

Church on the move

A theological reflection



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Across the whole range of Christian churches in this country the phenomenon of migration, particularly since the Second World War, has been tremendously important. Particularly in cities, independent 'migrant' churches have grown up – sometimes with roots in people's countries of origin, and sometimes not – and in all the existing indigenous Christian communities in urban areas the presence of migrants has not only been significant but has in many cases saved those communities from extinction. In this article I simply want to deepen our understanding of this important phenomenon in the history of Christianity in Britain, not from a statistical angle (for which others have done the job) but in terms of theology and the witness of the Scriptures. If our theology is right then we will be in a strong position to appreciate exactly how much this aspect of our lives enriches what we do and strengthens our mission.

The migrant characteristic of the people of God

Deuteronomy 26.4–7 is a creedal statement; some have claimed that it is the oldest Israelite creed.¹ It defines the faithful believer and gives him or her an identity, affirmed before the priest, in the sight of God:

'The priest shall then take the panner from your hand and lay it before the altar of the Lord your God. Then, in the sight of the Lord your God, you must make this pronouncement: "My father was a wandering Aramaean. He went down to Egypt to find refuge

there, few in numbers, but then he became a nation, great, mighty and strong. The Egyptians ill-treated us, they gave us no peace and inflicted harsh slavery on us. But we called on the Lord the God of our fathers. The Lord heard our voice and saw our misery?'

This passage is similar to an earlier formula in Deuteronomy 6.20–22:

'In times to come, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the decrees and laws and customs that the Lord our God has laid down for you?" you shall tell your son, "Once we were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and the Lord brought us out Egypt by his mighty hand, before our eyes the Lord worked great and terrible signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his House".'

The consciousness of being a wandering people, a people taken from one land to another because of the will of God, could not be more deeply engrained in the self-view of the people of Israel. This has remained – the phrase 'wandering Jew' is part of our language for a reason. It is through this act of journeying, of migration, that the people of Israel *become* the people chosen by God, so as here in second Isaiah when the people are coming back from exile: 'I, the Lord, have called you to serve in the cause of right; I have taken you by the hand and formed you' (42.6); or, again, in the Psalms: 'When they were few in number, a handful of strangers in the land, when they wandered from country to country and from one kingdom to another, he allowed no one to oppress them' (105 [104].12–14).

This defining characteristic is not incidental, or a footnote: it is central to the people's identity, and it is repeatedly portrayed as the will of God. God wants his people to be like this; although it has constituted history and oppression, that is his will and it leads to a brighter future. Even a cursory glance at Jewish history since biblical times will show that this has continued to be the case.

In the last century Christians of all traditions have grown in a greater appreciation of our Jewish roots. This has led to a repudiation of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, and has been accompanied by an improved acquaintance with the Old Testament, at least among some groups (such as Roman Catholics, less familiar with it before the reforms of the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council). This means that we need to take more seriously this fundamental *migrant characteristic* of the people of God that we see in the Scriptures, and to see this as part of our own heritage as Christians, grown from Jewish roots – even when we are conscious, as we must be, of the times in history when Christians have exiled Jews and increased their migration.

This characteristic is just as clearly seen in the New Testament. In 2004 the Holy See's Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People issued a detailed instruction about migration entitled *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* ('The love of Christ towards migrants'), which reflects on the New Testament in these words:

*'In the foreigner a Christian sees not simply a neighbour, but the face of Christ himself, who was born in a manger and fled into Egypt, where he was a foreigner, summing up and repeating in his own life the basic experience of His people (Matthew 2.13). Born away from home and coming from another land (Luke 2.4–7), "he came to dwell among us" (John 1.11,14) and spent his public life on the move, going through towns and villages (Luke 13.22; Matthew 9.35). After his resurrection, still a foreigner and unknown, He appeared on the way to Emmaus to two of his disciples, who only recognised him at the breaking of the bread (Luke 24.35). So Christians are followers of a man on the move "who has nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8.20; Luke 9.58)". In the same way Mary, the Mother of Jesus, can be equally well contemplated as a living symbol of the woman emigrant. She gave birth to her Son away from home (Luke 2.1–7) and was compelled to flee to Egypt (Matthew 2.13–14). Popular devotion is right to consider Mary as the Madonna of the Way.'*³

This insight draws, of course, on the words of Jesus at the end of the 'Sermon on the End' in Matthew's Gospel: 'I was a stranger and you made me welcome ... I was a stranger and you never made me welcome' (25.35,43).

The implications for the Church

The implications of this are even more far-reaching than the picture we have from the Scriptures of the people of Israel. In them, migration helps to define

the people of God. In the new covenant it has a direct bearing on our relationship with God himself. Jesus and his blessed Mother are identified as archetypal migrants and refugees. Moreover when we minister to strangers we minister to him and when we fail to do so we dishonour him. In Christian tradition such dishonour is called blasphemy.

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Mainstream Christians have developed enormously their understanding of the theological importance of migration in recent years. In the Catholic Church the first definitive papal document on the subject, Pope Pius XII encyclical *Exsul Familia*, was written in 1952 in the aftermath of the Second World War, a period that saw some of the largest movements of peoples in human history. Christian teaching about social justice rests in many ways from the doctrine of the incarnation and this leads us to identify those whom we serve with the person of the incarnate Christ.

