

TO WELCOME THE STRANGER

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Over this weekend we're marking the 300th Anniversary of the Raising of the Standard in 1715 at Braemar. We're doing so in comfort and safety.

However at the same time an apocalyptic nightmare is unfolding before us as politicians of dozens of nations are transfixed in the headlights of millions of refugees forced to flee from their homelands.

Why is this refugee migration happening? In some measure, I would personally say, it is because of the failure of the Iraq and Afghanistan military campaigns of the past ten years and more. In part also it is because the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 created power vacuums across the Middle East and North and sub-Saharan Africa which ISIS and other equally malign and mendacious organisations have willingly exploited to full advantage.

These new forces are clever. They deploy and combine all the capacities of western financial investment, international communication with a wicked personal ferocity designed that terrorises individuals and groupings who disagree with them. Simultaneously they paralyse into inaction those governments who oppose them and who seem incapable of stopping them or responding to the world-wide crisis they are wantonly and deliberately causing.

What should we do? For a start we cannot continue as we are. Public opinion around the world is forcing governments, our own UK government included, to expand its horizon to respond to the need of our stranger who in desperation wants to share the safety which we freely enjoy.

Those who, perhaps in more peaceable times, have travelled in Arab countries will readily tell of the hospitality given to the visitor. Tea, time and courtesy are unfailingly extended.

How then will the refugees who manage to walk ashore, or who manage to cross land borders into the EU, view us when doors are not opened in welcome? Our current political attitude is so alien to the hospitality we would have experienced in their homes that we risk alienating those who hitherto had thought us friends. And in the face of the global terror threat of ISIS, and its associates, we need all the friends we can get.

Thankfully public opinion is forcing our own government to act in a way that is more open and hospitably generous than it has previously been. This 'people pressure' is rekindling that historic generosity of the highland home where, at least until a generation ago, the door would remain unlocked so that the stranger could come in and find shelter from the storm.

What will happen when the stranger arrives, be they from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Nigeria or wherever? Communities the length and breadth of Scotland must then come together with a welcome that betokens once more the historic generosity of highland home and hearth.

As a young priest I visited Vietnamese 'boat people' (as they were called) who were settled in Falkirk. We have the space to take more - to share the international burden as peoples of many countries are no longer safe within their own borders. We have the community goodwill and decency to do this for such is our heritage. And once settled, if they cannot return home to re-established safety and security, then the refugees of today will be nation builders alongside us tomorrow.

And whilst this is happening other discreet questions need to be faced. How is it that ISIS can invest its vast resources in our banking system without us knowing where their money is? How can they use social media with next to no controls seeming to be imposed? And how can we call to our aid those refugees who speak their language and know their thought processes in the fight against them? In times to come we need them as allies and friends. Now is not the time to alienate them.

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