

RACIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY

"WHATSOEVER YOU DID TO THE LEAST
OF MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS
YOU DID FOR ME." MT 25:40

24TH JANUARY 2016



REFLECTION 2

Reverend Fleur Houston, United Reformed Church

Meditation on Deuteronomy 10: 17-22

Some verses in the Bible strike one immediately because of their moral power. Here is a stirring example: "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt". Moses is giving God's commands to the Israelites assembled on the plain of Moab. Their wilderness wanderings have come to an end. They are on the verge of the Promised Land. They are on the threshold of a new life. And before they go a step further they are given a vision of a just and gracious social order. And the ordering is God's.

So first of all Moses reminds them of God's attributes: God, cosmic in eminence, supreme over all other gods, supreme over all human kings. God defends the powerless, he makes himself the protector of those who have no-one else to protect them, the widow, the fatherless child. And God rescues the landless, he cares for the person who has no home or belonging: he himself provides food and clothing for the stranger whom he loves.

And then Moses reminds his hearers that this royal obligation extends to them. There is first of all a political dimension. As God executes justice, so must they; as God provides food and clothing for the stranger in need, so too must they. And there is also an emotional dimension: because God loves the stranger, they are to do likewise. The unconditional command to 'love the stranger' is unexpected, it is startling. The emphasis shifts from the stranger's poverty and need to focus on his particularity, his identity as a stranger. Just as God loves this person who has come from another place, so the Israelites are to love him too.

REFLECTION 2 (CONT)

And their love for the stranger is strengthened by human empathy. Moses reminds them that when they themselves were strangers in the land of Egypt, they knew first-hand what it was like to be viewed as alien settlers, of foreign origin, experiencing oppression from a harsh and xenophobic regime. The point is emphasised. It is vitally important to keep this memory alive as a corrective to any sense of superiority they may feel. True, they know that they are God's chosen people. Moses reminds them of that. In God's great acts in Egypt and in the wilderness, his promise to the patriarchs is fulfilled. Once such a paltry number, God's people are now as numerous as the stars in heaven. They are blessed by God, but as they keep alive the memory of their life in Egypt they will care for the stranger at their gates.

When the Lord God instructs his people to care for strangers in their distress this is directed not to his immediate audience alone but to the whole of humanity over time. God's love is absolute; it extends to every living person who has been driven from home. While we must be careful about over-rigorous identification of the ancient Israelites in today's world, nonetheless there is here an affirmation that the people of God, whoever and wherever they may be, have a particular responsibility to love God and love the stranger.

Our generation is marked by exodus and exile. Over the past months, the desperate plight of men, women and children fleeing from the war in Syria has captured the attention of the world. Around the globe there are more than twenty million people seeking sanctuary, forcibly displaced by war, driven from their homes by famine, fleeing oppression, personal or political, or driven to desperation by a combination of these factors.

We have watched as camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey are filled beyond capacity, we have seen desperate people put to sea in overcrowded craft, we have witnessed the capsizing, the sinking, the drowning, we have watched haggard, exhausted survivors trudging on along the railway lines of Europe. We have seen the fraught, often contradictory attempts by nations to find the best political solution. The matters are complex. But in all this we must remember one irrefutable principle.

We who have been greatly blessed are called to share that blessing with others. We are called to protect those who are fleeing from persecution and war, to treat them with fairness, dignity and humanity, to live out the biblical imperative to feed the hungry and welcome the stranger. As today we hear the cry of men, women and children who are fleeing for their lives, as we see children drown, trains turned back and barbed wire unfurled, not to protect them but to keep them out, we long for the Day of the Lord to come soon, that Day when there will be no more cruelty and injustice, that Day when men and women everywhere will treat the stranger in their midst with love.

Reverend Fleur Houston, United Reformed Church, gave this meditation on Deuteronomy 10 at the '20,000 Welcomes: Advent Vigil for Refugees' organised by the Churches Refugee Network.