

A PLACE OF WELCOME

This was written for The Inverness Courier

My sadness and frustration is heightened in this present refugee crisis as I listen to decidedly grudging offers of help coming from the UK government. We live in a country that has a history of welcoming those who are in need of shelter and I am proud of that, and I believe it is something we should be prepared to continue doing.

Nailed above the front door at Bishop's House is a small scallop shell, this shell has travelled with us from home to home and is an outward symbol of hospitality, it denotes that this is a place of welcome. We have it there, the ancient symbol of pilgrimage and hospitality; because we believe that the church should be a place of welcome, just as I had always believed that this country was a welcoming place. I hear the voices of many nations as I walk through Inverness and I believe Inverness is enhanced by it.

No one uproots their family, risks death and injury, leaves behind all that is familiar without good reason, these people are not on the move because they want a handout, it is because they are in fear of their lives, and see no future for their children. If I found myself in the same situation I too would be walking the European hard shoulders.

So what can we as a community do? We can make instant responses to the needs of the refugee, offer accommodation, send supplies, all good things to do, but what is really needed is for people to let our political leaders see that we are a nation who cares and that that care transcends national borders. It does matter to me that people are being bombed, it does matter to me that children receive no education, it does matter to me that people are imprisoned without trial but it shouldn't matter to me where they come from. The Government has announced that 20,000 refugees will be welcomed by 2020, that has to be an inadequate number, not least when we see what other countries are able to do. In communities across the land we can all play our part – no matter how small it might seem – in showing compassion to those seeking a place of safety. As Nicola Sturgeon has said “Scotland and the UK have a moral obligation to take a fair and proportionate share” It is more than a moral obligation, it is a basic human instinct to help one another.

As a church leader I do believe that one way to make a difference is to gather and pray for those who are caught up in this crisis, to pray and to show solidarity in our concerns. For that reason we are marking 25 September as a day when Inverness Cathedral will focus specifically on the refugee crisis and, as it always does, will provide a place of prayer, a place just to sit and reflect, a place to join with others in our concerns and allow our voices to be heard saying that we care what happens to the people of this world.

The Cathedral will start the day of prayer and reflection at 8.00am and there will be opportunities for personal prayer, places to leave offerings of money for the aid agencies working with refugees, times of meditation and all will conclude with a Service of Hope at 7.30pm. People can come for five minutes or for the whole day, they can bring their sandwiches or their flask, people can come from all traditions and faiths, they can come if they have no faith. All are welcome, as I pray all are always welcome.

The Rt Rev Mark Strange
Bishop of Moray, Ross and Caithness