
A “WE” AS WIDE AS HUMANITY

Dr. Anna Rowlands

“God says to the people who had lost their land, there are plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for your harm, for a future with hope”. These are the words used by a refugee explaining how the words spoken through the prophet Jeremiah had sustained him through many years of refugee uncertainty and precarious living. These words gave him hope in the face of impossible difficulty. He found them to be words of blessing, promise and of love, when everything in the asylum system he was subject to, spoke of the opposite: of disinterest, condemnation, hostility and refusal. To deny someone a future was to extinguish hope. This man explained that he read the scriptures as a story of the promise of God, sustained from the act of Creation through the generations. All is gift, he told me, what matters is promise. Our response to this promise, he told me, must be to create a legacy of love, wherever we are and however we are able. Even in extreme difficulty. We are given to each other for the purpose of care. This had been a realisation that had come to this man whilst incarcerated in an immigration detention facility; when he had felt most alone. This was, he said, when he learnt what freedom really is: the capacity to believe in a purposeful world, where the purpose is to learn how to give and to receive love in a community of others. These would be powerful words of biblical interpretation no matter who they came from, but for this man they were hard-won and much-tested insights. They were words that gave him the strength to refuse the smallness and meanness of the story of indignity and exclusion presented to him, and to embrace the vision of a greater human and divine truth. In a world without shelter, this was the story he had made his dwelling.

In this message for World Migrant and Refugee Day, Pope Francis takes us back to the beginning of our human story, to the origins of our shared human journey. In the beginning life is given as gift and as blessing, and the life we are created in, and for, is one of community – a community with an inherent value and with an ultimate purpose. The ‘we’ that God intends for our welfare, is formed through deep friendship, accompaniment and companionship. It is a relationship of friendship, fraternity and care; of interdependence not dependency or exclusion. *Fratelli tutti* teaches that this law of friendship is the first law: a law that transcends all other law. This is the legacy of love my refugee friend spoke of.

For Christians, the ultimate expression of this companionship is celebrated in the Eucharist – where we are *com-panis*; those who break or share bread with another, who give expression to the unity from which we come, and for which we are destined. Here, at a table of equals, the original story of the ‘we’ of creation is re-membered, put back together again, beyond the fracturing and division of our lives. This is the story and the event that Christians are called to make our dwelling.

As *Fratellit tutti* teaches, this call to social friendship – to become through every small act an ever wider ‘we’ – is a shared tradition and heritage amongst religions. The vision of human fraternity, the createdness and co-belonging of the whole human family, beyond and within a world of borders and states, is as a story that can help draw us back together again. We live in an age that desperately needs an alternative story of human purpose and value, beyond mere consumption, choice, or dis-value. The story of un-belonging needs to be replaced with a powerful story of brother and sisterhood. An objective story that is ‘for our welfare, and not for our harm’.

This requires not only a Church ready to act to build those networks of care and belonging, but also a Church open to deep learning from the experience of those who migrate. We learn how to be an ever wider ‘we’ together.

In this message the Holy Father reminds us that the most difficult task is not learning how to be an individual, but learning the unique value of every person, destined to be part of a people. The metaphors of membership in the scriptures and the Church tradition are instructive: we are called to become a people, a city, a community, a household, a body. These are the metaphors we use to talk about becoming a ‘we’ not merely an ‘I’. We face in the world today – and in every generation – a crisis of membership and deep belonging, the fracturing of the body, the city, the household, the community.

The message of Pope Francis is that salvation is always a story of membership and belonging, the story of a ‘we’. If Christ comes to repair the world created by the Father in love, then our response is to take up the work of reconciliation and healing which Christ lays before us. In doing so we learn to be at home in our story of salvation, and we offer this home as shelter to a broken world.
