

Strangers and Sojourners



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An exploration in community theology

Reflections and resources from a group held at



September 2009—June 2010

Session Five
Making Space for the Other

At the end of the course you might wish to construct a short worship service on the theme of "Strangers & Sojourners" for use in your community. You might wish to use extracts from the stories, some of the biblical materials and the Creed at the end of the booklet. Suitable occasions might be to coincide with Refugee Week in June or One World Week in October.

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This booklet is available online at <http://themagnet.org.uk/>

Session Four - *Shaping a Community Open to the Other*

Preparation

- Read and reflect on "St Benedict on Hospitality" and / or "The adversarial nature of the British mindset"

At The Session

At this session you may wish to reflect on the piece on Benedictine Hospitality and ask how Benedict's vision might shape our homes and churches or you might wish to explore the piece on our adversarial society and ask how the churches might contribute to a more inclusive, co-operative, accepting society.

If you have read the piece on "The adversarial nature of the British mindset" the following questions may be useful for reflection and discussion together:

- What practical actions could you begin now to make a start where you are?
- What have been your experiences of systems which are confrontational, adversarial or violent?
- Is this "just the way things are"? Rather than seeking to change anything, should we just stop whinging and accept that there will always be winners and losers?
- Do you think the Church really has a fresh opportunity to become again a critique of society, or are we too heavily involved and compromised by our elevated status?
- What scriptures help shed a light on God's concept of Justice? The passage in Luke 4 is sometimes referred to as "The Kingdom Manifesto" - what would happen if the Churches took this as their "mission statement"? - what shape would our faith communities be?
- Can Adversarial systems be redeemed? Or do they need replacing?
- Should the starting point be a revisiting of our theology? A New Reformation? If so, how would you frame your thinking? What aspects of our theology need looking at again? What is already good and needs to stay?
- Are you aware of movements, people or events in recent years which are beginning to challenge our acceptance of the myth of redemptive violence?

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The Contributors

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Revd Andrew Perry is the Rector of St John the Evangelist, Pevensey Road St Leonards. Tall, windswept and handsome are three words he'd like to use to describe himself. Sadly only one of these is true. In trying to facilitate an inclusive church he has had limited pastoral contact with those involved in the asylum process, but is gratefully learning much from colleagues and others working more deeply in this area.

Fiona Reader is a parishioner at St. John The Evangelist, Pevensey Road, Upper St. Leonards, who has worked in pastoral ministry both overseas and in this country.

Revd Penny Sayer is the curate of St John the Evangelist, Pevensey Road St Leonards, where she has gained some experience of pastoring those involved in the asylum process.

Revd John Western is the minister of St Leonards Baptist Church. He has worked with asylum seekers and refugees who have attended his church and Chapel Park Community Centre.

The views expressed in the contributions are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the group as a whole, the Magnet Centre or the Diocese of Chichester.

Introduction

Over the academic year 2009-2010, a Community Theology Group met at the Magnet Centre. It brought together a number of Christians from different backgrounds and theological persuasions all of whom shared a common interest in matters concerning asylum seekers and refugees. The aim of the group was to reflect Biblically on experiences. The group set its own agenda—deciding on which particular topics of many possible, to concentrate. This booklet contains some of the stories, experiences, reflections, liturgy and practical resources produced in the group. It is hoped that these will be of interest to local churches—that some of the material could be used to spark further discussion in small groups, or to help direct members to useful agencies if needed by strangers and sojourners coming to our churches.

It is the intention of the Magnet to run further Community Theology Groups on different topics relevant to our towns and villages of East Sussex. These are open to anyone who would like to explore what Christian faith has to say about practical issues. If you would like to attend a future group or indeed suggest a topic for reflection, please email themagnet@btconnect.com with “Community Theology” as the subject.

What is Community Theology ?

All baptised Christians are theologians for theology is faith seeking understanding; a process of thinking about life in the light of faith that all Christians engage in because of their calling to be witnesses and disciples. As Christians we seek to understand what we believe about the Christian message and how we as individuals and as a community are to live in the light of that message. Theology then has to do with the attempt to understand reality within the perspective of the reign of God; its home is in the midst of life.

Scottish Episcopal Church, Theological Facilitators leaflet (2005)

By the term "community theology" we mean theological reflection which is deliberately and self-consciously rooted in the local community and seeking to address issues facing the local community. In this way theology and theological reflection rises from the grassroots rather than having its agenda set from "the top down". This means that community theology is an activity open to anyone, benefiting from the contributions of all, rather than being driven from above.

What is Theological Reflection ?

The process of theological reflection is usually illustrated by some form of circle or spiral. Although the precise details vary, the general pattern is as follows:

The theological reflection spiral

EXPERIENCE - start with the lived experience, describing it in as much detail as possible. “Our capacity to live faithfully as Christians exists in direct proportion to our capacity to notice, describe and discover the revelatory quality of human experience.”

Study Guide

For those wishing to use the materials in this booklet for group study and reflection, a suggested outline and some questions are offered below.

Session One - Introductory

- Reflect together on the section on "What is Community Theology ?"
- What experiences and interests do the members bring with them to share with the group ?
- What questions do the members bring with them ?

Session Two - *Who is the Other ?*

Preparation

- Read "Case Study" and "A personal experience of being 'the other'"
- Reflect on any experiences you have had of being "the other"

At the Session

- How do you react to these stories ?
- What questions arise for you from reflecting on them ?
- Do you know anyone who might identify with these stories ?
- Where is "the other" in our community ?

Session Three - *The Bible & the Other*

Preparation

- Read "The Bible & the Other"
- Reflect on your own attitude toward "the other"

At the Session

- How do you react to the biblical material you have read ?
- What other biblical / theological material would you want to add ?
- You might wish to explore together the three questions posed in the preparatory reading
- What might it mean for our lives, our churches, to take seriously Jesus' call to embrace the other ?

