

Our Christian call to care for the strangers in our midst

An Anglican biblical and theological reflection by the Rev. Maggie Helwig

The Hebrew scriptures are deeply marked by the experience of displacement. The story of the exile of Jacob's descendants in Egypt, their time of wandering in the desert after being delivered from slavery, and, later, the deportation of a large part of the population of Jerusalem to Babylon, all became part of the self-understanding of the ancient Israelites. These stories of being uprooted and endangered in unfamiliar lands influenced the ethical teaching of the scriptures; frequently, the Israelites are reminded of their obligation to care for the stranger and the exile, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 10:19). Care for the displaced person is a priority in many Old Testament texts, not simply as an act of charity, but out of a sense of identity with the outcast.

The New Testament continues this emphasis on hospitality to the stranger and the alien. Throughout the gospels, Jesus is shown interacting with people who are foreign to his culture – a Samaritan woman (John 4), a Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:25-30) – and the stories are told in a way which emphasizes the “border violations” involved. Outsiders and those whose status is “irregular” clearly have a particular importance in Jesus' ministry.

Moving even beyond the Old Testament sense of identity with the stranger, the New Testament texts present the foreigner and the outcast as those in whom we directly encounter God. In Matthew's judgement parable (Matthew 25:31-46), the Son of Man presents himself as one who was “a stranger” and received welcome or rejection. Similarly, the author of the letter to the Hebrews draws upon Abraham's hospitality at Mamre to stress that we encounter God in the person of the stranger (Hebrews 13:2).

Perhaps most important of all, when we read the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke, we find Jesus himself entering our world as one of the excluded. In Luke's gospel, Mary and Joseph are forced by imperial order to leave their home, and must search for shelter in a busy city where there is no room for an unimportant peasant couple. In Matthew's gospel we see Jesus as a refugee baby, whose family must flee into a foreign country to avoid a politically-motivated massacre. In these stories, God comes among us as a wholly vulnerable displaced person.

In a meditation on the nativity story, the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton wrote, “Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it - because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it - his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected because they are regarded as weak; and with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, and are tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.”

The imperative of care for the displaced and endangered is profoundly rooted in our Christian narrative; if we neglect this imperative, we are, in effect, turning away Christ himself. And we believe that the uninvited, displaced Christ meets us, sometimes, in those who come from situations of violence and oppression, those who have been “denied the status of persons” in their countries of origin, and who seek safety in Canada.

We are required as church, then, to be concerned about the changes to our refugee procedures, which

have been introduced with the federal government's new refugee law, The Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act, (Bill C-31). We believe, having studied these changes, that some of them will act to exclude people in genuine need, and create situations in which we are turning away those we are most urgently called to welcome. This is why we are now asking for significant revisions to this new law.

This is why we may also, as the situation develops, find ourselves compelled to offer sanctuary to some of those at risk of deportation.

The practice of church sanctuary has deep historical roots. A similar concept can be seen emerging in the "cities of refuge" established under Deuteronomic law (Numbers 35:6-28, Deuteronomy 4:41-43, 19:4-13), places where those threatened by blood vengeance could be sheltered. In the Christian era, until the late Middle Ages, the right of churches to offer shelter to those at risk of unjust treatment by political authorities was formally recognized in many areas. More recently, church sanctuary has been offered to those who, at risk of persecution or murder in their countries of origin, have sought refuge in other countries.

Church sanctuary is always a last resort, and both those who seek sanctuary, and the churches who offer it, do so only when they are sure that no other option is possible. It is intended for those cases where the churches are convinced, after careful investigation, that those who come to them have exhausted all other avenues of appeal, and are at genuine risk of serious harm if they are forced to return to their country of origin.

Church sanctuary in Canada exists in part to compensate for the lack of an effective appeal system in our current refugee determination system. Inevitably, in the many complex decisions which reach the Immigration and Refugee Board, some mistakes will be made; churches have lobbied for a fuller appeals process for many years, and been refused. Now, with the new measures included in Bill C-31, there is far greater potential for mistakes due to rushed decisions, inadequate time to collect evidence, and lack of proper legal representation for refugee claimants.

We know that there is no legal recognition of church sanctuary in Canada at this time. When churches take the very serious step of offering sanctuary to failed refugee claimants, we understand that we are breaking the law. But we are bound by our baptismal covenant to "seek and serve Christ in all persons." This is an overriding obligation, and when we are fully and truly convinced that the Christ for whom the world has no room has come to us in the face of a person facing death if deported, we are required to offer shelter.

We do not do so lightly. We believe that, by doing this, we are giving the refugee determination system one last chance to correct a potentially terrible mistake. We are mindful that many people who have, in recent years, sought sanctuary in our churches have, with time and reconsideration, been determined by the IRB to be legitimate refugees. We would prefer a system in which church sanctuary was not needed, and this is why we have lobbied for an appeal system, and now lobby against many of the provisions of Bill C-31.

But when we believe, after careful and prayerful consideration, that we are being called to serve Christ in the person who is asking us for sanctuary, we cannot refuse.

- The Rev. Maggie Helwig is the assistant curate at St. Timothy, North Toronto, and Chair of the diocesan Social Justice and Advocacy Committee