

²The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all. *Proverbs 22.2*

As you look around the Church you will see remembered in the windows and in the tablets on the walls a wide range of people who in the past have been part and parcel of the life of this Parish. You will see references to the last Earl of Howth, those who have distinguished themselves in politics, in law, in the military, in academic life. But of course these are not the only ones who assembled here Sunday by Sunday – there were those for whom there are no memorial tablets, no references to their presence, to their faithfulness in their worship and service of God and their fellow man.

But all of them, be they the Earl, the barrister, the shopkeeper, the servant, the fisherman, all will have knelt at the same communion rail, taken hold of this cup, remembering the Christ that died that each should live. This is why I have always valued the practice in the Church of Ireland of drinking from a common cup, kneeling side by side at the communion rail. It underlines that fundamental unity expressed in our reading from the Book Proverbs:

²The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all. *Proverbs 22.2*

That unity in which Earl and fisherman come to drink from this cup runs deeper than that. It is a unity arising from a common faith, a common allegiance to Christ. St Paul, in writing to the Galatians reminded them:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. *Gal 3:27-28*

He speaks of an identity that transcends what would have been seen as unassailable barriers of culture, of class, of gender. So barrister and servant came forward to drink of this one cup.

The Old Testament talks of another common identity that spans all races, cultures and time as it speaks of an understanding of man not just made by God, but made in the image of God. That does not mean that we are all identical but it does mean that we have a common dignity.

The Jewish people have always had a very strong sense of their identity, of who they are before God, of their particular place in salvation history. Nevertheless the Old Testament Scriptures speak of obligations of the Jew not just in the sphere of his or her religious and community life, they also speak very powerfully of obligations to those on the outside, to the poor and the alien, recalling their own experience as a people of slavery and alienation. And so we read in the book Leviticus

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴ 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. *Lev 19:33-34*

In Deuteronomy, there is not just an obligation not to oppress; there is an obligation of practical care, a sharing of resources:

²¹ When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²² Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. *Deut 24:21-22*

In each case, with the injunction comes the reminder: ‘remember you were once aliens, you were once slaves in the land of Egypt.’

For the last few years we have watched on our television screens the unfolding conflicts in Syria, in Libya and in Northern Iraq with the emergence of the so called Islamic State. With this we have seen a growing number of refugees flowing into neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. In more recent weeks and months we have witnessed tragic scenes in the Mediterranean and refugees in their desperation have resorted to traffickers

who have put them on flimsy vessels and pointed them in the direction of Italy and the Greek islands. Many, despite the efforts of European naval vessels, have perished. And now the problem moves closer to home as refugees have moved out beyond Italy and Greece in what is becoming one of the largest movements of population since the Second World War and we have witnessed refugees walking the motorway out of Budapest in a desperate effort to reach the Austrian border and refuge in Germany.

What are we to do? The initial reaction may be to throw up our hands and say this problem is too big for us, we have enough problems of our own to deal with. But can we in all integrity do this? What would it say about us as a people? This is where I find the injunction in Leviticus very pertinent.

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴ 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.

‘For you were aliens ..’ Of course in the mid 19th century there was a mass exodus from this island of people who felt they had no choice; better to risk death in the coffin ships than face starvation here at home – as the Famine Memorial on Custom House Quay reminds us. There is another memorial by the same artist in Ireland Park in Toronto of the emigrants arriving – the desperation of the first replaced by the hope of the second.

Our Christian heritage, our own national experience of exile have all contributed to who we are as a nation, to our values as a people. What are these values that we bring to our response to the current crisis facing us.? I think, first of all there is a recognition of fundamental human dignity – as the make shift posters held aloft by the migrants declare, ‘We are not animals’. Then there is a God given responsibility to respond to those in need. ‘For as much as you did it to least of these you did it to me.’ There are no easy

solutions. But whatever course of action is followed, it must be informed, it must reflect these fundamental values.

What can you or I do? What we have to offer seems so insignificant in the face of the enormity of the problem. You may recall when we were embarking on our Roof Fund and I mentioned a figure of 200,000 euro I said, ‘What is the best way to eat an elephant? - In small pieces.’ Part of the solution to this current crisis will be in lots of small pieces coming together. Only last week one lady asked me, ‘Is there nothing we can do as a community?’ Maybe as refugees arrive, there will be opportunities to reach out in simple acts of charity and hospitality – let us begin to think imaginatively of ways in which we could engage either as a community or in partnership with other churches as a practical expression of our commitment to the Christian values that are a part of who we are

I leave the last word to the writer of the Letter of James:

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

As we kneel at the rails to drink of the cup, let us ponder on how we can serve the Christ we meet in bread and wine in the pain and turmoil of this world..

Prayers for the Refugee Crisis in Europe and the Middle East

Lord Jesus, as a child, you fled from persecution; You have lived the fear, desperation, hunger, cold, and isolation that being a refugee brings. Bring comfort and peace of heart, Lord, to all those risking their lives to seek safety, Protect and guide their journeys, Lord.

“Faith, hope and charity, but the greatest of these is charity. “Father, bless those who see the plight of refugees, and who are meeting those needs. For those who are exhausted, give them renewed strength; For those who feel overwhelmed, give them courage; For those who feel fearful, we pray for peace and compassion.

Lord, we want to hear your voice again, Guide us as we, as Mothers’ Union, reach out in your name to refugees both in Europe and the Middle East and those affected by conflict in South Sudan and Burundi, in Thailand and many other areas across the world. Bless the work of Mothers’ Union, And lead us, Lord, to fully play our part.

We thank God that our countries are blessed with resources. We uphold in prayer the governments across Europe and the Middle East, asking for wisdom for leaders to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

Father God, you are our place of refuge and safety, We pray for you to help us at this time of need. Give us compassion combined with wisdom to meet need with the right resources. May our practical action be rooted in your love as we reach out as the hands of Christ. Amen