Contact Details:

Phone: 07971 908141 (Mon-Sat 9-6), 01323 482847 (Mon-Fri 9-5)
Mrs Zephyr Grayland, Project Leader
Email: info@englishinthecommunity.org.uk
Web: www.englishinthecommunity.org.uk
Address: 11 Broadview Close, Willingdon, Eastbourne, BN20 9RB

Children's Services

In 2 Play CIC

Service Offered: This group is a community interest company with 4 Directors. Its aim is to promote play and playful activities through a series of projects including Lottery funded project 'Play on your doorstep', pilot scheme for BME families to understand education systems.

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 432742 (Claire Power, Director)
Email: info@in2play.org.uk
Address: The Bridge Community Centre, 361 Priory Road, Hastings, TN34 3NW

Housing

Council: Housing Advice

http://www.hastings.gov.uk/housing_advice/asylumandrefugees.aspx

Home Contact

British Red Cross

Service Offered: International Tracing and Message Services - free and confidential

Contact Details:

Freephone: 0800 1692030

National Organisations

Refugee Council - www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Detention in Europe - website of the Jesuit Refugee Service - www.detention-in-europe.org

EXPLORATION - move to an analysis of what is really going on. Assess the situation in the light of all the information that is available and explore the issues it raises in the light of other relevant disciplines.

REFLECTION - then put together the depth and complexity of the experience and insights gained from the heritage of faith so as to discover the presence of God and God's actions in the midst of the contingencies of the situation.

RESPONSE - move towards some 'graceful action', some transformation of the situation or the way of looking at it in the light of the foregoing process
Scottish Episcopal Church, Theological Facilitators leaflet (2005)

Theological Reflection in Action

The community theology group has been an example of theological reflection in action. For us the spiral has worked out as follows:

Experience

what we bring with us to the group

Exploration

tasks we set ourselves to engage in between sessions and discuss at sessions

Reflection

personal reflection and discussion with others at the sessions

Response

resources prepared by the group for others

New Experience

lived through in the light of what we have shared and learned ...

Peter King

Three Stories

The following are brief summaries of the stories of three individuals I know from ministering in St Leonards. To preserve anonymity I've not recorded names.

The first is an Eritrean asylum seeker. His application for asylum was turned down because the Home Office didn't believe he was a Christian. It is accepted that Pentecostal Christians are persecuted in Eritrea. Within a couple of hours of arriving in UK, still exhausted from the journey, disoriented and unfamiliar with the language, he was put through a gruelling interview. The Home Office solicitor asked him questions about his faith, including "Name the gifts of the Spirit listed by Paul in 1 Corinthians". Not only did this individual know all of them, he listed them in the correct order. However, he was also asked to summarise the story of Ruth from the Old Testament. Because he was unable to do so, the judge in his case decided he was not a genuine Christian and refused to grant asylum.

The second is a young Chinese lady. Her sister became ill with leukaemia. With no health service, her family had borrowed heavily from friends to pay for medical treatment. Sadly the treatment failed and her sister died. Immediately the “friends” demanded that the loans be paid back. So the young girl came here to earn money in order to pay off the family’s debts. A group of around 50 had paid an agent. Of those, she was the only one who got through. (Later she credited that to God!) Here in England she met a Chinese man and fell pregnant. If she looked after the baby she couldn’t work. She had no idea what to do. When I met her, out of sheer desperation, she had decided to send her 3 month old baby back to its grandparents on its own, while she stayed here and continued to work. We were able to help her verify her entitlement to stay here, receive maternity benefit and help with childcare. I’m glad to say mum and baby are still united in this country and doing well.

My third story is that of an Eastern European lady who came here to work for a family providing child care - effectively working as an au pair. Her host family took away her passport, and refused to register her for tax and NI. They threatened her that if she complained or left they would report her to the authorities. Then they made her work 7 days a week, with few if any breaks. Apart from her board and lodging she received no more than £10 a week pocket money. I would describe her condition as that of a slave. When I met her, she felt trapped. If she tried to get another job, to move, or contact the authorities, they would expel her. (We were able to help her get legally registered and find a good job.)

John Western

Case Study

Y is a young Eritrean man of about 25. His family are orthodox Christian, but as he grew up faith was not important to him. He didn’t go to church or read his Bible. In common with all his countrymen he was called up for national service.

In the army he met a young man of similar age who was a Pentecostal Christian. Y was attracted by this man’s integrity and contentment and after a few secret meetings at which he learned something of Jesus, Y dedicated his life to Christ. He continued to meet in small groups to pray and study the Bible. At one such meeting he was discovered by his army officer. Y was arrested and imprisoned. (Although Christianity is permitted in Eritrea and the orthodox church tolerated, the practice of faith - meeting together, evangelising, especially in the Pentecostal denomination, is outlawed.) Y was asked to recant his faith and tortured. Eventually an opportunity arose when a sympathetic guard turned a blind eye and Y escaped.

He fled to Sudan and managed to find an agent to send him to the UK. (Family members paid the agent.) On arrival in Britain he claimed asylum on the grounds that if he were to return home he would be considered a deserter from the army and be in danger of persecution for his faith.

He was settled by the Home Office in St Leonards and started attending our church. He was always enthusiastic in his worship - although his English was poor. He always had a big smile on his face and was keen to pray and to serve, e.g. eager to wash up the coffee cups. His initial claim for asylum was refused because the adjudicator disbelieved his story. The decision alleged that the story of his escape from prison was

involved with Hastings Intercultural Organisation (HIO).

