Sermon - Downing Place United Reformed Church, Cambridge

29th April 2018

*Deuteronomy 23: 1-8*

*Acts 8: 26-40*

I had never been to a migrants’ identification and detention centre before last week. Nor I would have ever expected to be shown around one by almost 20 police officers, all working hard to show Nigel and myself how democratically accountable their procedures are. At some point I even suspected they misinterpreted my letter, referring to ‘a visit from a British minister’. What looks like a well-oiled machine, a theoretical 72h process in which the Italian authorities and those of the European agency Frontex (among them, also British officers), can decide either to let you start the application for refugee status, or to repatriate you, is very different from the messy reality of mass arrivals that happens as soon as the weather starts improving. We are at the bottom of Sicily, and the latitude shows us south of Tunis: good weather comes with the wind from the Sahara, whose sand yellows our car, and whose breath pushes boats across the sea. The feeling of being at the very end of Europe is startling. ‘This visit is very important – says Giovanna Scifo, the director of the Casa delle Cuture in the nearby town of Scicli, the Waldensian home for minor refugees that St Columba’s has been supporting – it is only the pressure of NGOs and Churches that forces authorities to higher standards’. 3 years ago this detention centre, who then could only host 180 people, had more than 1000 residents. It was unclean, chaotic, and the 72h for many became months of imprisonment. Among them, many small children. In such centres services (from catering to cleaning) are often privatised, and in a land where corruption and the mafia are longstanding issues, many have made a quick buck at the expense of refugees. Giovanna points to a corner: it is there where 3 years ago she found a young woman on the floor, probably not older than 16. She was in labour, on a dirty mattress, infested with ants. The only privacy given to her was obtained with three wardrobes, meant to form a sort of a room. Giovanna stormed into the office of the warden, threatening to send pictures to the press. An ambulance arrived, and little Sara was born. With her big head of curly hair, it was indeed 3-years old Sara that had welcomed us the day before in Scicli. Her contagious joy is similar to that of the other mothers and children that we encounter at the Casa, where we have dinner after the visit to the detention centre. ‘Why did they leave their homes pregnant?’, I ask. ‘They didn’t’ – ‘they have all been raped in Libya. All of them you see in this room’. Only the oldest among them, I realise, are as old as my undergraduates, and many have 4 or 5 year olds to take care of. But the sense of fellowship and human warmth is striking. As Deuteronomy puts it, ‘the curse has been transformed into a blessing’.

Our New Testament story today is so well known that is at risk of being reduced to a cliché. The excluded by the ancient law is now included in the new covenant in Christ. The Gospel not only does not distinguish between the Jew and the Gentile, but also rejects any form of discrimination. Indeed, we have used this text to announce that the Word of God compels us to open the doors of the Church to the many that we have previously marginalised, not least because of their gender, sexuality, or ethnicity. But to me, a white middle class heterosexual Western male, this is not just the story of the eunuch being baptized, but that of Philip discovering the other. It would be hard to find anyone among us disagreeing with the fact that the love of God is for everyone, that Christ died for all, that ‘all are welcome in this place’, as we often sing, and that indeed all deserve a safe life and their human rights protected. But this story, that we could almost retitle ‘the story of the conversion of the perplexed good Christian Philip’, talks of encounter. Of the many conundrums of living the faith in the world, where prudence and common sense might need to be applied. Because as citizens it makes only sense to want the migration phenomenon managed, for example. And I am not talking here of the shameful Windrush repatriations, or of the anti-migrant rhetoric that is so successful in our age. I am talking of us, of myself, a migrant, that is moved to tears by the images of refugees, but who also might worry that ‘completely opening the borders’ might mean labour undercut by unfair competition, or extra pressure on an already overstretched NHS. I am talking of decent people, that maybe like to distinguish between economic migrants and refugees. But Philip does not encounter the normative category of ‘those men whose testicles have been crushed’, as Deuteronomy describes it, but that individual Ethiopian man, who is trying to understand if that Gospel could be also for him. In Sicily we did not encounter ‘economic migrants’ or ‘refugees’, but little Sara, with her curly hair. And this is not a cheesy point, but a theological check-mate to our need to rationalise reality and to protect ourselves. Because the love of God unravels the word we inhabit, and opens us to a new hope.

But the good news is that Scriptures reflect this experience, and our struggle to make sense of the other, and to understand God’s command.

