



MIDDLE EAST Reflections

SPRING 2022



Refugees and migrants in Macedonia, Aug 2015 (Kiro Popov/Shutterstock)

SEEKING REFUGE

In the week I am writing, the world is reeling from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. European nations have opened their borders and received over three million civilians. On 28 February, over a thousand faith leaders called on the UK Prime Minister to reconsider his government's proposed Nationality and Borders Bill. They believe it criminalises the majority of asylum seekers who have little choice except to use "irregular routes" to the UK, even though most subsequently show they have a legal claim to asylum.

In ministering in the Middle East and North Africa, SAT-7 serves a region that is massively affected by migration – both forcible displacement through war or persecution as well as migration for better opportunities. This migration happens both within

and away from the region. A number of SAT-7's staff, especially from Iran, are themselves exiles from their homelands, often because of religious persecution.

People movements have always been a feature of our world. Our *At a Glance: Egypt* feature reveals some of the many peoples that came to that nation over the centuries. The Bible tells multiple stories of migrants and refugees: from Abraham's call from Ur (in today's Iraq) to the Holy Land, the Hebrews' migration to Egypt, the exodus, exile in Babylon, Mary and Joseph's escape to Egypt with the infant Jesus, and the persecution that scattered believers after Pentecost.

How should Scripture shape our response to those who seek to come to our lands – as refugees, workers, migrants or visitors? One feature we see across the Bible's pages is a culture of hospitality. Abraham

provided a bountiful meal for his angelic visitors in Genesis 18:1-10. The author of Hebrews probably had this in mind when he wrote, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2, NIV).

The Hebrew word for "foreigner", "stranger" or "alien" appears 22 times in Deuteronomy. Twice it refers to the Hebrews, telling them that "God loves the alien" and they are to do the same since they were aliens in Egypt (eg, Deut 10:18-19). Exploited there as slaves, they knew how it felt to be mistreated.

Exodus 12:49 and Leviticus 24:22 call for a legal system that applies equally to strangers and citizens. The Book of Ruth relates the story of a vulnerable foreigner whose support and loyalty towards her Israelite mother-in-law leads her to being integrated, not only in the community of Israel, but in Jesus' family tree (Matt 1:5). Towards the end of His ministry, Jesus provided an essential test of our discipleship: when we welcome or reject the stranger, we welcome or reject Him (Matt 25:35-36, 43).

Ultimately, the Bible gives us all a very different perspective on our citizen status. Leviticus 25:23 described the Hebrew residents of the promised land as "but aliens and tenants" in a land on loan from God. In the New Testament, God's kingdom is not spoken of in physical terms; in this life we are called to live as "aliens and strangers" (1 Peter 1:17, 2:11). Our true citizenship is not found in any atlas but is with God in His kingdom (Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 13:14).

(Continued overleaf)

SEEKING INCLUSION

The previous reflection challenges us to think about our response to the stranger who comes to our shores. This reflection asks us to consider those who often get left out or even, left behind.

In the accompanying Middle East Briefing we read about the challenges and exclusion experienced by people with disabilities in the region. (See *A Glance: Disability and Integration*.) In Matthew's Gospel, we can read of similar challenges in the first-century Middle East:

"Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 'It is written,' he said to them, 'My house will be called a house of prayer', but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'" The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they were indignant" (Matthew 21:12-15, NIV).

This passage is famously used to speak about Jesus' righteous anger against the corrupt system of selling doves in the temple grounds, especially to visitors during the Passover Festival (exclusion). But it also speaks powerfully about Jesus making space for all people to be given access to God's house of prayer – especially the most vulnerable (inclusion).

The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as God's agent of change – the one who stands up for and helps the oppressed and most marginalised – the one who proclaims that the Kingdom of God has come. But these proclamations of hope are not just empty words. For, as we see in the above passage, Jesus re-creates an actual physical space for them to use their voice in prayer, in worship – for them to be welcomed and included in community together. Actions indeed speak louder than words.

The statistics about disability in the Middle East Briefing are stark, showing that the MENA region has significant challenges in order to bring change. Whatever our ability or disability, we're all seeking inclusion in God's family. And at SAT-7 we also know that lasting change begins with changed attitudes, which is why we invest in programmes like *City of Stars*, which models disability inclusion. "When I watch *City of Stars*, I pray for the children with disabilities. If they were at my school, I would welcome them," says a young Egyptian girl who watches the SAT-7 KIDS show. **Find out more: sat7uk.org/city-of-stars**

DISCUSSION

1. Read Matthew 21:12-15. How do you think God feels when He sees the Church or institutions of our day excluding the most vulnerable?
2. What other passages in Matthew demonstrate God's heart for the marginalised and those whose voice is not heard?
3. What visible or invisible injustices in today's world make you angry? Which situations make you more inclined to act than others. Why this might be?
4. It might not mean overturning tables, but what practical thing could you do to challenge yourself, family, and church to be more inclusive? ■

SEEKING REFUGE

(Continued from p1)

DISCUSSION

1. How should our status as "strangers" in this world affect the way we respond to the stranger who comes to our shores?
2. Some have seen a contrast in the welcoming European response to Ukrainian refugees and the response to arrivals from Syria's war. Is this because it is easier to show compassion to those closer to us in culture, faith, geography or race? Consider Deuteronomy 10:18-19 and the mercy shown by a Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. In what ways do these challenge us?
3. The SAT-7 *Refugee Tales* series depicts stories of Arab refugees who have undergone traumatic experiences but who also show great resourcefulness. Some are helping others in their host countries through NGOs and churches. The Bishop of Durham, Rt Revd Paul Butler, has said*, "I would rather people see refugees as a gift to us than something else." Can you think of ways that friends or neighbours from other cultures have been a gift to you?
4. Are there local opportunities for you to meet, support or learn from refugees? Christian organisations include Welcome Churches, Church Refugee Network, and Sanctuary Foundation, while local councils and volunteer organisations like City of Sanctuary UK can provide a variety of volunteering opportunities. ■

*BBC Radio 4 Sunday, 13 March 2022



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