

## SANCTUARY SUNDAY

### Introduction

*This service is a celebration of Sanctuary Sunday (also called Refugee Sunday) on the Sunday following World Refugee Day on 20 June. There are more displaced people in the world today than at any other point in history and the Bible is clear in its expression of God's loving concern for the stranger and refugee. We are reminded of the need to welcome the stranger and to see in all people our common humanity. We are all created in the image of God and we are all deserving of dignity and worth.*

### Our call to worship

Holy and merciful God, be with us now as we worship and speak to us so that we might be your hands and feet in the world in the cause of peace, justice, and community. Amen

**Hymn: StF 611. Brother, sister, let me serve you** Richard A.M.Gillard (b 1953)

- |                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Brother, sister, let me serve you,<br>let me be as Christ to you;<br>pray that I may have the grace<br>to let you be my servant too.            | 4. I will weep when you are weeping ;<br>when you laugh I'll laugh with you;<br>I will share your joy and sorrow<br>till we've seen this journey through |
| 2. We are pilgrims on a journey,<br>and companions on the road;<br>we are here to help each other<br>walk the mile and bear the load.              | 5. When we sing to God in heaven<br>we shall find such harmony,<br>born of all we've known together<br>of Christ's love and agony                        |
| 3. I will hold the Christ-light for you<br>in the night-time of your fear;<br>I will hold my hand out to you,<br>speak the peace you long to hear. | 6. Brother, sister, let me serve you,<br>let me be as Christ to you;<br>pray that I may have the grace<br>to let you be my servant too.                  |

### Prayers:

We thank you for the astonishing variety of races and cultures in this world. We know that human diversity is an expression of your manifold love for your creation. Empower us to recognize and celebrate differences as your great gift to the human family. Enable us to be the architects of understanding, of respect and love; to recognise that our lives are enriched by ever-widening circles of friendship.

Yet we confess that people can often turn diversity into a source of alienation, injustice, oppression, and wounding. Sometimes too the world seems to be in such a mess that nothing appears to have changed over the last two thousand years

Families are still suffering famine and infants dying of malnutrition; people are tortured and massacred at the behest of cruel regimes; homes and places of medical and social care are destroyed at will without thought for innocent civilians; the number of refugees increases exponentially each year.

Sometimes we feel we are helpless in the face of all this and we can become disillusioned and even doubtful about our faith.

Lord, we long to hear words of comfort and hope, and from these, to be inspired to action. Hear us, forgive us, and come to our aid, we pray; enable us to be the builders of your kingdom. Amen

### **Lord's prayer.**

Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done on earth, as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours  
Now and forever. Amen.

### **Readings**

*Ruth, a Moabite widow, returned with her widowed mother-in-law to Bethlehem at great risk to herself because Moabites were distrusted in Judah. As an immigrant Ruth took the path of total assimilation and made a great contribution to her new home, so much so that through re-marriage, it turned out that she would be ancestor of Israel's greatest king, David.*

*Our second reading, from St. Matthew stresses that in the face of everyone we meet who needs help of any kind we see the face of Christ. It highlights the importance of compassion, mercy, and service to society's most vulnerable.*

### **Old Testament reading: Ruth 1 vv 15-17 (NRSV)**

<sup>15</sup> So (Naomi) said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." <sup>16</sup> But Ruth said,

Do not press me to leave you, or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.  
May the Lord do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

### **Gospel reading: Matthew 25 vv 31-40 (NRSV)**

<sup>31</sup> "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'

### **Hymn: StF 242 A new commandment I give unto you (anon) (sung through twice)**

A new commandment I give unto you:  
that you love one another as I have loved you (repeat)  
By this the world shall know that you are my disciples,  
if you have love one for another. (repeat)

## Sermon: Sanctuary

### Reflection

Around 250 million people (more than 3 per cent of the world's population) are currently migrants and one fifth of that number have travelled beyond their native country. The level of desperation is steadily increasing. The many theatres of war and political repression obviously create a huge number of refugees. Many more are forced by factors like the adverse impact of climate change with concomitant famine and the ever-increasing global gap between rich and poor nations. But the general response of many of the wealthier western governments has been to shoo people away as much as possible for as long as possible.

Several politicians and the media have led people to believe that the number of asylum seekers in the UK is steadily rising (it has in fact fallen very significantly in the past year) and that these constitute a third of the total immigrants when they are less than ten percent. We hear about how they help increase the competition for jobs and housing and healthcare thereby creating flashpoints of social tension. However, that's partly because many of the newcomers have settled in what were already the most challenging and deprived areas.

