

## Keynote Speech by Rt Revd Dr Rowan Williams

AGM of the London Churches Refugee Fund, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2016

***Dr Williams' remarks were made following brief presentations by front-line agencies, including direct testimony from three refugees about their experiences of seeking asylum in the UK.***

This is crucial work at so many levels. Not only crucial work in the lives of people like those who have spoken to us so movingly this evening, but crucial work in witness at a time when there is so much suspicion, so much lethargy, so much open hostility at times to those whose needs we have heard about. The important people have already spoken this evening: Lillian and Victor and Francis have told us why this matters, why it matters for us to be here, why it matters for this work to go on. So all I can really offer is just a couple of reflections which have been much enriched and enlarged by what we have all heard already.

I want to say a very brief word, first of all, about why these issues do and should matter for Christian people, and I want then to say a little bit about what sort of points we ought to be articulating in the wider forum of our society at the moment.

I'm going to begin in a rather unlikely place. Some of you may remember a rather bad film called the *Last Temptation of Jesus* which appeared some decades ago: a very controversial dramatized version of a novel by the Greek writer Kazantzakis. He was also the author of another rather controversial novel, sometimes translated under the title of *Christ Recrucified*. It's a novel about rural Greece, somewhere around 1800. The settled community of the parish are preparing to perform a Passion Play. A young shepherd is designated to play the role of Christ. But the settled life of the village is interrupted by the arrival of a group of refugees. The refugees, fleeing from persecution further up in the Ottoman Empire, are perceived as threatening, alien and unwelcome. Although they are Greeks and Orthodox Christians like the villagers, they are strangers and, as the novel unfolds, the tension between the villagers and the refugees becomes tighter and tighter, as the rehearsals for the passion play evolve. Manolios, the shepherd who is going to play the part of Christ, finds himself drawn increasingly to defend the refugees. He alienates his own community more and more until eventually he is lynched by the villagers. He has played his Christ-like part to the very end. But the point I want to make is that this is a novel in which solidarity with refugees comes to be seen as *the* central mark of what it might mean to be in solidarity with Christ, in the most costly possible way. And that, surely, is something we need to have at the very heart of our thinking and our praying about this challenge and this opportunity that lies before us.

I find myself increasingly impatient when people talk about the refugee "problem" or the refugee "crisis". I want to speak about challenges and opportunities without denying the acute severity of those challenges, and the cost to us of rising to the opportunity. But

categorising this as a crisis and a problem already tells us something about how we are viewing it, something not very helpful, and I'll come back to that later on.

But there's my first reflection: here we have a novel in which Christian integrity at the end of the day rests on the willingness and freedom to stand alongside the stranger. And, as we were reminded in the opening prayers this evening, that language of insiders and outsiders, strangers and citizens, haunts the pages of Christian scripture in ways that are quite surprising when you look at it in detail. It's as if, when the early Christians thought about themselves and their world, they were again and again drawn back to thinking about these categories of insiders and outsiders, realising more and more deeply how the faith that they shared confused all those ready-made categories and ready-made boundaries; as if they recognised that there was something about the faith they professed which made it more or less impossible to stick with the idea that there were some people with a natural right to belong and other people without a natural right to belong, whatever the community, whatever the country, whatever the society.

The early Christians, it seems, saw themselves as a whole as people who might be considered migrants, resident aliens. They talked about themselves in just those terms. They were "passing through", they didn't have the right to settle and build walls and that gave them an instinctive sympathy, an instinctive compassion for those *literally* passing through, those literally homeless or landless. It's gone on being a mark of both Christian and Jewish integrity across the centuries to have in that theological core of their identity, hospitality to the stranger; and for both Christian and Jewish communities these days it's as much of a challenge as it ever was.

So these issues matter, for that sort of reason. They matter because there's something about these categories of belonging and not belonging, citizens and strangers, that relates to how we see ourselves, how the good news unsettles our sense of where we are and who we are and opens us up to new sorts of universal belonging. And in that light too it's quite important not simply to go back again and again to thinking of "us" and the aliens, "us" and the outsiders. I've been very struck by how our speakers this evening have talked about members of "our" community, and people have been introduced to us as members of a community: that's a crucial message and I hope we can keep it in focus.

