethlehem, after all, was his ancestral home; that’s why they were there to be registered. In any case, they were staying in someone’s guestroom, which is also how visitors to the annual feasts in Jerusalem were traditionally accommodated. This was how a culture that prized hospitality and honoured kinship handled such things. When Mary’s baby was about to be born, though, there was not enough space in the guestroom, which may have sheltered other visitors besides them or may just have been too small, and so Mary ends up placing her new-born baby boy in a manger.

While that may make us think of the famed stable that Luke never mentions, Judean houses at that time usually featured an area near the entrance where the family’s animals were kept at night, though no animals are mentioned in Luke’s account. This area would have included a manger or mangers to provide food and water for the animals. The family themselves would have lived, eaten and slept on some raised terrace in the same room, and there was also usually a guestroom either right next to the family room or upstairs on another floor. So for Joseph, Mary and Jesus to be taken into the family room, where the baby could be conveniently placed in an empty manger, implied neither unkindness nor a lack of hospitality. Quite the reverse, in fact. And in a culture where neighbouring women were traditionally involved in a major event such as childbirth, the main room downstairs would have been the best choice anyway.

So, in Joseph, Mary and Jesus’ flight to Egypt, yet another chapter is added to that familiar Old Testament story of migration and seeking refuge, of being displaced for no fault of one’s own and with all the consequences that that brings. Even the Son of God was not exempt from such trauma. As he would say some years later: ‘Foxes have dens, and the birds in the sky have nests, but the Human One has no place to lay his head’ (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58). But, as Luke’s story shows, he also enjoyed the hospitality that was the norm in the society into which he was born. His entry into this world was aided by hospitality freely given when it was most sorely needed. And whoever provided the room for Mary to give birth, ended up sheltering none other than the Son of God, who himself would grow up to meet with compassion those who needed it the most.

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18 A literal rendering would be ‘Son of Man’, which is found in many English translations. The Common English Bible’s ‘Human One’ seeks to convey the meaning of a term that has led to much scholarly discussion.
Inclusion, Healing and Transformation at the Table

At times, Jesus’ words have a deep ring of exasperation. Luke records one such moment where Jesus reflects that, whatever he or John the Baptist did, they could never quite satisfy the people’s expectations. While John’s fasting and refusal to drink wine were seen as a sign of demonic possession, Jesus’ practice of eating and drinking with people was condemned as misguided and excessive. A glutton and a drunk, they called him, and a friend of sinners (Luke 7:31-34).

Apparently, Jesus had a reputation for partying too hard and for mixing with all the wrong people. As Francis Spufford said, again and again Jesus unerringly settled on the most unrespectable citizens when deciding where to have dinner each night.19 It is a recurring theme in the Gospels. Having called Matthew to follow him, Jesus and the disciples end up at the tax collector’s house, eating with many tax collectors and sinners, many of whom had become his followers (Mark 2:15-17; Matt. 9:9-13).

Luke tells us about another occasion when all the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him (Luke 15:1-2). The Pharisees and the scribes just did not get it. Why on earth would Jesus do that? Why would he welcome sinners and eat with them? ‘Well’, says Jesus, ‘those are precisely the kind of people I have come to look out for, to forgive, to include, to call, to heal’ (Mark 2:17; Luke 15:3-32).

But there were other social outcasts that Jesus cared about. Aside from those, like the tax collectors and prostitutes, that were shunned because of immoral behaviour, for collaborating with the Romans or offering illicit sex, there were others that were considered dirty, impure and untouchable for no fault of their own. Such as the crippled, the lame and the blind. And then there were those that had fallen on hard times or had been born into desperate circumstances, the poor, those who had no means to support themselves. ‘When you give a banquet’, says Jesus, ‘they are the ones to put on your guest list. Don’t invite your friends or your rich neighbours. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, those who cannot repay you’ (Luke 14:12-14).

It has been said that Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners and the abolishment of purity and other social boundaries that such fellowship implied and enacted was at the very heart of his mission.20 And as we just saw, it was not appreciated by the guardians of the moral and religious order. The reasons are not hard to see. Eating together is a great leveller; it establishes a relationship of equality and inclusivity. Jesus’ table fellowship challenged deep-seated ideas of superiority by proclaiming and effectively putting in

place a radical egalitarianism, an egalitarianism that becomes one of the distinctive marks of the kingdom of God.

As Sallie McFague put it, 'the central symbol of the new vision of life, the Kingdom of God, is a community joined together in a festive meal where the bread that sustains life and the joy that sustains the spirit are shared with all'.

