

Read the Archbishop's opening speech in his annual House of Lords debate today, which this year was on the UK's asylum and refugee policy.

My Lords,

I am very grateful to the usual channels for facilitating this debate, and to those who have had to work extra hard amongst the staff of the House to come in today. And to so many noble Lords for being present today. Thank you very much indeed.

I look forward to hearing the maiden speeches of the Right Reverend Prelate, the Bishop of Leicester, the noble Lord, Lord Sahota, and the noble Baroness, Lady Twycross on this subject.

This will not be a sermon. As my last well attended sermon was 4.30 mins that may be a disappointment to Noble Lords. It is nevertheless underpinned by deeply held spiritual principles deriving from the words of Christ, beginning over a thousand years ago in terms of our policy and the application of them.

The last time I delivered a sermon on this subject it gained more than the usual attention. So much so that I see some of our newspapers this week have rebutted the arguments I am about to make today before I've had chance to deliver them. "Get your rebuttal in first," Willie John McBride, captain of the 1974 Invincibles, almost told his team-mates.

For the avoidance of doubt, my intention today is to examine some of the moral considerations which should drive our policies in this area – and then to propose some ways forward for the short, medium and long term.

The Church is often – and quite often rightly – criticised for talking about morality in isolation from the complexity of the real world. But when it comes to the treatment of refugees and those seeking asylum it is the Church both here and abroad which is doing so much of the heavy lifting, of meeting and supporting, healing and advocacy. We look into the faces, and we listen to the voices. We speak from that experience.

Two weeks ago, I visited Mozambique, to inaugurate a new province of the Anglican Communion. While there we went up north to the area where Isis is very active indeed.

It is a beautiful country, with generous people, recovering from civil war, now facing extremist insurgency. I met a young woman who had fled Da'esh. She had seen beheadings in her village. She herself had been raped. She had watched them smash her baby's head against a tree. That is one reality.

Last week in Ukraine I met people who with astonishing resolve face a winter under Russian bombardment, explicitly to destroy civilian infrastructure, a winter where it will fall to minus 20 degrees with no electricity, no water and because of that no ability to heat.

Two images of suffering, which is replicated in other countries around the world. We know, and I want to make that absolutely clear, that Britain can neither resolve these problems by ourselves, nor can or should we take everyone who flees such devastation. It is beyond our capacity.

But we do need to take a lead: how we shape our policies must look into the faces, and we must listen to the voices.

Recognition of human dignity is the first principle which must underpin our asylum policy. A hostile environment is an immoral environment.

Each human being has an inherent and immeasurable worth, regardless of their status, wealth, heritage or background.

The book of Genesis tells us 'God created mankind in his own image'. In Matthew 25 in the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus tells his followers, about those who are strangers 'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'.

Care for the stranger has long been embedded in societies of Christian and Jewish roots and of other faiths right round the world. The welcome arrival in the UK of other religious faiths has deepened those traditions of compassion.

A compassionate asylum system is one that sees the faces of those in need and listens to their voices. A compassionate system does not mean open borders, but a disposition of generosity and a readiness to welcome those whose need is genuine and which we are able to meet. It also needs compassion and generosity to those communities that will receive refugees which are often neglected and forgotten, and I have seen this with my own eyes around the diocese I serve in East Kent, the Diocese of Canterbury, which perhaps bears the heaviest weight of this great crisis.

A compassionate policy is one that has confidence to reject the shrill narratives that all who come to us for help should be treated as liars, scroungers or less than fully human.

Compassion is not weakness or naivety. It recognises the impact on receiving communities, which includes the need to limit numbers and maintain security and order. Compassion means ending the criminal activity of people smugglers, perhaps one of the biggest industries in the world after drug smuggling. But it must distinguish between victims seeking help and criminals exploiting them.

So much of the public and political debate on migration is driven by fear, linked to change and loss of control. Some of these fears are understandable. Many people are concerned that their communities and local services risk being overwhelmed. In East Kent, local schools, businesses and hospitals have risen magnificently to the challenge. The RNLI and Border Force have carried out their mandate of saving life at sea, despite the disgraceful politicisation of their work by some. There is real pressure on housing, schools and GPs surgeries to which they respond superbly. But refugees have not by the way caused our housing crisis. We are around 40 years behind in our investment in housing stock; there would be a crisis anyway.

And the numbers of asylum seekers have dropped in the past two decades. In 2021, there were 48,540 asylum applications made in the UK. In 2002, that was 84,132.^[1] Almost twice as much.