As I said, I don't want to make light of just how grave the sufferings are that we confront at the moment. At present, from the latest figures I've seen, about one and a quarter million people apply for asylum in Europe each year, and that itself is a very small part of a global situation more serious than anything for which we have records; certainly more serious than the last great upheaval, in the wake of the Second World War. Last year, the organisation which I have the privilege to chair, Christian Aid, marked its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It was founded in response to the challenge of unprecedented numbers of refugees in the wake of the Second World War. It broadened out its work from there to the scale that it now has, but many of us felt what sharp and poignant irony there was in marking that 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary at a time when the challenge it came into being to answer seemed more acute than ever.

And, as we've been reminded already this evening, we need some clarity in the middle of a public debate and discussion [about the European Referendum] which is shot through with poisonous confusion at the moment. The issue of "migration", so-called, is bearing a load quite disproportionate to the facts. As you've heard, into that concept are bundled a whole lot of completely different questions to do with the global economy, with patterns of employment, with wage levels, with the mobility of capital and labour, and any number of other things; and the most poisonous element in that is of course the paranoia and xenophobia that so easily go with it, and which are very naturally turned against the most obvious scapegoats, that is those who are knocking on our doors asking for help.

As you've heard, one of the worst things that both our system and our public discourse can do to those seeking asylum, seeking refuge with us, is to compound the suffering or the sense of worthlessness or the sense of rejection that they have already experienced. There is a cyclic character to people's experience. The humiliation that they have longed to escape is inflicted on them all over again; and often inflicted, as we've heard, in an unfamiliar language, in an unfamiliar cultural setting, in an environment where people's age and experience don't equip them to deal with the complexities of what's thrown at them. To me, one of the worst and most nightmarish aspects of what we are doing to refugees in this country is that sense of intensifying the humiliation.

We need to remember that we're not talking about – to use the appalling language that some like to use – a *flood* of casual foreign migrants who have mysteriously decided to come and make our lives more difficult. We are dealing with people whose experience most of us would quite likely shudder to contemplate; experiences which go so deep, that cause such profound and lasting hurt, that our imaginations often refuse to rise to the challenge. We're not talking about some neutral phenomenon of migration but about a crisis of stability in so many parts of the world, a crisis of governance, of human rights, a humanitarian deficit – put it as you will but that's the underlying reality which we have to contemplate, which we have to factor in to whatever we say and think about this situation.

And in that context, it's quite important to remember that the issue is not in any sense going to be resolved by us shutting our eyes tight and imagining that, by shutting our borders tight, the problem vanishes. Global instability is everyone's problem. Trying to reflect on some of these issues a couple of weeks ago, I noted in a piece in the *New Statesman* that one of the hardest things about our contemporary world is recognising that major crises don't read maps, they don't know where the borders are. The crisis in our time in the global economy, the global healthcare system, the crisis of the environment, have very little to do with sovereign borders. They are questions for humanity; therefore they are *our* questions, our questions, not "theirs".

And if we can't cope with those seeking refuge with us, they don't vanish, they go elsewhere, they go sometimes to contexts less well-equipped than we are to confront the challenge. Those who talk as though we have a refugee crisis in this country might benefit from a visit to Lebanon or Jordan, small impoverished countries with a level of refugee population that, in British terms, would be the population of several major cities at least, in Jordan even more so. And these are not stable and secure societies, but societies buckling

under the weight of the results of disorder, violence and injustice. We need to be crystal clear that if we are not part of the solution to this we compound the problem. It's as basic as that, because these are people who are not going to vanish.