This cannot be stressed too much: the life-sustaining bread and the spirit-sustaining joy are shared with all, no one is to be excluded. The kingdom of God becomes a realm of hospitality, in which everyone – the poor, the marginalised, the strangers, the unclean, those who have transgressed ethical boundaries – enjoys life and dignity. The kingdom’s inclusive dimension is not optional; it is at its very heart, as Miroslav Volf has pointed out, emphasising that,

since he who was innocent, sinless, and fully within God’s camp transgressed social boundaries that excluded the outcasts, these boundaries themselves were evil, sinful, and outside God’s will ... By embracing the ‘outcast’, Jesus underscored the ‘sinfulness’ of the persons and systems that cast them out.

The boundaries themselves are evil and outside God’s will. This is why Jesus’ all-inclusive table fellowship becomes the model for our own hospitality, which is to be equally inclusive and all-embracing. Those who are routinely excluded by persons and systems unwilling to include or even acknowledge them are to be embraced by us, the followers of Jesus.

It is important therefore that we consider how we might adopt Jesus’s model and what that might mean for how we respond to those seeking sanctuary in our midst. It is crucial in this context to reflect on hospitality, what it implies and looks like, why it is important, what it does to us and our guests, and how we might put it into practice. But we shall reserve those questions for later and turn first to a more particular concern.

Jesus sharing food, bread and wine, as well as him enjoying table fellowship with others, are both reminiscent of the Eucharist, which has been described as the ‘supreme act of hospitality’ and as an event that foreshadows the great heavenly banquet.

Symbolising and re-enacting Jesus’ inclusive and socially levelling ministry of table fellowship, the Eucharist is a celebration of God’s welcome and hospitality, which are shared by guests who ‘commit themselves to become fellow hosts with God.’

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celebration of the Eucharist is, as Lucien Richard put it, ‘an affirmation of the community’s solidarity with the poor, the aliens, and the marginalized people of the world’. Sam Wells takes this further, commenting that,

by sharing bread with one another around the Lord’s Table, Christians … develop the skills of distribution, of the poor sharing their bread with the rich, and the rich with the poor. They develop the skills of equality, of the valued place of the differently abled, differently gendered and oriented people, those of assorted races and classes and medical, criminal, and social histories. They develop the practices of giving and receiving … They practice the virtues of justice, generosity, and hope.

Hospitality, in Wells’ vision, expresses ‘the valued place’ of the many people that are usually excluded due to being differently abled, gendered or oriented, people of different races and classes, people with ‘a history’, such as the tax collectors and prostitutes of Jesus’ day, people like the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), the woman with a reputation who could not stop anointing Jesus’ feet with costly perfume (Luke 7:36-50), or the Samaritan woman at the well, yet another colourful individual with ‘a history’ (John 4:1-42). The Eucharist offers us an opportunity to welcome everyone without distinction, and thus, as Wells notes, to learn to practice justice, generosity and hope.

While we must not regard the Eucharist as the only expression of such hospitality and solidarity, its celebration clearly does offer us an opportunity for reaching out to those that are excluded by wider society. But that raises important questions for how we celebrate the Eucharist, as Burns has pointed out. How, he wonders, should the church’s vision of hospitality and its expression in the Eucharist be affected by Jesus’ practices of hospitality and open table fellowship? Based on his experience of reaching out to asylum seekers in Gateshead, Burns comes to the lamentable conclusion that

celebrations of Communion buoyed up by traditional Anglican and other Protestant theologies of ‘worthy reception’ are not an encouraging basis for hospitality to asylum seekers, or anyone else for that matter. The possibility of retrieving the traditions of Jesus’ open table fellowship suggests the great promise of reconfiguring liturgical practice in a more missionary mode.

But a Eucharist that models Jesus’ open table fellowship would not only result in a more missionary mode. It would also call into question a theology of ‘worthy reception’ whose agenda would appear to be much closer to that of the Pharisees than to Jesus’ vision and mission. According to the Gospels, ‘worthy reception’ was not high on the agenda of Jesus who, infuriatingly for some, never stopped seeking the company of those thought to be ‘unworthy’.

The Eucharist, then, entails a call and an opportunity. Richard Beck describes it as a ‘powerful psychological intervention’ and ‘a ritual that is fundamentally altering and

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remaking the psyche’. Herein lies the opportunity. Over against our tendency to build walls to keep people out, to distinguish between the ‘worthy’ and the ‘unworthy’, the ‘clean’ and the ‘unclean’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, the Eucharist offers an alternative vision entirely. As an expression of God’s unlimited welcome and hospitality, it is a ‘powerful psychological intervention’ indeed.