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 714837 (Mr Rene Tolno, Chair)
Email: uachastings@hotmail.com
Web: www.uach.org.uk
Address: 38 St Georges Road, Hastings, TN34 3ND

Language Tuition

The Traveller Education and English as an Additional Language team (TEAL)

Service Offered: The TEAL team supports pupils in schools whose first language is not English, including refugees, and comprises peripatetic teachers and Bilingual Support Officers (BSOs)

Contact Details:

Phone: 01323 842045
Email: teals@eastsussex.gov.uk
Address: c/o Marshlands School, Marshfoot Lane, Hailsham, East Sussex, BN27 2PH

Hastings College

Service Offered: Free English courses for refugees; to join a course, book an interview by contacting Adrian Heeson.

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 458409
email: sfladmin@hastings.ac.uk.
Address: Archery Road, St. Leonards on Sea, East Sussex, TN38 0HX

Chapel Park Community and Online Centre

Service Offered: Free English courses for refugees, register Mondays 2pm - 3pm

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 714095
email: ann.reid@yahoo.co.uk
Web: www.chapelparkcommunitycentre.org.uk
Address: St Leonards Baptist Church, Chapel Park Rd, St Leonards On Sea, TN37 6HR

Horizons Community Learning Project

Service Offered: Offers a wide range of free classes including ESOL. Creche facilities. Mon - Fri 09:00-17:30

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 204136 (Ms Sonia Plato—project co-ordinator)
email: horizons@sussex.ac.uk
Web: www.horizons-hastings.org.uk
Address: 2, Churchill Court, Stonehouse Drive. East Sussex, TN38 9DG

English In The Community

Service Offered: Lessons available at Gensing & Central St. Leonards Community Information Centre, 16 Silchester Road, St. Leonards-on-Sea. Please ring for further information and course schedules.

Opening hours: weekdays and Saturdays, daytime and evenings

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 812727 (Dr Tariq Rajbee, Chair)
Email: tyrajbee@googlemail.com
Address: 38 Little Ridge Avenue, St Leonards-on-Sea, TN37 7LS
Fax: 01424 755560

Maitreya Buddhist Centre

Service Offered: The Centre, its office and retail shop is open from 10am - 4pm Mondays to Saturdays. The Meditation Room is available, free of charge, during these hours. The Centre is also open most Monday evenings for meditation classes. 1.Provision of classes/courses in mediation and/or Buddhism so that anyone can learn how to gain inner peace and happiness and improve the quality of their lives through gaining a greater control over their minds and gaining greater insight into the relationship between their minds and their life experiences. The Centre also provides products and gifts complementary to mediation and Buddhism, and spirituality in general through its retail shop at the Centre. 2.The provision of accurate information and advice concerning Buddhism to local schools, colleges and community groups. 3.Participating in local community networks such as the Hastings & District Interfaith Forum.

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 733761 (Mr Andrew Durling, Administrative Director)
Email: info@meditateinbexhill.co.uk
Web: www.meditateinbexhill.co.uk
Address: 13 Sea Road, Bexhill-on-Sea, TN40 1EE

Polish Association - Hastings & Surrounding Areas

Service Offered: Our organisation aims to bring together Polish people living in the Hastings/ St Leonards area and encourage them to take an active part in the local community. We aim to aid integration within this community, but at the same time to enhance elements of our Polish identity. In order to do that we would like to provide language support when requested, ensure support and access for Polish people to education and support them with housing needs as much as we can. We would also like to support and encourage employment and self-employment and raise awareness of the English law. We would also like to link Poles with the local authorities and voluntary organisations and represent them on appropriate bodies.

Contact Details:

Phone: (Miss Aleksandra Nona, Chair)
Email: info@pinh.co.uk
Web: www.pinh.co.uk
Address: We meet at the Polish café HAK, 37d/e Robertson Street, Hastings and in private homes. Details can be found on our website.

United African Community in Hastings (UACH)

Service Offered: We do not have an office but can normally be contacted between 2pm and 4pm Mon to Fri. We organise regular meetings and social events throughout the year and details of these can be found on our website. The aims of this organisation are: to provide help, advice, information and advocacy to individual and different groups within the African community. To establish links with other communities and local authorities, in order to participate in development programmes and community initiatives. To promote true equality and African integration into civil society. We are proud to be one of the founding groups

fabricated and that his Christian faith was adopted simply to bolster his claim.

There were two main criticisms of his faith. One was that Y had been born an Orthodox Christian, then become a Pentecostal and was now attending a Baptist Church. Therefore, the judge concluded, he was not committed to Pentecostalism and could adopt one of the accepted forms of Christianity if he returned to Eritrea.

The other objection was that his Bible knowledge was inconsistent with that of a genuine believer. On the day of entry to this country he had been questioned by a Home Office solicitor. Since Y knew very little English, a Tigrinyan translator was provided. Y was asked a total of 145 questions - mostly relating to his national service, arrest and escape. 12 questions however related to his faith. A typical question was "Name the gifts of the Spirit listed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 in the correct order". It was assessed that 11 of these 12 "religious" questions he answered correctly. However, when asked to describe the conversion of St Paul, he said "He was on the shore of the lake with his brother and friends. They were fishermen and were working on their nets. Jesus said to them, 'follow me and I will make you fishers of men.'" In the Home Office record his answer continued in a similar vein for 2 pages of A4. At his hearing, it was simply said that this was wrong. Y would have known all about the conversion of Paul had he been a genuine Christian and therefore, he had obviously made an attempt to learn some Bible knowledge for the purpose of furthering a false asylum claim.

I saw his answer as evidence that he had a detailed Bible knowledge - difficult to attain in a short period in a situation where reading and studying the Bible is illegal - albeit that he had spoken about Peter rather than Paul. When I questioned Y, it was clear that although the solicitor had asked him to describe Paul's conversion (in English). When the translator had put the question to him, he had been asked about Peter.

I was able to go to Y's appeal and give evidence supporting his faith and countering the specific reasons why he had been disbelieved. He was granted permission to stay in this country and was settled in Cardiff.

Why the injustice? Although in criminal cases the procedure is to assume innocence until proven guilty, in asylum cases the Home Office assumes the asylum seeker is fraudulent. They have to prove innocence!
Lev 19:33-34

How do you judge and demonstrate the faith of another? Surely not adherence to a denomination, or even a certain level of Bible knowledge?