Other countries take significantly more refugees – in the year ending September 2021, Germany received over 127,000 applications, and France over 96,000. It is not a competition my Lords, but the UK ranked only 18th in Europe for our intake of asylum applications per head of the population in that period.^[2] And, it cannot be repeated enough, four out of five refugees stay in their region of displacement, hosted by nations far poorer than our own. Speak to Uganda or other countries in that area and they will say: "45,000? That's a rounding error."

When we fail to challenge the harmful rhetoric that refugees are the cause of this country's ills, that they should be treated as problems

people, invaders to be tackled and deterred, we deny the essential value and dignity of our fellow human beings. The right to seek asylum – and the duty of the global community together – to protect refugees has been politically degraded in this country, when it should be a positive and a source of pride. I am not only addressing the Government front bench. This has been a decades-long downward slide over successive Labour, Conservative and Coalition Governments.

My Lords, you would expect me to say something about the Rwanda policy. We cannot separate the policy from the moral arguments. The Government did not do this when it announced the policy in Holy Week this year – the most sacred week of the Christian calendar – on Maundy Thursday, when in Christian belief Jesus was washing his disciples feet including Judas Iscariot, and the Prime Minister of the time, gave a speech in which he used the word ‘compassion’ six times and described the policy as ‘the morally right thing to do’.

In my sermon on Easter Sunday, I gave a brief view on this – it was five lines in a three-page sermon – and shortly after, every one of my colleagues on these benches issued a statement concluding that this was “an immoral policy that shames Britain”. It is very rare on these benches that we are united on almost anything. I congratulate the Prime Minister on managing to unite the bench of Bishops, what a miracle. It’s a good reason for the other 53% of the population to click the census to say they are Christians.

The Government has said the Rwanda policy aims to deter people arriving in the UK through ‘illegal, dangerous or unnecessary methods.’^[3]

There is little or no evidence that this deterrence or the hostile environment works. The government’s own impact assessments say so.

The complaint I make is not about Rwanda, a country I know well and in which there is much I admire. A compassionate policy is one that recognises we have a share of the global responsibility. Outsourcing our share creates more opportunities for people smugglers to operate in and around Rwanda. It is not a solution - it is a mistake and it will be a failure.

Furthermore, the desire for orderly migration, to discourage people from ‘skipping the queue’ is absurd if there is no legal queue; a point the Home Secretary and her officials recently conceded at the Home Affairs Select Committee in the Commons.

There is no ‘safe’ or ‘regular’ route for an Iranian Christian, or a gay man or woman from Eritrea, to come to the UK to claim asylum. Yet both would be highly likely to have a valid claim if they got here.

Unless you are coming from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria or Hong Kong, and that by the way is not asylum but financial visas or are eligible for the restrictive family reunion criteria, there is no regular route to the UK that you can use.

It was reported this month that not one person has been accepted and evacuated from Afghanistan under the Afghan citizens’ resettlement scheme, the Minister has very kindly written to me to correct that report which was in the newspapers last Sunday. I hope in that response he will clarify that correction for the whole House.

When migrants arrive here, our system is grossly wasteful - in both human and financial terms. Control has become cruelty. Staggering inefficiencies by successive governments trap people in limbo - at incredible expense to the tax payer - in the system for years, unable to build a life or to contribute to society.

I recently heard the story of someone who has been in the asylum system for 14 years. 14 years, my Lords! Home Affairs Select Committee evidence shows that of all the people who arrived in the UK by boat and claimed asylum in 2021, only 4% of claims had been processed by the Home Office by October 2022.^[4]

This does not treat people with dignity or compassion and nor is it control.

As well as the overcrowded and disease-ridden conditions exposed recently, which the government is now addressing, camps and hotel accommodation keep migrants separate from the rest of the community. This segregation feeds concerns about lack of control. It fails to treat asylum seekers and refugees as neighbours or citizens-in-waiting. We miss out on the gifts they bring and want to contribute.

I met someone yesterday who is now a citizen, incredibly proud of his citizenship and contributing enormously to our society, working with people in prison helping them to go straight when they come out. Solidarity is built by contact and building relationships. Instead, we feed the politics of suspicion and division.

There are real alternatives to all this.

We have seen in the Ukraine scheme that asylum seekers and refugees can live within existing communities. Such communities should receive prompt and adequate Government support. It does cost money, but is cheaper than exporting our responsibilities, and much cheaper if the system is compassionate, clear, efficient, accurate and effective.

We are clear that the UK cannot take everyone. But it can make its decisions through a system which balances effective, accurate, and clear control with compassion and dignity, a system which is based in our history and proper moral responsibilities.