It's easy to lose ourselves in a morass of figures and forget that each one is someone's mother, father, brother, sister or other family member, all desperate to enjoy a better quality of life. This is not to suggest we abandon measures aimed to maintain national security. But that should not be synonymous with scapegoating those who do enter as second class citizens and consigning them to conditions barely about the level of destitution..

It's easy to forget that neither Britain nor the USA, or for that matter most other nations have ever constituted a single race or religion. (The Statue of Liberty bears witness to that). Moreover there is abundant evidence that immigrants or their children have often contributed significantly to the community of the host nation.

It was ever thus. The Bible is full of stories of migration; for instance, of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, the Babylonian exile, and there are numerous examples of migrants making positive contributions to the community they became a part of. Perhaps most significant of all is the flight of the holy family to Egypt to escape Herod's persecution. Jesus was thus a refugee at the very beginning of his life on earth.

The parable of the Good Samaritan shocked its audience because it made a hero of a member of a despised race. It suggests that our neighbour is anyone in need, and that our help should be unconditional. Authentic Christian love should know no bounds; no barriers, exclusions, or limits. Jesus calls on us to extend compassion to all no matter what their origin or beliefs. There is no excuse for demonising certain sections of the population or suggesting that their values are somehow inferior or that they threaten social cohesion.

To those who say Christians should not be 'political' we should counter that our faith does not allow us to be morally neutral or stand in isolation when we see what we think is injustice. The prophet Hosea enjoined everyone to *"do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God"*. If we're not about seeing justice and acting humanely then what are we about? But the line taken by many politicians and the media is a punitive one: detention, and sometimes forcibly returning folk to the countries whence they had escaped

Church leaders from across the traditions have strongly opposed any proposals for harsher treatment of asylum seekers and immigrants as at odds with our Christian conviction we are all made in the image of God, and should be treated with dignity and grace; not, in their words as *"ignoring our neighbour and walking by on the other side,"*.

hospitality, companionship and practical support in the form of clothing, food parcels, grants and so on.

The positive response from all churches should be to provide asylum seekers with positive, practical support and to offer the opportunity of membership. As Christ's followers I would suggest we have no alternative. Amen.

**Prayers of Intercession:**

Loving Father, our hearts cry out to you at the suffering in our world. We pray for the millions of displaced people around the globe—those forced to flee their homes due to war, violence, persecution, poverty, and climate change. Remind us that your earthly family knew the experience of seeking refuge.

We remember those who have lost their lives fleeing their homelands in search of safety. Though many of their graves bear no name, to you each one is known, loved, and cherished. We also pray for those who are separated from their loved ones, bringing them comfort, strength, and hope for reunion.

We pray for those currently embarking on perilous journeys, and those waiting in uncertainty for news of their asylum claims. We pray for an end to fear, isolation, and systemic injustice. Give leaders across the world the courage and political will to build societies where human life, dignity, and worth are protected.

We lift up all who offer refuge and support: local charities, volunteers, lawyers, doctors, and churches. We pray for those opening their homes to strangers and those advocating fairer systems. Bless their compassion, and give them the strength to continue being a sanctuary to the vulnerable.

We pray for ourselves and our own communities. Open our eyes, ears, and hearts to respond to the stranger not with fear, but with generous hospitality. Help us to challenge hostility in our own neighbourhoods and to make our churches places of genuine welcome. Amen

**Hymn: StF 701 Heaven shall not wait.** *John Bell (b 1949) and Graham Maule (1958-2025)*

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>1. Heaven shall not wait<br/>for the poor to lose their patience,<br/>the scorned to smile,<br/>the despised to find a friend:<br/>Jesus is Lord,<br/>he has championed the unwanted;<br/>in him injustice meets its timely end.</p> <p>2. Heaven shall not wait<br/>for the rich to share their fortunes,<br/>the proud to fall,<br/>the elite to tend the least;<br/>Jesus is Lord;<br/>he has shown the master's privilege-<br/>to kneel and wash servants' feet<br/>before they feast</p> | <p>3. Heaven shall not wait<br/>for the dawn of great ideas,<br/>thoughts of compassion<br/>divorced from cries of pain:<br/>Jesus is Lord: he has married word<br/>and action;<br/>his cross and company makes his<br/>purpose plain.</p> <p>4. Heaven shall not wait<br/>for triumphant Hallelujahs,<br/>when earth has passed and we<br/>reach another shore:<br/>Jesus is Lord<br/>in our present imperfection;<br/>his power and love are for now,<br/>and then for evermore.</p> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Blessing:**

May the God who created a world of diversity and vibrancy go with us as we embrace life in all its fullness. May the Son who teaches us to care for strangers and foreigners go with us as we try to be good neighbours in our communities. May the Spirit who breaks down our barriers and celebrates community go with us as we find the courage to create a place of welcome for all. Amen