

Friday Night Theology, 28th November 2008

Don't be a Stranger

Mercy is a term we don't hear much in our common discourse. In our modern usage, "mercy" is often associated with weakness. Mercy is born from compassion and enjoined with a desire to give freedom and dignity to others. Mercy recognises a power relationship between those in need, who seek mercy, and those who can give it. Sadly, mercy plays little part in political or judicial systems.

So said the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, [speaking last night](#) at the Evangelical Alliance's annual flagship event: the Eighth Temple Address. The theme of the event this year was welcoming the stranger, and in our [Don't be a Stranger](#) campaign, we are seeking to call the church, if not the country, back to the virtues of hospitality, mercy and love, particularly for those who are strangers in our midst. This is not a debate about the number of migrants we should accept into the UK. It is rather to say that however and for whatever reason people have come to this country, we, as Christians, have a duty to welcome and help them.

In preparation for this event, the Alliance interviewed several people who have migrated to the UK, finding out about their experience and how the Church has helped them. One lady, from South Africa, had problems with her visa when she arrived in the UK and was imprisoned by immigration authorities. She said, "When you get into problems you get a label and people looked at me as that label instead of as an individual. I was labelled as an illegal immigrant and as such they didn't want to know. However, Christians look at the person themselves and want to help them as individuals."

The Archbishop made his comments in response to those of the immigration minister, [Phil Woolas](#), who had attacked charities that campaign on behalf of asylum seekers as "playing the system". Certainly, we discover an entirely different attitude to that of Woolas in the Bible.

"When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. The stranger living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt. I am the Lord your God." Leviticus 19:33-34

Sometimes, people have this odd idea that Old Testament ethics is all about restrictive commands from on high, a set of 'dos' and 'don'ts' that infringe our freedom. The reality, as in the verse above, is that frequently God teaches us his ways by means of story or narrative. The point of this verse is not just that God has issued a command 'love the stranger', but rather that the Israelites' love for the stranger should spring from reflection on their own experience of being the outcast, the alien in a foreign land, oppressed for hundreds of years. They are themselves part of the story of being a stranger in the land. As subsequent generations read the narrative of the Israelite experience of slavery in Egypt they were meant to reflect on what such an experience of being the foreigner might mean, and as a result of this reflection to act with love towards the migrants in their own midst.

Perhaps this is what is at the heart of the injunction to love others as we love ourselves. It is not just that we should seek to care for others in the same way that we care for ourselves, but that we should remember what it feels like to be excluded or unloved, and in the process have compassion (literally *with-feeling*). Whether or not we've experienced discrimination, almost all of us know what it feels like to be shunned from what C.S. Lewis called "the inner circle". Our responsibility, then, is to recall and learn from our own experience of estrangement, and in the process welcome and love the stranger as we also would have desired to be welcomed ourselves.

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If you would like to read more about the theology of the *Don't be a Stranger* campaign, [click here](#).