**TEACHING OUTLINE – REFUGEE WEEK**

**Introduction to Refugee Week**

* This past year has placed refugees and asylum seekers front and centre in much of our national media. Whether it has been the Ukraine war and the Ukrainian people being hosted in the UK, an increase in numbers of small boats carrying people seeking asylum across the Channel, or the huge numbers of historic claims from people waiting years to get decisions on asylum claims – it cannot have escaped our notice that increasing numbers of people are seeking safe routes to safe homes.
* It can sometimes be hard to recognise that these people are but a small fraction of the global population who have been displaced by war, persecution or natural disaster. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates the current total number of displaced people to be over 103 million – the highest number of displaced people in history – with the vast majority of these people remaining in neighbouring countries.
* However, with this number of displaced people (with figures looking set to increase) we must expect and accept that the UK will see increasing numbers of refugees and people seeking asylum travelling to the UK and safety. The question then becomes – how will we, as the Church, choose to respond?

**Bible Reading**

Matthew 25:31-46

**Key Headings**

**The theme of compassion**

* The theme of Refugee Week 2023 (19-25 June) is ‘Compassion’, with 20 June being World Refugee Day. As part of this focus, there is a desire to create a shared understanding of compassion to ensure we are extending it widely, and to all. As a touchstone they use the following quote:
* ‘Our task must be to free ourselves – by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.’ (Albert Einstein)
* One of The Salvation Army’s core values is compassion. The description about this says: ‘We will serve with the unconditional love and grace of God as the pattern for our behaviour, with a bias to the poor and marginalised.’
* But is compassion purely about service? Does extending compassion to others and the world around us lead to freedom? In the following we will explore how we may understand compassion, why we may have an organisational bias to show compassion to the poor and marginalised, and how this may indeed set us free.
* To help us in our thinking, let us consider where the word comes from and how we may understand its meaning:
	+ Etymology – from the Latin *compassio*, which means ‘I suffer with’.
	+ Definition – A strong feeling of sympathy and sadness for the suffering or bad luck of others and a wish to help them (*Cambridge Dictionary*).

**The experience of Jesus**

* In the Bible accounts, Jesus undergoes many of the experiences that refugees and asylum seekers would be able to identify in their own story, or the stories of their friends and family members. Such examples include:
* Rejection – Luke 4:24-30 (Jesus is rejected by his own community at Nazareth).
* Displacement – Matthew 2:13-23 (The flight of the infant Jesus and his family to Egypt to escape genocide).
* Grief – John 11:28-37 (The death of his dear friend Lazarus).
* Betrayal – Matthew 26:14-16 (Judas, one of Jesus’ friends, agrees to betray Jesus).
* Abandonment – Luke 22:54-62 (Peter, his closest follower, disowns Jesus).
* Torture – Mark 15:16-20 (Jesus is tortured and stripped by soldiers).
* Despair – Mark 15:33-34 (In darkness and despair, Jesus calls out on the cross).
* Painful death – Luke 23:32-50 (Jesus is murdered by the state through crucifixion).
* When we read Matthew 25:34-46, we see that Jesus, who in the previous verses has been shown as a King coming in glory, astounds both ‘the righteous’ and the ‘cursed’ by identifying himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner and the poor and marginalised, of which refugees and asylum seekers are exemplary.
* When we reflect on Christ’s experience on earth, we can see how his personal experience demonstrates that he is not only able to feel sympathy and sadness for those on the margins. He is not limited to empathy, purely understanding how they are feeling. He instead exemplifies compassion – he suffers alongside them – having known this suffering himself. His time on earth demonstrates to us a model of true compassion – ‘suffering with’.

**A call to compassion**

* Disciples of Christ seek to become more like Christ, to think and act more like Christ. As such we are called to compassion. And while most of us will thankfully not experience first-hand suffering in the same way Jesus did (and many refugees and asylum seekers have), we can still grow in compassion.
* We can study the life and experience of Jesus and try to place ourselves in his shoes. We can educate ourselves about the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. We can build relationships with and walk alongside them, be with them, on their journey. And we can seek to act to help asylum seekers and refugees to have life, and life to the full (John 10:10). And in doing so, in humbly walking alongside them and being with them in their journey, we too are transformed.
* Theologian Sam Wells, writing about the power of ‘Being With’, says: ‘Go, and continue to see the face of Jesus in the despised and rejected of the world. You are not their benefactor. You are not the answer to their prayers. They are the answer to yours.’ (Wells, S: *A Nazareth Manifesto* 2015, p96).
* In the response to the Ukraine crisis, the UK and Ireland demonstrated compassion by welcoming large numbers of Ukrainians into their communities and, in many cases, into their homes. We can be proud of the fact that Britain has welcomed over 170,000 Ukrainians and Ireland 77,000 (around 3 per cent of the total number of Ukrainian refugees in Europe). This has been hugely impactful for those people served in this way. As an example, [watch Bodhana’s story](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Chc9863TyQ).
* Equally, hosts have had their perspectives changed and eyes opened from living alongside their guests, sharing their joys and sorrows, celebrating and mourning with them. However, there are still large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and Ireland who are isolated and alone, without hope.

**Application/Response**

* How can we continue to serve refugees and asylum seekers? How willing are we, by being with ‘the least of these brothers and sisters of mine’ (v40), to allow Christ to change our hearts and minds?

**For Discussion**

* Why do you think both the ‘cursed’ AND ‘the righteous’ were unable to identify Christ in the passage? (Matthew 25:31-46)
* What does this passage tell us about Christ’s expectations of those people who are his followers?
* In the passage there is a list of those people who are marginalised at the time of Jesus (vv35-36). Who are the marginalised in your community? Is it always easy to identify groups that are marginalised? Why, or why not?
* Are there refugees and asylum seekers in your community? How has the community shown them compassion? How could the Church show them compassion?
* Is there a marginalised group that you have a relationship with? How might you / your church be with those people and show them compassion?
* Have you experienced change in your life due to spending time with someone on the margins? What did that change look like?