What practical help is demanded? For example, asylum seekers are routinely moved around (possibly in a deliberate attempt to unsettle them in the hope that some may return). Would the setting up of a national church/friends of refugees network help?

Against whom are we struggling: individual adjudicators and Home Office Presenting Officers, or "the system"? What does our answer say about how we should act?
Ephesians 6:12
Amos 5:6-24

This is an ancient prophecy against God's people - the Israelites. Amos an immigrant

himself in that he originated from Judah but carried out his role as a prophet in Israel - N kingdom. First half of 8th century bc when Jereboam II Israel's King.

Nothing to do with us? Would it be aimed more at our government than the church today? V 21-24 they were concerned for religion - festivals, offerings, songs, but ignored justice. Is that true for us when we bury our heads in worship services and fail to concern ourselves with injustices on our doorstep?

Turn justice to wormwood v7. Certainly an apt description of the bitter experience of many who come here, fleeing persecution. Think they have found somewhere safe. Instead disbelieved. Bitter injustice.

V11 Speaks of economic oppression. Trample on poor. Take levies from them. Meanwhile enjoy the fruit of lavish vineyards. How much of our immigration and asylum system is designed to preserve economic privilege?

Several references to injustice "in the gate" v10, 12, 15. A reference to court - the place where most legal practices were undertaken. Yet gate greater significance. The place of entry to the city. Is there justice for those entering our society?

Justice and goodness key to life (v14) (avoiding judgement) irony. Our society believes that life is gained by grasping things for ourselves, but life for us in safe, wealthy countries is actually gained by behaving justly.

Seek good v14. Raises very basic question what is good? Good for one person may differ greatly from good for another. Passage repeatedly exhorts us to seek God (v6). He defines what is good. No substitute for knowing Him.

Amos 5:6-24 (NRSV)

⁶Seek the LORD and live,
or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire,
and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it.

⁷Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,
and bring righteousness to the ground!

⁸The one who made the Pleiades and Orion,
and turns deep darkness into the morning,
and darkens the day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea,
and pours them out on the surface of the earth,
the LORD is his name,

⁹who makes destruction flash out against the strong,
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

¹⁰They hate the one who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

¹¹Therefore, because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

¹²For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—

Minority and Religious Support Groups

Siddhartha Nepali Society

Service Offered: We do not have a specific place to meet, but arrange a hall or restaurant nearer the time. The aim of our organisation is to unite all Nepalese living in the area and celebrate our cultural activities, New Year and other festive Hindu occasions.

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 201509 (Mr Babu Ram Devkota, Secretary)
Email: baburamdevkota@yahoo.com
Address: 21 Clinton Crescent, St Leonards-on-Sea, TN38 0RN

Hastings Kurdish Welfare Association

Service Offered: Help and support for Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers. Services include help with form filling, finding accommodation, job search and with the process of paying utility bills and council tax. Information on local services. Area Served: Hastings and surrounding areas.

Target Group: Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers in Hastings and surrounding areas.
Languages: Arabic and Kurdish.

Contact details:

Phone 01424 427911
Fax 01424 427911
Email hkwa1066@yahoo.co.uk
Website www.freewebs.com/rojbas
Address 49 Cambridge Gardens, Hastings, TN34 1EN

Hastings Bengali Forum

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 718514 (Mr Abdul Mukith, Chair)
Email: ABBU.AHMED@hotmail.co.uk
Address: 5 Norman Road, St Leonards-on-Sea, TN37 6NH

Hastings Intercultural Organisation

Service Offered: Hastings Intercultural Organisation aims to support and empower BME communities, also challenges prejudice and discrimination in all areas of members' lives. A coalition of local community groups, initiatives and individuals that come together to influence local decision making and service delivery. Meets monthly. Women's Voice is an organisation, formed by HIO, which aims to give a voice to women on equalities issues and to provide a supportive network for women to join.

Contact Details:

Phone: (Mrs Shiva Serati, Mr Owen Thompson)
Email: hastingsinterculturalorganisation@hotmail.co.uk
Address: c/o 31 Mann Street, Hastings, TN34 1SE / 31a Priory St, Hastings, TN34 1EA

Islamic Information Centre

Service Offered: Available all hours by telephone or email, By appointment for lecture or discussion. To remove misunderstanding and misconception about Islam. To create harmony with the host community and Muslims. Free supply of books, cd, dvd and lectures or one-to-one discussion with non-Muslims eager to know about Islam.

Hastings Ethnic Minority Advice Service (HEMAS):

Service Offered: An advice service for all ethnic minorities on issues including: employment, debt, housing, education and training, racial incidents and discrimination.

Opening hours: Thursdays 2pm - 4pm, no appointment necessary

Contact Details:

Phone 01424 714095 (Ann Reid - Manager)
Address: Chapel Park Community Centre, Chapel Park Rd, St Leonards, TN37 6HR

Hastings Voluntary Action (HVA):

Contact Details:

Phone 01424 444010
(Habibah Anwar Bhatti, BME Development and Community Cohesion Officer)
Address: 32 Priory Street, Hastings, TN34 1EA

Hastings BME project

Service Offered: Information and links to local support agencies, statutory and voluntary organisations, Cultural Voices Newsletter - free community magazine

Legal and Immigration Advice

Refugee Legal Centre (RLC)

Service Offered: Provides legal advice and representation to those seeking protection under international and national human rights and asylum law.

Opening hours: Monday - Friday 10am - 4pm

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 437922
Out of hours emergency telephone service,
6pm - 8am week days and all weekend: 07831 598057
Address: c/o The Hastings Trust, Silchester Mews, 17a Silchester Rd, St Leonards, TN38 0JB

Hastings Racial Incident Support Group

Phone: 01424 204683 (with 24 hour confidential answering service)

Hastings and Rother Citizens Advice Bureau

Service Offered: Advice and information, advocacy, referral, money advice, rota solicitor scheme, counselling, mediation.