It is all too easy to remodel the Eucharist on our terms, to insist on ‘worthy reception’, to keep the ‘unworthy’ away from an encounter with the ‘holy’. Jesus’ life, ministry and teaching, however, instruct us otherwise, which is why the Eucharist also entails a call, the call to follow in Jesus’ footsteps and extend his welcome and hospitality to everyone without distinction. That demands that we allow for our walls to be torn down, for our boundaries to be transgressed, and it is here that the Eucharist becomes a politically subversive and profoundly countercultural event. Hospitality that knows no bounds will always be offensive to those who insist on degrees of worthiness. Yet it is precisely the abolition of any such distinctions that characterises the hospitality of God, a hospitality we are called to emulate and embody in our own lives and in the life of the church.

But our lack of hospitality may be caused by more trivial reasons, by thoughtless routines and an often subconscious unwillingness to be open to and flexible enough for change. Henri Nouwen laments how hard we often find it ‘to give up familiar ways and create space for the strangers’, to ‘make a new common prayer possible’. As Nouwen says, when we forget God’s call to be a ‘pilgrim church’ and settle in our comfortable oasis, unity is broken and ‘prayer is shriveled into a partisan affair’. Yet there is nothing partisan about God’s limitless hospitality, which found its perfect embodiment in Jesus’ practice of eating and drinking with the marginalised and the supposedly least ‘worthy’.

**Reckless Love and Generosity**

In Jesus we meet a man who, throughout his life, reached out to those in desperate need, people needing food, healing and shelter, many of them people who had been rejected by ‘respectable’ society. In this he showed us what it means to achieve our full potential as human beings created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), and, daunting though it may be, Jesus called his followers to an ethic of imitation. He expects us to live and love exactly like he did: ‘Just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone’, he says, ‘so also you must be complete’ (Matt. 5:48).

Negative reactions to people seeking sanctuary among us are frequently influenced by deep fears, fears about our own safety and security, about job losses, about additional

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31 This is the Common English Bible’s interpretation of ‘be perfect (complete), therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect (complete)’. 

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strains being put upon an already floundering economy. While such fears are human and understandable, as Christians we cannot avoid Jesus' challenge to love the people who cross our path (Matt. 22:34-40), to give generously to those in need, regardless of what they may require, and to learn to trust God to provide for our own needs.32 'Don’t worry what you’ll eat, drink or wear’, says Jesus. ‘Look at the birds in the sky or the lilies in the field. God provides for them all. Won’t he do much more for you? He knows your needs. You desire God's kingdom and righteousness, and you’ll be given everything else as well’ (Matt. 6:25-34).

This may be a difficult message for us to hear, but the consequences of not hearing it are there for everyone to see, especially in the way we treat people who have come to us for shelter, many of whom have experienced trauma on a scale we shall never even begin to understand. It is disheartening to see how a society that prides itself on its humanism can fail the most vulnerable in often shockingly inhumane and dehumanising ways. There are, as always, many and complex reasons for this, but our incessant, self-absorbed worrying about our own needs clearly has much to answer for. Jesus’ demand that we ‘desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness’ is so important in this context, because it calls us to live in a way that allows others, especially those in need, to survive and thrive alongside us.

Jesus’ parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:15-21), an amazingly apt description of the spirit of our times, takes things further by looking at the damage we do to ourselves by greedily accumulating more and more possessions. Enjoying a well-paid job, the man in the parable piles up the dosh and everything that comes with it. What he doesn’t get is that a life well lived is not about possessions and that nothing he owns can give his life ultimate meaning. Parker Palmer has offered some insightful observations about this, which are worth considering. ‘The more material abundance we have or seek’, he notes, ‘the more likely we are to starve from scarcity of the Spirit. But if we can let go of our anxiety about material scarcity, a great abundance of the Spirit will be opened to us.’33 For Palmer, this is why we actually need the stranger, as well as other vulnerable people, for, as he puts it:

the poor and the hungry and the sick and the stranger – without and within – bring us the Christ; they bring us the opportunity to receive the gift of compassion in our lives and to be saved (‘made whole’) by sharing that gift with others. The stranger offers us the chance to come out of ourselves and thus to find ourselves. By ministering to the sick and the hungry and the imprisoned we do ourselves more good than we do them; and when we turn our back on ‘the least of these’, we turn our back on God and on our own true selves.34

32 There is also a wealth of evidence to suggest that migration tends to boost host economies. Many fears therefore turn out to be unfounded.
34 Palmer, Company of Strangers, p. 75.
On Welcoming Asylum Seekers and Refugees

It is by receiving the gift of compassion, Palmer insists, that we are made whole ourselves, that we find our true selves, that we experience full life, the abundance of the Spirit.

