

**2024 TALK, 17.3.24, DEUT. 10:14-22, LUKE 9:51-58**

**REJECTED, HOMELESS - OUR 'MAN OF SORROWS'**

He's been called 'Bill Bryson on 2 wheels'. Tim Moore has written a number of books about his travels on a bike. All very funny. Here's one: 'The Cyclist who went out in the cold'. It's about him tracing the line of the Iron Curtain, as it was, between Europe & the former Soviet Union. Somehow (and for reasons best known to himself) he undertakes this journey on an old model of an East German shopping bike. A tiny bike with 2 gears & hardly any brakes... Tim squeezes every ounce of comedy out of the ridiculous figure he looks, in the face of the wilderness & the variety of human cultures & languages he meets.

But the reason I mention this book is that in his travels, Tim crosses many international frontiers. At some frontiers he is simply waved through or virtually ignored. At other crossing points he is subjected to the closest scrutiny & the most thorough searches of the contents of his panniers & person.

Which brings me to my first point about our story from Luke 9. We all have to be careful when crossing borders or boundaries. Jesus sent some messengers ahead, into a Samaritan village. But, at some point they crossed an invisible boundary & the people there 'did not welcome Jesus'... Why so? Because Jesus was travelling on to Jerusalem. He had crossed an invisible 'red line' for many Samaritans. Where are **our** 'red lines', I wonder? As we near the end of this season of Lent, it seems appropriate for us to spend time reflecting on this aspect of Jesus' ministry, ahead of his last, fateful week in Jerusalem.

By this point, Jesus was already very well-acquainted with rejection. With being treated as a 'non-person'. After all, his family were forced to become refugees in Egypt, shortly after Jesus was born. And, right at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus experienced rejection at the hands of the people of his home town. He had crossed a red line. Who was he to talk about God choosing people outside of the expected & respectable family of God?. Jesus was no longer treated as someone worthy of attention, rather seen as worthy of death.

No surprise then that, in the very next exchange in Luke 9, Jesus should talk of himself as someone who was homeless. 'Foxes have dens, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. He had hoped to be able to 'lay his head' in the home of someone in that Samaritan village. But instead, he

was going to have to find somewhere else to sleep. He was someone always looking for 'refuge', but never sure where he was going to find it.

Here's a challenge for us all. Whenever we read about refugees or meet a refugee, we need to see the person of Jesus in their place. Jesus himself was the ultimate 'alien & stranger' in this world, because he travelled the greatest distance: from heaven to earth. Like the millions of refugees in our world today, Jesus personally understands the experience of being unwelcome, of being treated like a bad smell. Either just because of who he was, where he was from on earth, or because he had the courage to speak Truth to power.

Let's try to face the truth today shall we? Here's one simple truth. We are all refugees from somewhere. I'm a refugee from Yorkshire ! I still remember how I felt like a 'fish out of water' when I moved from 'up north' to (Royal) Tunbridge Wells. But, on a more serious note, many of us here would be surprised about our true origins. If all of us here were to take DNA tests, it's amazing what a genetic mix we would discover. Likely that most of us would encounter DNA we did **not** expect to find within ourselves.

That said, here is an equally important truth. There probably aren't many people here who have been forced to leave their homes, for the sake of the safety & health of yourself & your family?. There **may** be people here who have known this experience, but I won't ask you to raise your hands. You see, until you have had to make the impossible decision about leaving your homeland, it's impossible to understand what today's refugees are going through.

No doubt, we are all aware of the current ding-dong in the Houses of Parliament, over the government's 'Rwanda Bill'. Now I'm not going to get all political here. That's the last thing many of us want to hear. You may feel you come to church to get away from all this. But, the thing is, we cannot get away from what **God** said to his people about how they should treat 'aliens & strangers' in the land of Israel. This passage in Deuteronomy 10 is a very profound challenge to the current approach our government is taking to the immigration crisis. God not only says that he 'loves the foreigner among you'; God loves them by feeding & clothing them. The LORD goes on to say: 'you yourselves were foreigners previously'. Therefore, you should understand the plight of the refugee. You should not take the approach of making 'aliens' feel unwelcome & treating them as if they were 'non-people'.

No doubt some will object that we are talking, today, about a problem on a much bigger scale. And the fears of people 'native to Britain' are therefore bigger. Sadly, our political leaders are seeking to make political capital out of these legitimate fears in this election year.

Let's name some of these fears now shall we ? Helpful to name our fears & bring them out into the light of the LORD. Here's some of them:

- the fear that people will not integrate, our communities will become increasingly divided, leading to violence & even civil war
- the opposite fear of people getting on too well & there being too much of a genetic 'melting pot'
- the fear of national financial ruin, of there not being enough to go round
- the fear that 'native Britons' will not be able to find jobs or housing
- (there's this general fear of Britain being 'swamped' & overwhelmed)

What does God have to say to these fears & others ? I think God would say: 'Do not be afraid'. This phrase occurs 366 times in the Bible. So every day, including in a Leap Year like this, God encourages us not to let our fears overwhelm us.

God would say, in the words of Jesus: 'Treat other people as you yourself would like to be treated' and, 'Pray for those people you consider to be your enemies'. To repeat what I said earlier: whenever you see a refugee, try to see Jesus in their place instead. And try to see yourself in the shoes of that refugee... (If anyone is serious about this kind of exercise of your imagination, then you might watch the film 'Swimmers'. It's the story of 2 sisters from Syria: why they came to Europe & what they went through to get here).

Something that is too often overlooked in any discussion of the immigration crisis is this: Western nations have themselves contributed to this crisis. The UK itself has made a significant contribution to what we see unfolding today. Are you surprised at me saying this? You shouldn't be. You really shouldn't be.

Two more truths, if you can stomach them! Firstly, Western nations have concentrated wealth in Europe & the US, so it's no surprise that desperate people from desperately poor countries should want to come here. Secondly, the UK & other wealthier nations have contributed, more than most, to our unfolding climate emergency, which is also contributing hugely to the

immigration crisis. I realise that neither of these truths are particularly good news. Nonetheless truths that our government - & we too need to hear.

Let's finish with good news. Jesus, the 'ultimate refugee', is different from all refugees. Jesus left a perfectly good home. Though he was rich, he became a homeless refugee – for us. Though he was LORD of LORDS, he became a servant - for us. What an example of self-giving love we are called to follow... This Lent, we need again to ask God's Spirit to help us to follow Jesus. Amen