

Hospitality and losing your religion

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Proverbs 25.6-7; Psalm 112; Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16; Luke 14.1-14.

‘Are you Xenophobic?’ A question famously put to a Senator in an infamous interview in 1996. The response, you might recall was ‘please explain.’ Well let’s explain by looking at the opposite of xenophobia because it is word that appears in our reading this morning from the letter to the Hebrews. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. That word hospitality, a word which trips off our lips and which is increasingly used has a very different meaning here. The word is *philoxenias*, literally love of stranger, love of the other, it is the opposite of xenophobia. This should help us as we look at today’s readings, because the business of hospitality is a serious one in our sacred texts and traditions—it is not about the best place to get a good latte.

In 1991 the US rock band REM released a single called ‘Losing my Religion.’ At the time I didn’t really understand either the lyrics or the video that accompanied it. They both seemed to me rather obscure. The video features an elderly angel who falls to earth. It seems to be loosely based on a short story by the Nobel Prize winning author Gabriel Garcia Marquez: ‘A very old man with enormous wings.’ In the story the elderly angel is treated as something of a freak in the community in which he fell. He smells, he can’t fly, he speaks a language no one understands, and doesn’t even understand the priest’s Latin, he’s bald and almost toothless, and his wings are filthy. Can this be an angel? The story tells of the community’s loss of their religion, revealed in the lack of even a simple act of hospitality afforded to the elderly angel, because he doesn’t fit their stereotype—that is, despite the wings which should have been something of a giveaway, angels were not smelly, toothless, bald, and grubby. And most certainly they should be well versed in Latin.

In 2001, over twenty years ago, the General Synod of our Church declared this Sunday as a Day of Prayer for Refugees. Things have clearly not improved since that time. In fact, they are significantly worse. The UN reported in June this year that, ‘that the number of people forced to flee their homes has increased every year over the past decade and stands at the highest level since records began, a trend that can be only reversed by a new, concerted push towards peacemaking’.¹

By the end of 2021, those displaced by war, violence, persecution, and human rights abuses stood at 89.3 million, up 8 per cent on a year earlier and well over double the figure of 10 years ago. Since then, the Russian invasion of Ukraine—causing the fastest and one of the largest forced displacement crises since World War II—and other emergencies, across Africa to Afghanistan and beyond, pushed the figure over the dramatic milestone of 100 million. Sobering statistics indeed.

The problem is that we stereotype and scapegoat refugees, just as that angel was smelly, and toothless and bald—hardly a pre-Raphaelite vision, one of those gorgeous Victorian paintings. Refugees today come in all shapes and sizes they defy stereotype. But just like the fact that that angel who fell to earth was quite clearly an angel—he had wings after all—many refugees today are quite clearly displaced because the vast majority of them will take

¹ ‘Global displacement hits another record, capping decade-long rising trend.’ UNHCR Press Release, 16 June 2022.

great risks to secure safety for themselves and their families. As for scapegoating them, it seems quite clear that there are jobs aplenty to go around. Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic worker movement, and a radical in her day, often called those who came to the Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality in New York ‘refugees from this ruthless industrial system.’ The same can be said of those who are refugees from the ruthless global market, which makes it so difficult for them to stay at home and earn enough to maintain their families—today they are simply economic migrants.

When we consider this idea of hospitality in the context of the first century and the Biblical witness, we are brought face to face with the issue of refugees in our time. In essence, the custom of hospitality in antiquity grew out of a desire to neutralize potential threat—threats to strangers and threats to one’s community. Not only were hosts protecting strangers from thieves along the road and from their fellow townspeople suspicious of the other, they were also seeking to protect their household and community from the wrath of the stranger. Our refugee policies seem to have that same sort of reciprocal basis: what will these people bring to our community? Jesus rather challenges this understanding of hospitality. His is the hospitality of *philoxenias*: the love of the stranger, the other; the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. This is risky, challenging.

When years ago, when studying liturgy, I was asked to describe the earliest liturgy. I waxed lyrical about Hippolytus, but I was told by the Director of Ordinands to read Luke 24; this is a text we usually only hear at Easter. In it we read about a pair of disciples walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus after Jesus’ crucifixion. These two, Cleopas and another, had heard rumours about Jesus’ resurrection, but they were slow to believe. A ‘stranger’ joins them on their journey. Unbeknownst to them, the stranger is none other than the resurrected Jesus. In this respect Jesus’ actions resemble the visit from Yahweh in Genesis 18 or his angels in Genesis 19. As the disciples arrive at their home in Emmaus, the stranger continues to travel onward. However, the disciples insist that the stranger accept their hospitality, especially because the day is ending to a close. Once inside, the hosts prepare a meal for the traveller. When the stranger breaks the bread, the disciples’ ‘eyes are opened’ and they recognize Jesus. At that point he vanishes from their sight. In the risky offering of unconditional hospitality Abraham and the two travellers received blessings beyond their imagination.

This is what our liturgy, and from there our ethic, is about. In Jesus we welcome a strange other. He is unsettling, dangerous; this is a risky business. But this idea of hospitality goes to the very heart of our Christian faith so much so that indeed it could be said that to ignore it we are indeed beginning to lose our religion. Amen.