We used to talk of No Recourse to Public Funds. A system of segregation risks creating a policy of 'No Recourse to Public Compassion'. We should take heart from the magnificent public response to refugees of recent years: there are still in this country profound reserves of kindness and goodwill to draw from.

So what can we do in the short, medium and long term, underpinned by these principles of human dignity and compassion?

In the short term, we must combat smugglers, and prevent small boats crossing the Channel.

To minimise irregular arrivals, we need to provide safe ways and legal ways for people to get here and receive assessment and, where appropriate, protection. Approaches include expanding family reunification models and community sponsorship and humanitarian visas and corridors from a far greater number of countries.

We cannot continue with tenfold increase in the number of people waiting more than a year for an initial decision an increase between 2010 and 2020.^[5]

The average processing time for an asylum case is currently 15 months – it should be a maximum of six. In Germany in 2021, the average asylum procedure took 6.6 months, despite a far higher refugee and asylum seeker population.^[6]

Nearly one third of those who have been waiting for more than six months are made up of nationals from ten countries that each have a successful asylum application rate here of 75% to 99%.^[7] It is ridiculous and disgraceful that people fleeing Afghanistan or Syria are having to wait so long when their applications will almost certainly be granted.

It is right that 'safe countries' are currently determined by statutory instrument. Then parliament can democratically scrutinise those decisions, altering them where needed based on the views and needs of the population.

We need a triaging system for those who arrive, which distinguishes quickly between people, based on the likelihood that they will be granted asylum. It will speed up decision-making, allowing those who aren't going to be granted asylum to be removed almost immediately.

That is not so far from our current policy, but in practice it's not happening – the Home Office could do that.^[8]

Removing people whose claims are unsuccessful can happen in a dignified way. There has been real success with voluntary removals in the past when the Government collaborated with civil society. Returns, have been on a downward trajectory for years. Removals will only be swift, just and fair if the system is clear, accurate and not overwhelmed.

In the meantime we should also make one major change that I propose which is that asylum seekers should not just be allowed to work, but expected to work – except in limited circumstances where it would clearly be inappropriate. This combines the right to fair and dignified protection matched with a responsibility to contribute to their new society and the common good.

In the medium term, I suggest, people smuggling, like piracy, should become an international crime. And that the UK should take the lead in the struggle against people smuggling, forming an international body to track it down and attack it everywhere. It is what we did in the 17th century against piracy and 19th century slave trading; surely this is as serious.

In the longer term, we need to update the 1951 Refugee Convention, which is hugely valuable in maintaining the importance of protection for all refugees but must be made fit for the new challenges we face. A recent report ^[9] by the Legatum Institute lays out some areas of ambiguity, including the role of the 'safe third country' principle, the responsibility to report other countries who are hosting many refugees, guidance on return and readmission policies, and the eligibility of people fleeing new drivers of displacement such as climate migrants. This problem is going to get worse my Lords.

Britain has shown global leadership in 1951; we can do so again. Time is not a luxury: climate change and conflict risks driving migration for future generations at a rate we cannot imagine today. Perhaps tenfold more.

Of course, we do not have all the answers on these benches. But the Church of England, together with many others, plays a leading role in dealing with the consequences of our present policy and its chronic dysfunction. We have done so for quite a little while.

In a chapel in Canterbury Cathedral, there is an inscription several centuries old that bears witness to the protection given to French Huguenots who fled persecution in the 17th and 18th Centuries. The community needed a place to worship, and a chapel in the Cathedral was offered to them by a simple exchange of one page letters. They are still there: the French Protestant Church of Canterbury still gathers to worship there

today, next to the plaque which heralds:

“the glorious asylum which England has in all times given to foreigners flying for refuge against oppression and tyranny.”^[10]

My Lords this is our tradition, this is our history, this is our pride, let us make it our future. I beg to move.

[1] <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/23102/documents/169178/default/>

[2] <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/asylum-in-the-uk.html> - The EU, EEA and Switzerland

[3] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-61782866>

[4] <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/home-affairs-select-committee-oral-evidence-on-channel-crossings-refugee-council-response/>

[5] <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/thousands-seeking-asylum-face-cruel-wait-of-years-for-asylum-decision-fresh-research-shows/>

[6] https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/asylum-procedure/procedures/regular-procedure/#_ftn2

[7] Graham O'Neill's briefing on chronic delays in asylum system (Scottish Refugee Council)

[8] [Two-tier asylum system to clear migrant backlog | News | The Times](#)

[9] <https://li.com/reports/a-british-national-refugee-policy/>

[10] <http://www.frenchchurchcanterbury.org.uk/history/samuel-smiles-1812-1904.html>

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