It is surely clear that theological reflection along these lines is important both for distinctively migrant churches – by which I mean independent African and Caribbean churches – and more established churches in which migrants now play an important role. Sometimes responses to the needs of migrants and refugees operate solely on the level of Christian charity: while this has helped people in need a great deal, and will always be important, theological reflection points us much further. Migrants are not simply people to be helped – they have come here as part of God's plan and enrich the communities in which they now live. While some churches now have a long-term experience of 'being of migrants',⁴ the extent to which we have reacted well, let alone theologically, varies a great deal. For example, there is a very uneven picture in relation to how far people from migrant communities occupy leadership roles in parishes or in faith schools.

What this needs above all is a radical change of perspective – not simply listening to what migrants have to say, but trying to reorder our vision to enable us to see migrants as 'subjects' of their own history, not people who are victims needing to be helped. This also involves a hard-headed analysis of the circumstances behind migration, which means Christians need to engage with the best social scientific research that is around. For example, Thomas Nail, who teaches Philosophy at the University of Denver, recently brought out a very important study, *The Figure of the Migrant*.⁵ Nail moves us away from seeing

NOTES

1. E.g., G von Rad, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia, Old Testament Library, 1966), pp. 157–61.

2. Scripture quotations are from *The Jerusalem Bible*.

3. Section 15. The whole text is available from www.vatican.va. I have omitted in this quotation the document's own footnotes.

4. The Catholic Church in the UK, so heavily Irish in many places over the years, would be an obvious example.

5. T Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 236–7.

7. Encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*, 106 (available from www.vatican.va).

8. You can find out more about this worldwide movement at www.catholicworker.org. For a UK-based perspective visit www.london.catholicworker.org

migration as a 'problem', towards an appreciation of its universality in a wide variety of forms and societies. Migration and movement are *primary* – it has always happened within and between societies, in different defined ways. He writes in the conclusion to his study:

'Analyzing contemporary migration according to the primacy of movement thus makes three important contributions. First, it allows us to see that contemporary migration is not a secondary phenomenon that simply occurs between states. Rather, migration is the primary condition by which something like societies and states is established

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*in the first place. Migration is an essential part of how societies move. In particular, the expulsion of the migrant is a condition for social expansion and reproduction: it is constitutive. Second, it allows us to see that contemporary migration is poorly understood according to a single axis of social expulsion. Rather, the social conditions of migration are always a mixture of territorial, political, juridical, and economic types of expulsion ... Finally, this movement-based analysis allows us to see that there are alternatives to the contemporary conditions of migration being developed by migrants today.'*⁶

For the churches, Nail's complex treatment of the issue leads us to two urgent issues that must be addressed. First of all, we must enable migrant groups in our congregations to be heard, to be able to 'tell their stories'. In my experience, even within very 'mixed' congregations people are often woefully ignorant about each other's backgrounds, and I include clergy in this criticism. Some of this is sheer laziness or a lack of confidence. However, sometimes people will be infected with racism. This is a particular danger in this country at the moment, where negative attitudes to foreigners, refugees and migrants have increased during and since the EU referendum.

Secondly, there is woeful ignorance of Christian teaching about migration in our churches. How many Catholics, for example, know that Pope John XXIII in 1963 taught that migration is a human right? He wrote: 'When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive.'⁷

To address this issue, churches and parishes must take practical steps to raise awareness of how we are enriched by the presence of migrants, and how we are enabled to *change and grow* in our discipleship. Through the phenomenon of

migration we become more truly the Church, we are aligned more closely to the biblical vision of what the people of God is like. This means that increasingly as Christians we must sit light to the claims of the state for our loyalty – claims that so often work against the interests of migrants – and put our faith first. Here are some suggestions:

1. Churches should engage in practical study and 'faith-sharing', drawing on the Scripture readings referred to above, and enabling members of migrant communities to share their experiences and feelings. There is good material available from faith-based groups. In some places, groups of this kind could be ecumenical and perhaps include members of 'independent migrant' churches. This link, set up by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, is helpful: www.focusonrefugees.org.

2. Churches and parishes should be engaged in practical work to support migrants in particular need, such as asylum seekers awaiting decisions or those who have failed in their applications. An example would be regular collections of food and other necessities for groups such as the Catholic Worker communities. Based in Houses of Hospitality these communities are built around doing 'works of mercy' – feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and exiled, visiting prisoners, etc. – and finding the often challenging face of Christ there.⁸

3. Churches and parishes should also not be afraid to engage in political lobbying and agitation on behalf of migrants and refugees. Members of Parliament, particularly those who claim to be Christians, need to be made aware of where the churches are in relation to this issue, and how far the punitive actions that they have taken over many years are at odds with Christian moral teaching and the witness of the Bible.

4. In our communities we should look at various ways in which we can celebrate the nature of our churches and our rich mix of backgrounds. In many parishes there is a regular International Celebration – a special act of worship followed by a party, with people wearing national costumes and prayers and songs in different languages. These should be high profile events and the acts of worship should include Scripture passages.

Conclusion

The Bible offers us such rich resources to help us understand properly the issue of migration – not to help us solve a problem, but to look afresh at ourselves – to see how we can be changed as communities, to be more closely aligned to God's will. Only then can the Church be representative of all peoples and effectively witness to Christ in the society in which we live.