‘Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth’, says Jesus; they won’t last long anyway. Also, bear in mind that you ‘cannot serve God and wealth’ (Matt. 6:19, 24). And to the young man, who throughout his life had observed all the commandments and wishes to follow Jesus, he says there is just this one thing he needs to get sorted:

‘If you want to be complete [this is the same word as in Matt. 5:48], go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come follow me.’ But when the young man heard this, he went away saddened, because he had many possessions (Matt. 19:21-22).

The man’s response leads Jesus to reflect on how difficult it is for a rich person to become part of God’s kingdom. But he immediately reassures his disciples that ‘all things are possible for God’.

Spufford, in a brilliant summary that gets right to the heart of Jesus’ message, especially highlights his call to ‘reckless generosity’:

Behave as if nothing you gave away could ever make you poorer, because you can never run out of what you give. Behave as if this one day we’re in now were the whole of time, and you didn’t have to hold anything back, or to plot and scheme about tomorrow. Don’t try to grip your life with tight, anxious hands. Unclench those fingers. Let it go. If someone asks for your help, give them more than they’ve asked for. ... you’ve got it wrong about virtue. It isn’t something built up from a thousand careful, carefully measured acts. It comes, when it comes, in a rush; it comes from behaving, so far as you can, like God Himself, who makes and makes and loves and loves and is never the less for it. God doesn’t want your careful virtue, He wants your reckless generosity. Try to keep what you have, and you’ll lose even that. Give it away, and you’ll get back more than you bargain for; more than bargaining could ever get you.35

There is simply no getting away from it; this is the essence of Jesus’ message. He calls us to reckless love and generosity that, quite literally, know no bounds. And there is some irony in the fact that this is, at times, more readily recognised by an avowed atheist such as Barbara Ehrenreich, who, when reading Matthew’s Gospel, was struck by ‘the mad generosity Jesus recommends’.36 Jesus’ message is clear, and anyone who talks about a Christian society but has no regard for such love and generosity is not following the Jesus we meet in the Gospels. Given the spirit of Jesus’ teaching, Giles Fraser is entirely justified, therefore, to challenge us to ‘let the refugees in, every last one’, as he put it in one of his Guardian columns, drawing attention to the Bible’s insistence on ‘the absolute priority of our obligation to refugees’. As Fraser concludes, there is ‘no respectable Christian argument for fortress Europe’.37

One of the clearest calls to the unreserved welcoming of strangers is found in a text traditionally known as Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46). Some prefer to speak of the judgement of the nations instead, as Jesus here envisages all nations gathered in front of the Son of Man. The sheep are those who are invited into God’s realm, because they have offered Jesus food and drink when in need, welcome when a stranger, clothes when naked, care when sick and company when in prison. The goats, who haven’t done any of these things, are told that they are barred from God’s realm. Both groups are puzzled and want to know when they did, or did not do, these things for Jesus. His answer is well-known: what you did, or didn’t do, for one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you did, or didn’t do, for me.

It is in the people who are seeking sanctuary in our midst that we encounter Christ today. Thomas Merton once expressed this very powerfully in the closing lines of his poem ‘Hagia Sophia’:

A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.38

‘A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification’ – an illegal God, we might add, at least in the words of certain media and politicians. When we offer this destitute wanderer, this stranger who has come to us from some far-away place in need of refuge, a true welcome and the hospitality that everyone deserves we are welcoming Christ. When we refuse to extend such hospitality, we are shutting our doors in the face of Christ himself. Stephen Carter saw this clearly when he emphasised that ‘our obligation is to see God in everyone, not merely as possibility, but as reality. So whenever we mistreat others, we are abusing our relationship with God’.39

Drawing attention to the stark nature of Jesus’ words, Pierre Whalon suggests that, ‘for people of faith, how we welcome the stranger is liable to the judgment of God’ and that, ‘in the teachings of Christ, it is a matter of life and death, not only for the migrant but for us all’.40 What this underlines is that, in Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God, reckless love, generosity and hospitality are integral to the vision of God’s new world, a world that had already begun to become a reality in Jesus’ own life and mission, a world that we, his followers, are called to desire and whose values we are to embody in our own lives (Matt. 6:33).

But we must never assume that we are the only ones capable of such love and generosity, if indeed we are. There is a profound danger in reflections such as these that

we think of vulnerable others, such as asylum seekers and refugees, as the passive recipients of our love and generosity or, as is perhaps more often the case, our indifference and stinginess. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) tells a different story.

‘So who is my neighbour?’ the legal expert wants to know after Jesus had made him recite the two most important commandments, love of God and love of neighbour (vv. 25-28). In response, Jesus tells the famous story of a Samaritan who comes to the help of a severely injured man, who had been robbed of his clothes, beaten up and who was dying from his wounds. Some highly respectable people had walked right past without any apparent regard for the man on the side of the road, but this Samaritan, the loathed and looked-down-upon stranger, had been a model of compassion. Not only had he dressed the injured man’s wounds, he had taken him to an inn to be nursed back to health with the money he had provided – all costs covered, as it were.