Nor is it as if any society could simply protect itself in isolation. We've been reminded this evening that there's a referendum happening this week, and far be it from me to make any comments about that or make any inappropriately partisan remarks on this... BUT [laughter] what we need to bear in mind is that there is no problem in the globe at the moment that a single country can confront alone, no problem at all. And that withdrawal from certain systems of mutual support and cooperation and so forth does not miraculously exempt us from issues, it simply lays upon us an urgent duty of reinventing systems which, sadly, very often means reinventing the wheel. Were we to withdraw from the EU, we would not have withdrawn from compliance with the Refugee Convention of the United Nations and all that it means. And I suspect that even the most dedicated anti-European might balk a little at the suggestion that we back away from our compliance with that. We are part of a global system, we need collaboration effectively to implement that global system, we must not give way to fantasy here and whichever way people vote on Thursday I hope and pray that it won't be fantasy that wins the vote.

So to try and draw some of these issues together, let me suggest in good sermonic form three focal points which we might want to bear in mind in our reflection and our advocacy around the challenges posed by the suffering and the need felt by refugees. Three messages that I believe it's crucial that we get out into public discourse, at this bitter, sour, fraught time in our political life.

We need to remind ourselves and our society that the levels of incoming refugees and seekers for asylum that we face in this country are proportionally very far from exceptional. They are less than the levels, for example, faced proportionally by Norway and Switzerland. And we need a sense of proportion in this. We need to think not only of Norway and Switzerland, we do need to think of Lebanon and Jordan, and we need to remember that refugees need to go somewhere. If we don't agree with that, we are simply saying that their death is inevitable and we are prepared to be complicit in that. Once again, it would take a very, very resolute person to sign up to that proposition. So: levels, context, proportion: that's the first point.

And the second, related to it, is that we need to help people distinguish between economic migration and the challenge of people seeking asylum and refuge. We mustn't buy in to the idea that migrants are bad and refugees are good, that refugees are nice and migrants are nasty: that's not the issue, God forbid that it should be. As we are frequently reminded, we live in a world whose global interconnectedness means that economic migration is itself a means of survival for many communities and many countries. But we do need to be clear about the fact, as I said earlier, that in this instance we're not simply looking at populations making rational choices to go somewhere else and complicate other people's lives. We're looking at people whose options are brutally restricted, people whose needs are urgent, people whose chances of survival, whose chances of well-being, in their own context, are minimal. And we need to be clear that those who are taking the extraordinary risks

involved, faced by some people, are not doing this lightly or selfishly. So, that's the second point: we need to be clear about the kinds of choices that people have had to make and are still making.

And third, as I've said, we need once again to be crystal clear about the impossibility of simply building walls around ourselves. I am told there's a prominent American politician who talks about building walls on his country's frontiers [LAUGHTER]. I won't say that I wish him joy with that because I don't; but it seems to me another triumph of fantasy over fact, but a triumph of fantasy that tells us quite a lot about the dreams some people indulge, the notion that somewhere there is a simple solution to the threat posed by *uncontrollable other people*. Uncontrollable other people: at the individual level we're all terrified of it, at the corporate level we're all terrified of it, in the political context we're all terrified of it. Uncontrollable other people: those people who haven't signed up to my agenda, to our agenda; those people who are not like me and perhaps never will be; one of the most fundamental forms of human dis-ease and, going right back to where I started, one of the things that the Christian gospel seeks to tackle at root.

The Christian gospel says, among other things, uncontrollable other people are God's children and God's beloved; uncontrollable other people have no more and no less right than you to be where they are and who they are; and, the merciful good news of God says to us, compassionately and gently: "Get used to it! This is the world you are in, this is reality, God's reality."

So, if we are ever tempted to think that somehow there is an isolation that will keep us safe, we should remember the kind of world we actually inhabit, for good and ill: the kind of world where the suffering of others sooner or later becomes ours and where the wellbeing we enjoy *can* – no *must* about it, alas – sooner or later become the wellbeing of others. And that's why, as I said right at the start, when we press this issue and we start to disentangle it, what emerges surely is a recognition that our response to this set of questions, this set of challenges and opportunities, will tell us something essential about our integrity as believers, our alignment with the one we call our Lord.