Opening hours: Monday to Friday, 10am - 4pm; open door mornings

Contact Details:

Phone: 01424 430400; Appointment line: 01424 718882
Appointments & telephone service 2pm - 4pm. Also Wed. evenings, 5pm - 7pm
Address: 24 Cornwallis Terrace, Hastings, TN34 1EB

you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.

¹³Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time;
for it is an evil time.

¹⁴Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;

and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.

¹⁵Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;

it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

¹⁶Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord:
In all the squares there shall be wailing;

and in all the streets they shall say, 'Alas! alas!'

They shall call the farmers to mourning,
and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing;

¹⁷in all the vineyards there shall be wailing,
for I will pass through the midst of you, says the LORD.

The Day of the LORD a Dark Day

¹⁸Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why do you want the day of the LORD?

It is darkness, not light;

¹⁹as if someone fled from a lion,
and was met by a bear;

or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
and was bitten by a snake.

²⁰Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²²Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.

²³Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

John Western

A personal experience of being "the other"

I was in my twenties when, in the early 1980's, I went to Sierra Leone with VSO as a teacher trainer. I was unaware of the importance of the culture, that I was entering, the world of 'the other'. I was Fiona, full of ideals, bringing an English Language Teaching syllabus to teachers working in village schools in the bush. I soon became aware that the colour of my skin made a difference. I was given an authority by the village elders that I didn't merit. Children in the villages would run after me with

hands outstretched, calling out 'Pumwe' - the Mende word for 'white person'. In the house I lived in, I tried to keep an open door policy, to make friends with the local people, but increasingly found that I had a need for privacy. This communal living was a strain. Children, and adults, would come into my front room and just sit there, looking at me. I found out that I didn't know how to buy food in the local market place. Eggs were sold singly and rice by the cupful. Nor did I know how to eat. Eating with my hands from a communal tray of rice and dried fish, I got more food plastered across my face than into my mouth.

I didn't understand the culture and didn't understand all that I do now - which is not a lot!! I made mistakes. Once I gave a gift of white linen sheets to someone, not knowing that white was the colour of death, as black is for us. But I don't remember being hated for this - I think I was more tolerated, and regarded as being ignorant!! - and in a loving way. It was exhausting trying to be 'friends' with the locals. Even then I was aware that I didn't understand what was going on beneath the surface. It was far more relaxing to spend time with other V.S.O.'s, or go to drinks parties at the British Council in Freetown, tho' that too was another culture in its own right. So when people talk here about people from other countries being in a ghetto mentality, and not being integrated, there is a part of me that understands!!

I didn't understand, nor was I aware of the local politics. I thought I was helping out financially, moving from a house on the chiefdom's compound, which V.S.O. provided, into my counterpart's house. I unwittingly became embroiled in local politics. A teacher was hacked to death near where I worked. I was later moved to the North of the country to lecture in a teacher's training college.

Later in life, in the mid 1990's, I went to Peru as a lay missionary. I lived and worked in a shanty town on the edge of Lima and also visited prisoners in a High Security Jail there. This time I went with a 'religious' group. So I had some training re culture and language.

However, although I had a bit of Spanish, I felt a sense of powerlessness. I didn't have the basic survival skills, let alone the relation skills. I couldn't get myself around Lima (flag down one of the overcrowded minibuses,) I had no accommodation, had to find some and furniture.....I was so dependent, not just on the goodwill of the local foreign 'missionaries', but above all, on the goodwill of the local people.....Transfer that to St. Leonards on Sea.....

In Peru, I was aware of the history of the country, of the Conquistadores, of oppression, of the Good Friday Mentality. The Christianity I experienced had its roots in a mixture of sixteenth century Spain with its processions and bloody lacerated Christ, with probably a dash of Inca thrown in. Where was the Jesus I believed in? It all felt incredibly alien. At times I felt helpless. I couldn't, initially make sense of the reality I was immersed in. A sense of the reality came through my relationship with the people who welcomed me into their community.

Another experience of being inside/outside was in N. Uganda and S. Sudan. Yet another culture with the addition of civil war. The people spoke many languages. As a white woman, I was treated as an honorary man. On important occasions, the local women would kneel before me to wash my hands before eating. I remember one occasion in particular when I felt myself to be so much the outsider. I was in the compound one

A Creed

We believe in the creator God who gave life to all
We believe in the loving God who accepts all humankind
We believe in the just God who abhors all oppression
We believe in Jesus, God's Son, who experienced life as a stranger and outcast
Who challenged worldly systems of selfish prejudice
and overcame them by giving himself in the sacrifice of death
renewing life and hope by rising again.

We believe in the Holy Spirit who enables us as the people of God to demonstrate the characteristics of God in the world:

to welcome asylum seekers and refugees;
to believe in them unless or until they make it impossible to do so;
to campaign for justice in determining their cases,
so that everyone we encounter might experience the life God longs them to share - a life of liberty, of possibility and of hope.

John Western

Support Services For Refugees and Migrants in Hastings and St Leonards

General Support

Links, One-Stop-Shop:

Service Offered: Advice and support for asylum seekers, refugees and new communities on issues including: immigration, health, housing. The Links Project provides a welcoming, safe and inclusive environment for members of Hastings and St Leonards asylum, refugee and BME communities where they can access a range of advice, health and support services under one roof. The project works with and supports and enables a very vulnerable client group that experience trauma, isolation and many different barriers. We aim to help the project users to build confidence, access information and increase their opportunities to achieve a better quality of physical and mental wellbeing.