While the legal expert wants to know who he is supposed to love and, by implication, who he can get away with not loving, Jesus turns the whole thing on its head. He denies the respected religious authority figure, who wishes to establish what would make him a good neighbour, any chance to feel virtuous. And so he tells this story about a despised stranger who not only knows but models what loving one’s neighbour means. In Jesus’ story, ‘it is the foreigner who is the good neighbour bringing life and healing’.41 It is the stranger who offers reckless love and generosity.

The current situation, in which so many people are looking for refuge in Western Europe, calls for a response. If we seek to be guided by Jesus’ example and teaching, it is abundantly clear what kind of values that response must express. Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God demands a radical decision in favour of our neighbour.42 Yet, as the parable of the Good Samaritan so powerfully illustrates, even if we were to rise to Jesus’ challenge and grow in love and generosity, we should always be open to the possibility that others, perhaps especially those we least expect to, may well put us to shame with their superior generosity.

Daniel Groody tells just one such story. Along the well-guarded border between the United States and Mexico, he says, there operate some groups that offer humanitarian aid to immigrants who have been travelling through dangerous desert and mountain terrain for miles. One summer, when temperatures reached almost 50° Celsius, one such group, having spotted about twenty immigrants, called out to them, asking these people whether they had food and water. Upon hearing this, the immigrants stopped, huddled together and deliberated for a while. At last, their leader walked towards the aid workers and said,

41 Worsley and Rooms, *Walking in Another’s Shoes*, p. 10.
'We don’t have any more food and only a little water, but if you need some, we will share what we have with you'.

**Reflections on Hospitality and Embrace**

'I was a stranger and you welcomed me', says Jesus, and ‘what you have done to the least of my brothers and sisters, you have done for me’ (Matt. 25:35, 40). This, together with many other biblical passages, indicates that hospitality is an essential Christian practice. But what is hospitality? What does it mean to welcome the stranger in our midst? And what might it do to us and the other when we do welcome them and show them true hospitality? These questions invite further reflection, which can help us gain a better understanding of the nature, the potential, the challenges and the blessings of welcoming others.

Oliver O’Donovan once noted that ‘the act of recognition and welcome, which leaps across the divide between communities and finds on the other side another community which offers the distinctive friendship of hospitality, is a fundamental form of human relating’. There are several points worth noting here. Apart from the fact that hospitality is essential as a way of relating to others (without it we would remain alone), O’Donovan importantly describes it as a way of showing the other recognition. This is exactly what is lacking when refugees are described as a flood that needs to be stemmed or a swarm of people crossing the Mediterranean. Hospitality, first of all, means recognising the other as a human being, a person just like us, with similar potential, gifts, joys, hopes, needs, fears and weaknesses.

Richard Beck, too, speaks of hospitality as ‘an act of human recognition’, but he also thinks of it as an act of embrace. In doing so, he adopts a key term of Miroslav Volf’s influential book *Exclusion and Embrace*, according to which hospitality is the ‘will to embrace’. Volf goes on to say that this:

> will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity. The will to embrace precedes any ‘truth’ about others …. This will is absolutely indiscriminate and strictly immutable; it transcends the moral mapping of the social world into ‘good’ and ‘evil’.

Again, there is much to reflect on in these lines. Recognition of the other as a human person is central for Volf as well. But he goes further than that in emphasising that our recognition of the stranger must not be tainted by any prior judgements about them, that

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there must be no dualistic division of the world into ‘good’ (for which read ‘us’) and ‘evil’ (i.e. ‘them’). Sadly, as the public debate shows, such judgements are only too quick to hand and indeed are actively pushed and encouraged by too many politicians and media. Volf challenges this, rightly insisting that the will to embrace must come before any so-called ‘truth’ about the other. The inverted commas helpfully remind us that our ‘truths’ not infrequently turn out to be very far from the truth.

O’Donovan also hints at this, turning our expectations upside down by speaking of the community on the other side as offering ‘the distinctive friendship of hospitality’. We quite like to see hospitality as an opportunity for us to shine, as a chance for us to be generous and offer friendship to the stranger. O'Donovan wisely stops us in our tracks. He does exactly what Jesus did when he praised the Samaritan man as a model of what it means to love one's neighbour. Just as Jesus shattered the worldview of his first-century audience, so O'Donovan challenges our assumption that in welcoming the stranger it is we who are benefactors, that we are the ones who give, so that others can gratefully receive. Actually, says O'Donovan, when we extend hospitality to others, we may discover friendship that is being offered to us, friendship that we would never be able to enjoy otherwise.

