

Read Archbishop Justin's article in The Telegraph on refugees and migration policy:

Behind the headlines about migration policy are human tragedies. A former colleague in Afghanistan called me recently: "I have fled to my village. My brother was shot yesterday. We can't get food. I must get my sons out - they have no future. Can you help? If not, I will have to send them across the Mediterranean."

Britain still represents the best hope for many like my friend. Our language and culture, reputation for fairness and the rule of law - these are "pull factors" of which we should be proud. For now, my friend remains in place, as does our dilemma: we cannot take all the world's refugees nor can any country. But the global community is currently letting down millions of people seeking refuge. There must be a better way.

This may come as a surprise, but there is much in migration policy on which the Church of England and the Government agree. The global asylum system is broken. We must destroy the deadly trade of people trafficking. We need innovative solutions to stop the suffering of millions of people - and the devastating deaths in the English Channel, the Mediterranean and elsewhere. We agree on those common ends, which are urgent and compassionate, but we profoundly differ on the means to achieve them.

Like many, I oppose sending vulnerable and traumatised people more than 4,000 miles away without their consent, and paying another country to take them in. People who would have been offered refugee status in the UK will be shipped out without their case being heard - including those with family ties or other links with Britain. The vast majority (98 per cent) of those crossing the Channel apply for asylum and most (61 per cent) are granted it. These are people fleeing war, famine and persecution.

Meanwhile, there are serious ethical questions about using "deterrence" to stop asylum seekers trying to reach our shores. For years, the hostile environment has not reduced the numbers of people seeking asylum here. This approach does not lead to better or fairer outcomes for anyone.

We can and must do better.

There are safe means of crossing the Channel, but we refuse to make them available to asylum seekers. There is no safe or legal route for persecuted Christians from Iran to reach the UK, or those fleeing famine in the DRC, or conflict in Sudan. Meanwhile, the people smugglers prosper. People trafficking is an evil crime. We must go after the traffickers and bring them to justice. They are the villains here, not the people being trafficked. We created this system, and it has failed people. We should not use it as the justification for going further down the same path.

So we must ask ourselves: who do we want to be? Jesus Christ's summary of God's law is to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself. For me, that is the standard by which we must treat those seeking asylum.

The Church of England is not a passive observer of migration policy. Some of my fellow bishops, clergy and worshippers came to the UK escaping persecution or conflict. We welcome and serve asylum seekers at every level of society – from providing housing, food banks, social support and friendship, to scrutinising legislation in the Lords. We partner with the Government to settle refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. We have consistently condemned the evil of people trafficking, and in communities nationwide we are training people to spot it, expose it and safely disrupt it.

Government and Church are not the same, but we must surely all want to put humanity and fairness at the heart of our asylum system. That is why the Church has called for safe and legal routes for asylum seekers, making visas available for humanitarian reasons, and helping families to be reunited.

When the 1951 Refugee Convention was agreed, it obviously did not foresee the climate crisis that may see hundreds of millions more people displaced in the coming decades. We must renew and build on this agreement. This is not about ‘open borders’: it’s about global cooperation to address a global problem, with human dignity at the centre – along with an international commitment to defeat the activities of people smugglers.

We stand at a crossroads: do we lead the world into a future where rich nations outsource their responsibilities to poorer nations? Or do we lead the world in reimagining a truly global asylum system, where every nation takes its fair share of people – like my friend – desperately in search of safety and a chance of living a good life?

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples: ‘Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ pray that as we seek together to build a new world in the years to come, we keep these words in mind.

4 min read

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