Opening hours: Wednesdays, 9:30am - 4pm, no appointment necessary

Contact details:

Phone 01424 461225 (Mrs Nicole Zaaroura, Project Co-ordinator)
Email: links.onestopshop@hotmail.co.uk
Address: Concordia Hall

Migrant Helpline:

Service Offered: One stop service team providing assistance for asylum seekers and refugees with enquiries regarding welfare benefits, Home Office support, accessing health care, housing and employment.

Contact details:

Phone 01424 461225
Email: mhl@migranthepline.org
Address: 17a Silchester Mews, St Leonards

We are often told that we stand on the cusp of an atheist society in the UK today, with diminishing church going numbers and diminishing influence (although I suspect both of those are debatable): perhaps our challenge is to become, once again, a critical voice where we see a gap between our society and the Kingdom of God.

Andrew Perry

So why does this stuff matter?

One way of approaching a theological framework for our lives is to pursue the idea that we are made in the image of God, and that when we do the stuff of God we are functioning as the Maker intended and that we can then catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

The parallel to this is considering Mission not as something we “do for God”, but that God’s grace and action are prevenient - our task is not to “do something for God” but to prayerfully look at the world around us and see where God is ALREADY active and roll up our sleeves and join in.

The corollary would be to identify and resist systems, practices, attitudes or actions which are anti the Kingdom of God: things which are oppressing people; things which are preventing people developing their God-given potential; things which are life draining rather than life enhancing; things which are unjust; things which don’t celebrate the diversity of God’s image in humanity; things which don’t accord with the “kingdom manifesto” of Luke 4:

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour." 20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

One of those systems which we have been considering in this Community Theology Group has been people who are seeking asylum and the way in which they are treated. We have been asking questions such as: how we should treat the “other”, the outsider, the alien; how our justice system matches up (or doesn’t) with God’s idea of justice; how we approach a system which is inherently confrontational and violent.

It has been said that the way a society treats the most vulnerable of its members speaks volumes about how compassionate and just that society is. The issue of how asylum seekers are treated falls squarely within this consideration, and therefore it matters.

Andrew Perry

night, the only white person there. The rest were Sudanese and Ugandan. There was a young black Jesuit seminarian from S. Africa. He was sharing his experience of apartheid. I felt my presence was not welcome. Nothing I’d done myself, but I felt the burden of the British Empire and its legacy upon my shoulders.

In this country, I have lived alongside the homeless in an Emmaus Community. Another culture, another outsider experience. Whilst we are focusing on people seeking asylum, wherever we enter into the world of people living in poverty, we enter another culture. We need, too, to see people as people! - not as objects of our ministry or our aid. The God I believe in, is a relational God who created us as relational beings.

In Genesis, Ch. 4:1-11, there is the first concrete account of human beings outside paradise. In connection with the story of Cain and Abel, God says, ‘What have you done? The voice of your brother is crying to me from the ground.’ The term ‘cry’ appears many times in the Bible. It is the agonised plea of a victim for help in some injustice.

In Exodus 3:7-9, Yahweh says, ‘I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry.’

Matthew 25: 31-46 The Last Judgement.

To be alongside people seeking asylum, I believe we have to be in touch with our own insider/outsider experiences of life. How we perceive God and our relationship to God will inevitably affect our relationship with ‘the other’.

I will finish with the reflection of a Columbian priest, Ray Collier. ‘God created every person to be human, in God’s own image. There are three characteristics to being human: powerlessness, vulnerability and limitation. To love is to experience these things. Humanity rejected this plan of God...because people did not want to be powerlessness, vulnerable and limited. The result is a world full of victims of poverty, war and violence.’

Fiona Reader

The Bible and the Other

Although there is a tension within both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament between openness to, and concern for, the other, and a more exclusive worldview, at its best the Bible offers a vision of a world where there is justice and wellbeing for all.

Hebrew Bible

The roots of Hebrew identity lie in the exodus story, which tells of aliens resident in a foreign land suffering oppression and persecution led by God into making their escape into what was to become their own land. Hundreds of years later, much of what by then had become the nation of Judah again found itself in a strange land in the exile - and this too was a greatly formative experience in the growth of the Jewish identity.

Particularly in the later writings of the Hebrew Bible there is a profound concern for the

inclusion of the alien or the foreigner in the community:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:33-34

New Testament

Right at the beginning of the Jesus story, Mary and Joseph are forced to flee with their son from their own land into Egypt. This means that the holy family are presented, at least in Matthew's narrative, as what we would now call asylum seekers.

Ø *Do you think they would be granted leave to stay in the UK?*

Jesus' ministry was marked by inclusiveness - towards women, towards the unclean, towards the marginalised, and towards the foreigner - for example: a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15); a Samaritan woman (John 4); a Syro-Phoenician's daughter (Mark 7).

The Samaritans were especially hated by the Jews of Jesus' time. They were the descendants of the former northern kingdom and were viewed with considerable antipathy by Jews perhaps precisely because of their common roots.

Ø *Can we see parallels between the way in which first century Jews viewed Samaritans and the way in which some people in this country today view Muslims?*

Yet think of the times in the gospels that Jesus mixes with or commends a Samaritan: the Samaritan woman (John 4); the Samaritan leper (Luke 17) parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10). It is clear that Jesus sought to challenge his contemporaries' fear and rejection of the other and that this is a fundamental characteristic of his teaching.

The Church & the Other

Although the church's track record in welcoming the other leaves something to be desired, this is no excuse for inaction in our own time and context.

The biblical narratives are rooted in the experience of oppression, exile and escape. As such they are profoundly honest and realistic about the thoughts and feelings which arise from such experiences (see Psalm 137 for a powerful example), yet they also offer a vision of a world where the other is welcomed and accepted.

It is our responsibility to take from the biblical narratives those stories and examples and principles which open us up to the other and live these out in our churches and communities.

Ø *Which stories and examples from the biblical narratives inspire you in your concern and action for the other?*

in which the prize goes to the strong. Peace through war, security through strength. The argument is that this philosophy has percolated through much Western Christian theology; illustrated by atonement theories, the blessing of armies, battleships etc.