Against the fears and apprehensions that take up so much space in the public debate, it is important to point out that ‘strangers may actually enhance our well-being rather than diminish it’. Why always assume that we only stand to lose if we welcome people in? It may be useful to turn to the Bible again at this point, which offers some intriguing examples of hosts benefitting, in both surprising and life-giving ways, from welcoming their guests.

One sunny day – the text does not say this, but one assumes it to be sunny in that part of the world – Abraham looks up and sees three men standing in front of him (Gen. 18). He does what one does in that culture and offers them water so they can wash their feet, shade so they can refresh themselves and of course a good meal: bread, butter, milk and meat from a freshly-slaughtered calf. But it was the guests who contributed the greatest gift, the promise that in a year’s time Abraham and Sarah would be parents of the long-awaited heir. And who were these people anyway? (Rembrandt’s painting has the rather unfortunate effect of eliminating what is mysterious in the biblical text.) Was the writer of the letter to the Hebrews thinking of this encounter when he said, ‘don’t neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it’ (Heb. 13:2)? Maybe, but in Genesis the claim is even bolder. In entertaining those strangers, Abraham came face to face with none other than God (Gen. 18:13-14). Hospitality to them turned out to be hospitality to God; inviting them in became the occasion for encountering God.

47 Ross, 'Hospitality', p. 3.
Some other sunny day in Jericho – there are only sunny days in my retelling of these stories – two men arrive at the house of Rahab, an apparently well-known prostitute (Josh. 2). She would have been used to getting visitors, but these two men are not like her usual clients. They are Israelite spies, and their presence in her house put her in great danger. Yet she welcomes them and takes them in. When the king, who somehow must have got wind of the spies staying with Rahab, demands for them to be handed over, Rahab denies any knowledge about their background and pretends that they had already left before the city gate was closed for the night. In truth, she had given them refuge on her roof, and she is willing to take the risk of sheltering them if the spies can give her the guarantee that she and her family would be spared in the Israelites’ destruction of Jericho. This the spies promise, and so her hospitality saves them all from certain death (see Josh. 6:17, 23, 25).

And then there is the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17). This time we actually know that it happened on a sunny day, because it was a time of drought and famine. That was the problem! Elijah is told by God that he had ordered the widow to take care of him. Though what the widow actually knew about that and how she was to care for him anyway is not so clear. When Elijah arrives and asks for a little water and a piece of bread, he is told:

‘As surely as the L ORD your God lives, ... I don’t have any food; only a handful of flour in a jar and a bit of oil in a bottle. Look at me. I’m collecting two sticks so that I can make some food for myself and my son. We’ll eat the last of the food and then die’ (v. 12).

Grim prospects indeed. But Elijah says, ‘just make me some bread first; you can make some for yourself and your son later’. Really? With a handful of flour? No problem, says Elijah, because God has promised that ‘the jar of flour won’t decrease and the bottle of oil won’t run out until the day the L ORD sends rain on the earth’ (v. 14). This is costly hospitality, hospitality that puts the other first and requires faith that God will provide. And God does, and so they all survive. But there was another unexpected blessing yet to come. When one day the widow’s son gets ill and stops breathing, Elijah, the guest she had been harbouring in her house, ends up saving the boy’s life.

Some other time, many years later, two men, making a desolate journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus, meet a stranger on the road (Luke 24). They are in deep mourning over the death of Jesus of Nazareth, the one they had hoped would save Israel. They are also confused because there had been reports about an empty tomb and that Jesus was alive. Hearing all this, the stranger gives them a free Bible lesson, going through much of the Old Testament (they had a little bit of time, as it was a seven-mile journey). When they get to Emmaus, he wants to move on, but they urge him to stay with them. And so it is that, by extending hospitality to this stranger, they meet the resurrected Christ when he takes the bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them. And in this act, the roles of host and guest are reversed, for in the breaking of the bread, it is Jesus, the one they had
invited in, who becomes the host. Their hospitality to the stranger thus leads to the stranger’s, or Christ’s, hospitality to them.

Welcoming others and offering them hospitality may, as these stories illustrate, bring unexpected benefits and blessings. As we saw earlier, it would be foolish and arrogant to assume that we are the only ones who have something to give. Hospitality involves a mutual giving and receiving, and the biblical stories invite us to consider the possibility that it may actually be the host who receives the biggest blessing. The other, the stranger, the foreigner may end up enriching our lives in ways we would never have thought possible. Indeed, O’Donovan suggests that:

It is essential to our humanity that there should always be foreigners, human beings from another community who have an alternative way of organising the task and privilege of being human, so that our imaginations are refreshed and our sense of cultural possibilities renewed.48

Parker Palmer makes a similar point when he notes that, when we invite the stranger into our private space, that space is suddenly enlarged. Hospitality to the stranger therefore ‘gives us a chance to see our own lives afresh, through different eyes’.49 We have, it would seem, much to gain by embracing those who are knocking on our doors.

