

## Building Bridges or Barriers?

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On Racial Justice Sunday this year, the Catholic Association for Racial Justice will be reflecting on the issues surrounding migration and asking the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' How can our faith inform our thoughts and actions as we adapt to the changing nature of our society?

This Sunday, 12 September, is Racial Justice Sunday in Britain and Ireland. For over 25 years the Catholic Association for Racial Justice (CARJ), together with many organisations, has supported and given a voice to people from all backgrounds striving for racial justice in society and within the Church. This year, to guide our reflections on Racial Justice Sunday, CARJ has chosen the theme of 'Migration: Building Bridges or Barriers?' This theme addresses the question in Luke 10:29: 'Who is my neighbour?' The issue of migration puts this question into particularly sharp focus.



important dimension of the current reality of living in Britain.

Rev Jean-Arnold de Clermont, President of the Council of European Churches, said this year:

Migration is at the heart of the churches' agenda in Europe. Migration is an overall reality in society today – migration is posing challenges to societies, political institutions and churches. At

the same time migration offers perspectives for living in diversity and for enrichment in personal life as well as for the life of Churches.

The Church places the sanctity of human life at the heart of the migration debate. As Christians, the belief in the dignity and equality of all human beings is fundamental to the practice of our faith. We are all created in the image of God and are loved by God as part of one human family. The scriptures challenge our preconceptions about one another and call upon us to speak out about injustice where we find it. Jesus was never afraid to cross social, cultural, geographical and religious boundaries – aren't we supposed to be following in his footsteps?

Churches throughout Britain and Ireland, and all over the world, recognise that migration is not a new phenomenon. They share a common biblical tradition that the welcoming of strangers, particularly those who are vulnerable and in need, is an essential aspect of our mission and ministry. Migration comprises an integral part of British history and an

The European Churches are responding to the challenges posed by migration by aiming to be visibly committed to welcoming strangers, answering the biblical call to tackle injustice, and by promoting an inclusive policy at the European and national levels for migrants, refugees and ethnic minority groups. At a policy level, this is done by advocating the rights of all migrant workers and their families, enhancing opportunities for encounter and participation, and combating exclusion and unemployment.

But what are we doing as individuals and in our church communities?

In a climate of financial uncertainty and international political tensions, it is too easy to reignite a blame culture and victimise the strangers in our midst, making them feel responsible for all the problems we all face in today's society. 'They're taking all our jobs

and housing'; 'there is not enough for us so why should we give them handouts?' Immigration is such an emotive subject for most nations facing today's strains on its economy, sometimes fuelled by the legacy of negative views of different races by some. There is no place for racism in the immigration debate. Racism...there, the word is out. Let's look at it rationally.

No nation should be defined by the racial identity of its inhabitants. It should be defined by a democratic, fair, pragmatic approach to justice for all, of course taking into account the practicalities of balancing the welfare of its host citizens. It goes without saying that not everyone who advocates greater immigration restriction is inherently racist. Not at all. Weighing up the costs and benefits of immigration is complex. Immigrants often have valuable skills and their cultures enrich our national life, and the Christians among them can renew our churches with their fervent faith. But at the same time, it has a cost to the nation: large-scale immigration imposes burdens. Taxpayers bear new expenses for education, social services, healthcare, and law enforcement.

So how do we tackle this in a way that is fair for all?

There is a difference between the callings of Church and government. The Church is called by God to welcome all with the grace of Jesus Christ. It does not make distinctions according to nationality or immigration status. Government is called to manage its nation effectively and to enforce justice, and it looks first to the interests of the citizens to which it is responsible.

However, government and Church are not mutually exclusive. We ought to want immigrants to have legal rights and to be treated fairly because it is in the best long-term interest of our own society and its health. It is bad for all of us to have a group that lacks legal protection and is vulnerable to exploitation.

Daniel Carroll, in his book *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and Bible* rejects the methods of those who take a position on the issue of immigration on the basis of, among other things, racial motivations, instead urging a different approach:

It is easy to look at the immigration issue through the lens of economics, national security, or even national identity. But Christ's followers are obligated to look at the issue through the lens of Scripture. As we do, we find not only that this topic is close to the heart of God but also that his laws have implications for the way we should respond today.

So what can this 'lens of scripture' tell us about how, as Christians today, we should approach the issue of immigration? Well, essentially, it tells us how God asks to treat the strangers in our midst. To give just two of an endless list of examples:

- The people of Israel are reminded by the Lord of their own past as slaves who fled to a new land, and told to be mindful of that in their treatment of others: 'The alien who resides among you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.' (Leviticus 19:34; see also Exodus 22:21)
- In the Letter to the Hebrews we hear: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares.'

The call to welcome strangers is not just a matter of the earthly justice that it may help to bring about, but is rooted in the fact that the way we act towards the person in front of us is the way we act towards Christ; in welcoming others, we welcome Jesus.

The CARJ Racial Justice Charter affirms:

... that the ethnic and cultural diversity that has existed in Britain for centuries is a reflection of God's gift of diversity in creation. It is strength to be treasured, nurtured and regarded as a blessing for us all.

We believe that Catholics cannot afford to treat racial justice questions as peripheral to the Good News. Since commitment to racial justice lies at the heart of Christian witness it must permeate the life of every Catholic who should respond to the imperative in Micah 6:8 to 'act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.'

Hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, human tragedy and personal suffering see no race, no cultural differences; but our faith expects us to respond as Jesus would, not just in our hearts but also in practical ways, living out our mission beyond the bounds of the church doors. Reacting to natural disasters and doing something to help is admirable and most of us fall within that category, but our faith asks us to do more: engaging with your neighbour next door or in your

street, with the child in your school whose first language is not English, the colleague in your place of work who may be highly qualified but is cleaning the floors, or the person in the pew beside you who you offer the sign of peace.

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