Walter Wink:

"The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the simplest, laziest, most exciting, uncomplicated, irrational, and primitive depiction of evil the world has even known. Furthermore, its orientation toward evil is one into which virtually all modern children (boys especially) are socialised in the process of maturation. Children select this mythic structure because they have already been led, by culturally reinforced cues and role models, to resonate with its simplistic view of reality. By making violence pleasurable, fascinating, and entertaining, the Powers are able to delude people into compliance with a system that is cheating them of their very lives."

[Walter Wink 2007 http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/content/cpt/article_060823wink.shtml]

But is the Babylonian Creation myth an anthropological centred etymology - ie explaining the way things are by working backwards to legitimise what is; in contrast with the Hebrew myth which claims to be a revealed God-centred explanation of why or how things have gone wrong from an original right.

From Creation to the Crucifixion

And does our theology of atonement contribute towards this? Some would say that it does. Anabaptist scholar, J Denny Weaver claims that Satisfaction theories of atonement depend on violence to make sense. Black theologian James Cone claims there is a direct link between "substitutionary atonement...[and] defences of slavery and colonial oppression." Whilst there are many who would not agree with such claims, and would view substitutionary atonement in much more positive terms, these are challenges which need to be addressed.

Weaver's other criticisms are:

- that Satisfaction theories of atonement separate ethics from salvation (hence a Christian can wield a sword for Jesus, despite the fact that Jesus opposed violence; a slave owner can preach salvation to a slave without addressing the inequality in their relationship).
- and that a Christology in creeds separated from ethics make it possible to define Christianity in terms of what you believe with no reference to how you act.

Towards a summary

So is there violence inherent in UK systems? It would appear that adversarial systems either accommodate or encourage violence overtly (punishment; our concept of "justice"), **systemically** (racism; sexism etc), **passively** (criminal justice system) and **actively** (sports - esp football crowds). Many of the systems we take for granted are adversarial.

This violence is explained in the Babylonian Creation story; and actively opposed in the Jewish Creation story. It is legitimised or accommodated in some atonement theologies, notably those developed since the post-Constantinian Settlement when Christianity went from being a critique of society (principally pagan Roman), to upholding that society (the Holy Roman Empire) and became used to justify expanding "Christendom" by conquest, subjugation and violence.

thrive by beating others, being first or being selective with the truth!

§ **the Asylum and Immigrant Service.** People are assumed to be trying to defraud the authorities until proved innocent.

(Are there other Systems which are not inherently adversarial, confrontational or violent? The NHS, the Welfare System, Taxation, farming, industry, social work, art, music...?)

Justice, punishment and retribution

Underlying the criminal justice system as we experience it in the UK is the retribution model of justice: righting of wrongs, punishment of offenders. We are only 46 years on from death being replaced by life imprisonment. Is Life Imprisonment merely the passive aggressive version of capital punishment?

“Doing justice” seems to be synonymous with “meting out punishment” in the western mind set. The quiet whisper of God’s forgiveness is quickly drowned out by our cries of “Crucify! Crucify!”.

A trip to Babylon to explain our predilection for violence

Walter Wink refers to the Babylonian Creation story as being a description of the modern day violence patterns in everything from our social system, religious systems, ordered systems all the way to our children’s cartoons!

The Enuma Elish (c1250 BCE)

In the beginning, Apsu, the father god, and Tiamat, the mother god, give birth to the gods. But the frolicking of the younger gods makes so much noise that the elder gods resolve to kill them so they can sleep. The younger gods uncover the plot before the elder gods put it into action, and kill Apsu. His wife Tiamat, the Dragon of Chaos, pledges revenge.

Terrified by Tiamat, the rebel gods turn for salvation to their youngest member, Marduk. He catches Tiamat in a net, drives an evil wind down her throat, shoots an arrow that bursts her distended belly and pierces her heart. He then splits her skull with a club and scatters her blood in out-of-the-way places. He stretches out her corpse full-length, and from it creates the cosmos.

In this myth, creation is an act of violence. Chaos is prior to order; evil precedes good; order is established by means of disorder: the gods themselves are violent.

The biblical myth in Genesis 1 is diametrically opposed to all this; a good God creates a good creation. Chaos does not resist order. Good is prior to evil. Neither evil nor violence is part of the creation, but enter later, as a result of the first couple’s sin. In the Babylonian myth violence is no problem, simply a primordial fact.

The Myth of Redemptive Violence (epitomised by the Enuma Elish) is the story of the victory of order over chaos by means of violence. In such a philosophy human beings are thus naturally incapable of peaceful coexistence. Life is combat. Order must continually be imposed upon us from on high: men over women, masters over slaves, priests over laity, aristocrats over peasants, rulers over people. Unquestioning obedience is the highest virtue, and order the highest religious value. Any form of order is preferable to chaos. Ours is neither a perfect nor perfectible world; it is theatre of perpetual conflict

There is no question about the Christian response to asylum seekers and refugees. The Church is called to be a place of welcome. As faithful disciples we are to provide care and comfort to those who come to this land as strangers, seeking safety.

Uniting Church of Australia

<http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/issues/refugees-asylum-seekers.html>

Peter King

St Benedict on hospitality

Chapter 53

All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, who said: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Mt. 25:35)." Proper honour must be shown "to all, especially to those who share our faith (Gal 6:10)" and to pilgrims.

Once guests have been announced, the prioress and the community are to meet them with all the courtesy of love. First of all, they are to pray together and thus be united in peace, but prayer must always precede the kiss of peace because of the delusions of the Evil One.