Of course, the flipside, that in welcoming those who are seeking shelter in our midst, we are offering them something, is also true. For Christine Pohl, hospitality means that ‘the stranger is welcomed into ... a place of respect and acceptance and friendship’ and is ‘included in a life-giving and life-sustaining network of relations’.50 Respect, acceptance, friendship – all these flow from the recognition of the other person as a human being with gifts and needs, strengths and weaknesses, a human being just like us. But Pohl here emphasises another key aspect of hospitality, that of including the other person in a network of relations, a network without which they would struggle to survive. Hospitality is so important precisely because human relationships, with everything they entail – love, concern and care as well as material, practical, emotional and spiritual support – are what quite literally gives and sustains life.

So that, too, is what hospitality is about; it involves ‘inviting the stranger into our private space, whether that be the space of our own home or the space of our personal awareness and concern’.51 That is why references to those seeking refuge in Europe as mere ciphers are so profoundly damaging, both to them and to us. These people, every single one of them, are human beings just like us, and yet that awareness is often being denied to us by the language used by politicians and the media. Against this background, it is easy to see why the picture of Alan Kurdi made the impact it did. Here we ‘met’ a little

48 O’Donovan, Desire of the Nations, p. 268.
49 Palmer, Company of Strangers, p. 78.
51 Thus Palmer, Company of Strangers, p. 78.
boy and his father, two individuals we could care about. We allowed them, at least briefly, into the space of our personal awareness and concern.

Of course, actual hospitality goes much further than that. It invites the other into our country, our town, our street and our private space, our home. It leads to personal encounter, which deepens our awareness and concern. In being welcoming, we are opening a space within ourselves, a space in our hearts, minds and souls, a space that the other is allowed to inhabit. Hospitality thus means making ‘room for others within the borders of my selfhood’. And, as we saw Volf saying earlier, making such space requires readjustments to our own identities. After all, hospitality means inviting people in as they are. Any demand that the other must share our beliefs and lifestyle if they desire to be welcomed in would be manipulative rather than an expression of the unconditional welcome that is at the heart of the gospel. True hospitality, we are beginning to see, has more far-reaching implications than we may at first realise. It is not about charity, about being virtuous and doing the good deed; no, true hospitality is about a profound change of heart.

Sometimes, there may be real costs involved. Peter Rollins, in his book The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales, illustrates this with the help of a somewhat disturbing story, which will require careful analysis and reflection. It is about a priest of a magnificent cathedral who is known for offering welcome to everyone without restraint, because to him each and every stranger is a manifestation of Christ.

One evening, the priest was visited by a terrifying demon, who wanted to know from the man of God whether he would welcome him in. This the priest did without hesitation, only to find that the demon, having gained entry, soon went about wrecking the sanctuary. Later on, when the priest was getting ready to go home, the demon asked whether he could stay with him over night. ‘Come’, the priest said, ‘I will prepare a meal’. And so the demon came along, ate the meal, mocked the priest and did more damage. At last, he had one final question: ‘Will you also welcome me into your heart?’ ‘Of course’, the priest replied, ‘what I have is yours’. Unexpected as it was, the priest's final reply stopped the demon in his tracks because, in freely giving everything, the priest had held on to what the demon had meant to take. Despite his best efforts, the demon had not been able to rob the priest of his kindness, hospitality, love and compassion. 

The story works on a number of levels, and it is vital that we do not misunderstand or misapply it. On one level, it says that not everyone knocking on our doors may turn out to be friendly and benign. From experience, many of us know of course that the vast majority of people are, quite regardless of their origin. But there is always some risk

52 Thus Beck, Unclean, p. 140.
involved when we open our doors to others. The story insists, though, that this is no reason to shut the door in the other’s face. Rollins, who himself offers some comments on the tale, notes that, ‘through our trying to show hospitality to the demon at our door, the demon may well be transformed by the grace that is shown’.54

That, of course, is right at the heart of the Christian message. Christ came to transform this world through love, and he expects us, his followers, to do the same. ‘Love your enemies’, he says, ‘and pray for those who harass you’ (Matt. 5:44). Even if we were to get hurt in that process that, from a Christian point of view, would be no reason for ‘fortress Europe’, as it has been described by some. Jesus’ message is quite clear on this point.