Indulge me for a moment. In Hebrew the ‘ger’ is the foreigner that, alone or in a group, has left their motherland after political or economic trouble, looking for protection within another tribe. So were Abraham in Hebron, Moses in Midian, Elimelech and his family in Moab (according to Ruth’s book), and indeed so was Israel in Egypt. The ‘foreigner’ is usually poor – albeit Leviticus recognises his right to become wealthier – and therefore is associated with the orphan and the widow: it is Israel’s duty to help them. As the widow, they have the right to glean, and are under divine protection. The foreigner has to be loved as oneself, as Israel has to remember the Egyptian captivity. The ‘ger’ has the same rights of the Israelite: for example, the sabbatical year mechanism, or the use of refuge cities. In other words, in everyday life there should be no barrier between the foreigner and the native. But what is my point? That this comes in the biblical story as result of a growth in consciousness parallel to the experiences that Israel makes of God and of its neighbours. The understanding of the position of the ‘ger’ within Israel is changing with time. The earlier juridical texts compare Israel and the foreigner, reaffirming the superiority of Yahweh above the neighbour’s gods, and the Lord’s protection of the refugee. Later on (and this appears with the emergence of a monotheistic theology in Israel), the refugee becomes the beneficiary of political protection. Finally, the Second Temple tradition, redrafting Scriptures after the Babylonian captivity, adds a list of duties for the foreigner, making of him a full member of the community, with no real differences with the Israelite. Now, what can we make of this? Indeed, it reaffirms that the Jewish faith was far from exclusivist, and that Israel’s vocation was for the benefit of other peoples too. But this makes also apparent that living out God’s word happens eminently when you are brought out of your comfort zone. As Philip, we are called to take the desert road: there we might meet the eunuch. Only when you meet those you would have not met before, you can give new breath and depth to the meaning of God’s love.

I have learned a few lessons in Sicily that are helpful for me as an elder in our new Downing Place URC. Many of the buildings now used to give refuge to asylum seekers were previously retirement homes or schools belonging to the Church, built in the late nineteenth-century when illiteracy and the lack of social services where at appalling levels. Thanks to the welfare State, these needs are not as urgent. As a retired minister told us, ‘the Church has to confront the social difficulties of the area. Only with such analysis we can have a meaningful mission. The difficulties of today are different from those of the past. It would have been self-indulgent not to change’. In doing this, the Waldensian Church confronts all the same challenges that mainline Protestantism witnesses everywhere. How to be the Church doing social work, and yet not becoming just another charity? How to be a Christian presence, without bashing the Bible around, but at the same time clearly announcing the good news of Jesus Christ? As Downing Place we know that our vocation is in the public square, but what is the distinctive Christian character of what we will do? How do we keep together the service to the dispossessed and the nourishing in the faith?

Philip and the Eunuch’s story might help us. They both struggle to discern God’s will, and so together they go back to God’s word, trough which they both discover Christ. The Church that encounters the other does it only because it has been encountered by God’s otherness. Prayer, study, and meeting the neighbour, Scripture tells us, are the only places where you can discern God’s will. We will need to be very careful, as Downing Place URC, to balance these three elements. If prayer and knowledge of Scripture won’t be as important as our social mission, the reason of why we do what we do will fade, and our crisis only deepen. Because this reason can’t be anything else but Christ, as only in him, the alpha and the omega, is the start and the end of Church’s life.

Indeed, the Church should not talk about itself, but of Christ alone. It should point to God’s glory, not to its own. As Philip, we are asked not to boast, but to disappear – that seems to me a very significant detail of the story – and to leave the others rejoicing in Christ.

For me, the image of the Sicily trip is probably that of the evening after the dinner at the Casa. Exhausted by the day, the minister and I decide to have a final stroll, and a cheering-up ice-cream sitting on a bench. There soon arrives little Sara (who by the way promptly tells off Nigel for eating gelato just before bed time!). She is hand in hand with the local Church secretary, who with his wife has taken Sara in foster care. The most unassuming of men, well into his sixties, he simply explains me that when people knock at your door (he literally found asylum seekers sleeping in his shed) you can’t turn your head away. ‘I never explain to people why we have taken Sara in’ – ‘She was just there, and we had to do it. Trust me, we did not have children earlier in life, and we had given up on that. I would have never expected to take care of one at my age. I won’t give Sara an adulthood, I am too old. But at least I have given to one human being a childhood. And that is all’. Together, hand in hand, a Sicilian man of few words, and a sparkly little daughter of sub-Saharan Africa, like Philip, disappear in the night.

May the Lord bless them, and us, in being His Church and His people, on whatever desert roads he will call us to walk. Amen.