All humility should be shown in addressing a guest on arrival or departure. By a bow of the head or by a complete prostration of the body, Christ is to be adored and welcomed in them. After the guests have been received, they should be invited to pray; then the prioress or abbot or an appointed member will sit with them. The divine law is read to all guests for their instruction, and after that every kindness is shown to them. The prioress or abbot may break their fast for the sake of a guest, unless it is a day of special fast which cannot be broken. The members however, observe the usual fast. The prioress or abbot shall pour water on the hands of the guests, and the prioress or abbot with the entire community shall wash their feet. After the washing they will recite this verse: "God, we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple (Ps. 48:10).

Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received; our very awe of the rich guarantees them special respect.

The kitchen for the prioress or abbot and guests ought to be separate, so that guests and monasteries are never without them--need not disturb the community when they present themselves at unpredictable hours. Each year, two members who can do the work competently are to be assigned to this kitchen. Additional help should be available when needed, so that they can perform this service without grumbling. On the other hand, when the work slackens, they are to go wherever other duties are assigned them. This consideration is not for them alone, but applies to all duties in the monastery; members are to be given help when it is needed, and whenever they are free, they work wherever they are assigned. The guest quarters are to be entrusted to a God-fearing member. Adequate bedding should be available there. The house of God should be in the care of members who will manage it wisely.

No one is to speak or associate with guests unless she is bidden; however, if a member

meets or sees guests, she is to greet them humbly, as we have said. She asks for a blessing and continues on her way, explaining that she is not allowed to speak.

A summary of what Joan Chittister, of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania, writes in her commentary on the Rule of St Benedict.:

‘Guests are to be received as Christ. “Hospitality is one form of worship,” the rabbi wrote....The message to the stranger is clear: Come right in and disturb our perfect lives. You are Christ for us today.’

We find it much easier to be hospitable to those who are like us, Chittister suggests the ‘scrubbed and minty-breathed’. But those of a different race or culture or social background we find much more difficult even dangerous. But ‘Benedict wants us to let down the barriers of our souls so that the God of the unexpected can come in.’

‘In Benedictine spirituality...hospitality is clearly meant to be more than an open door. It is acknowledgement of the gifts the stranger brings.’ There’s also a return of gifts, mutuality in giving and receiving. And the way we give hospitality is very important. ‘We can give people charity or we can give them attention. We can give them the necessities of life or we can give them its joys. Benedictine hospitality is the gift of one human being to another. Benedictine hospitality is not simply bed and bath; it is home and family.’

The poor have a very special place. ‘Those who have been thrown upon the mercy of the world are the gauge of our open hearts.’ We live ‘in a culture in which strangers are ignored and self-sufficiency is considered a sign of virtue and poverty is a synonym for failure. Hospitality for us may as much involve a change of attitudes and perspectives as it does a handout. To practice hospitality in our world, it may be necessary to evaluate all the laws and all the promotions and all the invitation lists of corporate and political society from the point of view of the people who never make the lists. Then hospitality may demand that we work to change things’.

The Rule of St Benedict was written at a time when the Roman Empire was disintegrating. Travel was dangerous. Life was precarious. Benedictine monasteries were places of safety, hospices in the original meaning of the word.

Benedict realises the importance of keeping the work of the monastery going. ‘We all have to learn to provide for others while maintaining the values and structures, the balance and depth, of our own lives. The community that is to greet the guest is not to barter its own identity in the name of the guest. On the contrary, if we become less than we must be then we will be no gift for the guest,’ Benedictine spirituality values balance and order. It also values humility and we should try to meet the needs of others in humility. She quotes Edward Everett Hale “I cannot do everything but I can do something, and what I can do I will do, so help me God.”

Joan Chittister, O.S.B. *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*, Crossroad, 1992 pp140-144

Penny Sayer

The adversarial nature of the British mindset

As we considered the plight of those seeking asylum in the UK, we were particularly struck by the way people are treated by the legal system. Contrary to every other area of the law people seeking asylum are presumed to be guilty (of trying to trick their way into the country) and the onus is on them to prove they are genuine. This is partly because we have a judicial system which is an adversarial one, based on “a fight” (although these days physical violence is frowned on in our court rooms!) This caused us to start asking wider questions about other systems in the UK: is violence necessarily inherent in systems which are adversarial? And why do we in the UK seem to have such a large number of adversarial systems?

An adversarial system is confrontational - is it, by its nature, violent and based on conflict? Adversarial systems create winners and losers and perpetuate divides (such as those between rich/poor, winner/loser, haves/have nots). In the UK our system is adversarial - or inquisitorial.

A comment from Western Australia: “In the inquisitorial system the emphasis is on *outcomes*, in the common law systems on *process*.” In the book of Exodus, Moses seems to favour the inquisitorial system (Ex 18.16).

How many of our systems are confrontational and/or aggressive?

§ our **legal system** - protagonists are paid to “win” and often presenting the best case is more important than the genuine search for truth or understanding. Such a system tends to create winners and losers rather than a sense of justice.

§ our **political system** - rather than proportional representation our current “first past the post” system again creates winner and losers; and the losers are sent into political wilderness after being “defeated”. Arguments in Parliament likewise are adversarial - even seating arrangements in the chamber are set squarely facing each other for a fight. Other parliaments sit in the round.

§ our **theology** - we seem to want to present water tight arguments to convince (“win over”?) others... We don’t tend to invite others to explore with us, to worship and pray, to watch and seek - we give answers: we tell people their problems and then hold out the answer/solution. We don’t “share” our faith; we **tell** it, because we are right and others are wrong (or so the assumption must be from the behaviour).

§ our **sporting systems** all depends on winners and losers. Sports psychologists have drawn a parallel between hunting and football... Why is a football crowd so different from a rugby crowd?

§ is our **education system** inherently confrontational? School league tables; exams and tests must have comparisons, winners and losers. A middle class aspiration for education to give the child the best start in life implies that they will later “beat” others in applying for university places and job interviews.

§ **Journalism, Capitalism, Advertising and Market Forces**... the very act of making money, acquisitiveness - it seems that these are inherently violent occupations, which