But it is worth quoting Rollins again, for he goes on to suggest that in the encounter with the other, even the one who is causing us trouble, hurt and grief, ‘we may come to realize that it [is] not really a demon at all, but just a broken, damaged person like ourselves’.55 In Rollins’s story, the ‘demon’ does not introduce himself as such. This is rather how he is perceived. Sadly, there is, to put it perhaps overly cautiously, a real danger in our society that asylum seekers and refugees are not just dehumanised but effectively demonised. Fleur Houston expresses her deep concern that the fears evoked by strangers seeking sanctuary in our midst are unscrupulously exploited by certain politicians and the popular media, which leads not only to the demonization of people who are among the most vulnerable but also blinds politicians and citizens alike to the brutality of their public policies, the inhumanity of the ways in which they are implemented, and the unimaginable suffering their decisions have caused and are causing to those who have already had more than their share of ill-treatment.56

When we welcome the stranger, we find that our encounter is with a human being just like us. That encounter may, as we saw earlier, turn out to be an unimagined, life-changing blessing. It may also entail difficulties, hurt and grief, for being the broken, damaged people that we are, we do have a tendency of causing each other pain. And yet, there may be unimagined blessings also in reaching out to those that may hurt us. This is just what the priest found, whose kindness, hospitality, love and compassion, it turned out, could not be taken away from him in spite of the hurt he endured.

Regardless of the exact outcome of our encounter with the other, hospitality is of such inestimable importance because it counters the dehumanisation of the stranger that our society is increasingly guilty of. As Beck puts it, ‘where the dynamics of ... dehumanization foster exclusion and expulsion, the practice of hospitality welcomes the outcast and stranger as a full member of the human community’.57 We already saw that, when we

54 Rollins, Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales, p. 29.
55 Rollins, Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales, p. 29.
56 Fleur S. Houston, You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself: The Bible, Refugees and Asylum (Biblical Challenges in the Contemporary World; New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 98.
57 Beck, Unclean, p. 124.
open the door to someone else, we find that who we meet is another human being. At least as importantly, however, when we do open our door, we bestow upon that person the dignity to be received as such. No longer are they a nameless and faceless refugee, an Other, a stranger, a victim, a statistic, a problem, one among hundreds of thousands or even millions. No, who we meet is someone like Augustine Stevens. Augustine was granted refugee status in 1997, having fled the coup in Sierra Leone, and her story is briefly summarised by Hannah Skinner, who quotes her as saying that:

[The label ‘refugee’ is] not encouraging, it’s dehumanizing. It degrades. I am a newcomer, you can call me a stranger for a while, but if you give me a passport, a right to stay, I am just Augustine. I don’t need that description: ‘Augustine is a refugee from Sierra Leone’. If a British person is working, as they are, in Sierra Leone, you don’t go round saying ‘John, the Englishman from Birmingham’. You don’t go to that extent. You don’t even say ‘John, the Englishman’. You just say ‘John’.58

True hospitality receives Augustine as Augustine, thus counteracting the dehumanising tendencies that are at work in our society. In doing so, hospitality becomes subversive because it ‘undermines and challenges existing power structures and restores human dignity and respect’.59 It gives dignity and respect to those who are denied them by the popular media and the political system, and it breaks down social boundaries by including the excluded. As Pohl points out, ‘hospitality that welcomes “the least” and recognizes their equal value can be an act of resistance and defiance, a challenge to the values and expectations of the larger community’.60

But is not this precisely what Jesus is remembered for by the Gospel writers? Imagine the scandal when he welcomed the prostitutes and the tax collectors, those collaborators with the Roman Empire. The Gospels positively teem with examples of Jesus resisting, defying and challenging the values and expectations of his society, most especially those in power. Clearly, if, as the evidence suggests, public policies regarding asylum seekers are brutal and implemented in inhumane ways, causing unimaginable suffering to those who are already deeply traumatised and all-too often utterly defenceless, then what is needed is the kind of hospitality that resists and defies such injustice and inhumanity.

Finally, I should like to come back to Rollins’s story just one more time. The priest, we might say, was a true hero. He simply kept giving and giving, inviting the ‘demon’ deeper and deeper into his life, regardless of the damage the other was inflicting upon him. Who among us would be able to act like that? As Rollins comments, the story expresses what he calls an impossible hospitality, a divine hospitality we can never hope to attain. And yet, this is undoubtedly the kind of hospitality that we, as followers of Jesus, are called to offer. As we saw earlier, Jesus expects us to be complete in showing love to everyone, just

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59 Thus Ross, ‘Hospitality’, p. 4.
as our heavenly Father is (Matt. 5:48). It is salutary then to be reminded, which is what the story does, that we shall never be able to congratulate ourselves for having done enough. After all, who among us could claim to have been truly, radically hospitable?