

---

# Thinking Allowed: Christian engagement in public debates

## Refugees

**Sermon by Sarah Teather, Director of Jesuit Refugee Service UK;  
Given at evensong, St John's College Cambridge Sunday 28 October 2018**

*1 Kings 17:7-16 (Elijah and the widow); Luke 4:14-30 (Jesus in the temple at Nazareth)*

*[introduction]*

“There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah” Jesus said in our Gospel reading, “when the heaven was shut up for three and a half years and famine raged throughout the land. But to none of these was Elijah sent”.

No, God sent his prophet to a poor widow in a city in Sidon; the birthplace of Jezebel, Israel’s Baal worshipping enemy...

It is sobering to think that Jesus’ earthly ministry nearly ended there. The crowd reacted with such violence to the idea that God might choose to relate to foreigners, that they expelled him from the city, and tried to fling him off a cliff.

But God’s way of confounding boundaries is precisely what’s at stake in the two readings tonight. And I think it has something powerful to say to the debate around refugees. Something surprising. About the gift of giving hospitality; the liberating effect of mutual inter-dependence; and the transforming power of vulnerable encounter with the other.

*[a message the world will struggle to hear]*

It is a message the world will struggle to hear. There’s been an aggressive gear change in the global noise of hostility to migrants and refugees this year. Whether it be tearing children from their parents’ arms at the US border, or turning boats away at Italy’s shores, it leaves a sense of foreboding. The Windrush scandal exposed the UK’s sins too, but still our obsession with toughness shows no signs of abating.

Swimming into this unpredictable river of geopolitics are men, women and children forced to migrate. The result is what Pope Francis has decried as the *globalisation of indifference*: we have lost our bearings, he says, forgotten how to weep with others, and all been rendered nameless and faceless as a result.

At the Jesuit Refugee Service, our mission is first and foremost to accompany refugees – to be with them, as companions. In this context, we come to know people by name, as people who are much

accompany • serve • advocate



/jesuitrefugeeserviceuk



@JRSUK

JRS UK, 2 Chandler Street, London, E1W 2QT  
020 7488 7310 | uk@jrs.net | www.jrsuk.net

more than the label of refugee. Perhaps surprisingly, the heart of what we do often isn't the practical help we provide, but the everyday ordinary sharing of meals and the human relationships that evolve.

I have learnt a lot from listening to refugees. Often, I am inspired by their courage. Sometimes I am startled by their insights. Purpose, relationships and place are complex weaves of identity, which displacement unravels, and each thread must be plaited again. When struggling with my own grief after the death of my brother, listening to their struggles to recreate a different future for themselves in their new unchosen reality sometimes showed me the way.

In spite of all refugees have been through before leaving their own country, what is often more painful than what is lost is the fresh wound of rejection from the place they hoped would provide sanctuary. It is almost as if they arrive safely after a long journey and get left at the gate to their new life. Limbo gnaws the threads of hope. Jesus's promise to liberate captives has a visceral resonance for anyone stranded in this in-between land.

I have seen many projects JRS runs around the world. A mix of grief, rejection and limbo, in some combination, is frequently a feature of refugees' reality.

And yet, there are also striking differences from place to place.

You can't help but notice how much more generous is the welcome for refugees in the poorest of communities, as opposed to the richest. And how much higher is the threshold of opposition to refugees' presence in the places that have already received huge numbers, as opposed to the places that have received very few. Like the poor widow who feeds Elijah, this generosity amidst scarcity is a challenge to our self-centredness amidst abundance.

Compare the millions of refugees hosted by tiny Lebanon for example, with the fuss made over welcoming 5000 resettled refugees from Syria here in Britain last year. Or compare the gift of land and freedom to work given to refugees who arrive in Uganda, with the torrid time asylum seekers get trying to gain recognition of their need for protection in the UK. In the words of the anthem we heard tonight (Walton: The Twelve), they walk in the valley of mistrust. Those we work with at JRS UK face gruelling years of destitution and sometimes detention, from which they never fully recover. Theirs is an intense experience of rejection and corrosive limbo.

#### *[Elijah and the widow]*

When we meet Elijah in our reading he is fleeing persecution, in hiding from the King. He must have walked miles in search of water to arrive, as a stranger at the threshold of enemy territory, begging hospitality for what he needs to survive.

The widow he greets at the gate is apparently in no place to provide for him. She is starving; her child is dying. Indeed, he interrupts her at a moment of particular vulnerability, as she is collecting firewood alone, away from the protection of her community. He asks for water, which is in short supply. And then asks her to share her last scraps of food with him, making an improbable promise about never-emptying jars.

accompany • serve • advocate



/jesuitrefugeeserviceuk



@JRSUK

JRS UK, 2 Chandler Street, London, E1W 2QT  
020 7488 7310 | uk@jrs.net | www.jrsuk.net

A work of the Jesuits in Britain, registered charity in England & Wales, 230165, and Scotland, SC04090

Widows have a special place in scripture: for the God of Israel is their defender. There is then something odd to modern ears attuned to the burden of need, about sending this poor starving woman yet another mouth to feed. It seems inexplicable that a God who cares for her might ask her to choose an option, which reason suggests, could lead more promptly to the death of her and her child.

But here is the topsy turvy message of God – and we heard it echoed in Jesus’ formulation: to give hospitality is not a burden but a privilege. God bestowed a great gift in inviting the widow to welcome His messenger and put what little she had at His disposal.

What God does with the widow’s limited resources is indeed miraculous – and nothing is wasted. But what trust it must have taken, not only to hand over the first scrap of food, but to go on trusting that each day there would be enough. The promise made to Elijah is not of abundance in fact, but that he will be sustained. And the Lord sustains him by providing for them both through the generosity and trust of the poor widow. There is only enough because they share what they have; there is only enough because they are reliant on one another; there is only enough because they recognise their reliance on God to provide what they need.

*[conclusion]*

The story of Elijah and the widow is laden with sacramental symbolism it is hard to miss: the request for water, the morsel of bread in the hand, never-ending oil; even the willingness of the one carrying two pieces of wood to face death to save the life of another. We are evidently meant to pay attention to this passage.

And Jesus raises this story of surprising, vulnerable encounter across forbidden boundaries immediately after laying out his own mission. Perhaps he does so, because it is integral in some way: perhaps if we are to be healed, set free, restored, we too must allow ourselves to be in relationship with the stranger who asks our help.

This is our experience at the Jesuit Refugee Service: that in coming to know refugees as people, the work of healing and transformation goes both ways. And the work is a privilege. And a gift.

Because it is the hungry stranger, who bears God’s promise; the one who makes demands on us, who teaches us how to rely on God; the one who asks for hospitality, with whom we share our food, who may ultimately be the one who saves our life.

accompany • serve • advocate



/jesuitrefugeeserviceuk



@JRSUK

JRS UK, 2 Chandler Street, London, E1W 2QT  
020 7488 7310 | uk@jrs.net | www.jrsuk.net

A work of the Jesuits in Britain, registered charity in England & Wales, 230165, and Scotland, SC04090