

This year during Advent, we are using the life experiences of refugees to inform us of **Emmanuel**, *God with us*, who journeys from Heaven to live among us, or to use John's lovely phrase, so apt for this series, *God dispatches His Son from Heaven to pitch His tent among us*¹!

How do we understand the narrative of people who have left, or affected by their country in the midst of war or civil unrest? How does this help us understand and appreciate the Christmas narrative?

Let's remind ourselves, no one **IS** a refugee; people **become** refugees, fleeing from their own country, leaving behind family, friends and a way of life, seeking places of refuge.

Would we refer to people who are fleeing famine, as hungry people? Hunger neither defines them nor identifies them; they become hungry as a result of the famine they face.

Last Sunday we heard Nathan's story who went through the shock-horror of becoming a refugee. Let me introduce you today to Omar, whom I met two years after I met Nathan. Omar was a young, early 30-something, from a west African country. While studying in University, Omar met a stunningly beautiful and intelligent young lady. They fell in love, told their parents they wanted to get married, and then all hell broke loose. His parents said she was from a different tribe and the girls from that tribe could not be trusted; Her parents said, he was from a tribe whose integrity was questionable. Besides, you will be very unhappy in his country because his people will treat you like a domestic servant.

They eloped, married, and decided to set up home in the capital city of his country, which was bigger than her country, and offered better job prospects for university graduates.

¹ John 1:14

Both found jobs, she as a bank clerk and he with a small, local aid agency. Both managed on what they earned, with nothing to put by as savings.

Two sons were born to them over the next five years. Omar and his wife tried to re-connect with their parents and siblings, but they wanted nothing to do with them. Each parent forbade them to return.

One day, Omar was informed of a partial scholarship available to study on a one year Masters' degree in development studies at Oxford.

Hope is a strange thing. Hope needs to be grounded in reality, and anchored reliability, because if it isn't, a person can be sucked into foolishness.

Omar knew that a Masters' degree from Oxford would open doors to work with international aid agencies where the income and benefits would be significantly better and his wife could be a full time mother, bringing up two energetic boys.

Driven by the vision of getting a good job to look after his family, with half his programme fees paid by the scholarship, and only a return ticket, that too bought with a loan from a friend, Omar arrived in Oxford, on a cold, damp day in early autumn.

Within a month of his arrival, when he should have been settling into his studies, financial issues he had not planned, started to unravel. Here in Oxford, the housing arrangements he thought he could make did not materialise, and back home, the impact of losing his income whilst he studied, very quickly racked up unpaid bills.

His wife was a "foreigner" in his country, and she was beginning to feel it. In his absence, friends drifted away, and their local Church was not very welcoming of the foreign wife and two mixed-race children.

The twin burdens of looking after himself and trying to find resources for his family back home, consumed his time and he started to lose focus and concentration on his studies.

Just before Omar left for Oxford, news came of civil unrest between tribes in the north of the country, now drawing closer to the capital city. His wife phoned to say she could not stand the pressure any longer, and was going back to her country with their two sons, to stay there until he returned and found a job.

Omar panicked. Now four months into the programme, he was truly between a rock and hard place.

Omar and his wife were each brought up in Christian families, where Christian values and a tribal way of life coexisted in an odd sort of harmony: as long as one set of values did not challenge or upset the other, both could be tolerated in a symbiotic relationship.

Late one afternoon, I saw Omar talking to himself. Over an extended evening meal, I found Omar stressed and unable to handle the stress.

As we talked that evening, I could not understand the first time he pensively asked the question, *I don't know where I belong!* (je ne sais pas ou je fait partie). I knew he had a passport and his nationality was settled. The third time he asked the same question, I thought he was referring to problems I was not aware of in his mixed-race marriage.

Omar repeated that question several times that evening. It wasn't until well past midnight, shortly after we prayed and Omar left, that I understood why that question, *I don't know where I belong!*, was haunting him.

To whom can I turn for help, when I don't belong anywhere? His parents and siblings had disowned them, so he did not belong in his family; away from his country, he could not "*make arrangements*" to find funds; now in his

temporary home in Oxford, he had no one to turn to, because he did not **belong** here.

One of the Psalms pilgrims sang as they climbed the winding road up from the Dead Sea towards Jerusalem, when the climb was particularly difficult, was Psalm 121, the opening lines of which are: *I look up to the mountains; does my help come from there? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth!*²

The pilgrims knew to Whom they belonged, and they could appeal for help to the Lord who made heaven and earth. They “belonged” to Him, and He would look after them.

In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth, he says Joseph did not know what to do when he was informed of Mary’s pregnancy. He was minded to divorce her, until the angel from God appeared to him in a dream and said, *Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you shall name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.* Joseph awoke to the knowledge, he and Mary were chosen to be parents to the long awaited Messiah, and he acted as he should; he took Mary as his wife. Joseph knew he belonged to family line of King David, and now he knew, he also belonged in the family of God!

Luke gives us Mary’s side of the story. Visibly disturbed by the angel who told her she was to have a child before moving into their home that Joseph was still preparing for them, Mary was very concerned she would be an outcast from society. Assured by the angel, the Son she would carry would be God’s own, the promised Messiah, and given the news her elderly cousin Elisabeth was also carrying a son, Mary responds, *“I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me, come true.”* Mary belonged in the family of God and had a significant part in God’s great

² Psalm 121:1

plan; all she needed to do was to acknowledge, she belonged in God's family. *"I am the Lord's servant."*

Omar's question, *I don't know to whom I belong*, is a serious question, worthy of a serious answer. When we know we belong in the family of God, we can develop a relationship with the Father of the family.

When we know we belong in the family of God and enjoy a relationship with Him, we can unburden our worries to Him, who listens and who cares; we can express our needs knowing, the Father of the family will provide what is good for us.

Does this begin to sound familiar? Yes, **how** we pray to God our Father, and whether we will receive an answer from Him, depends on whether we think we belong in His family! 90% of our battle in prayer depends on our belief, whether we belong in the family of God.

I leave you with a final thought on "belonging". The great leader Moses achieved all that he did, because he knew he belonged in the family of God, **AND** he knew he belonged in the palace of the Pharaoh. Remember, he was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter and brought up in the palace. So when God sends him to Pharaoh to tell him, *Set my people free!*, Moses knows he belongs in the palace and can enter at will and speak to the great Pharaoh, **at any time.**

Each one of us belongs in the family of God. For each of us here today, God sent His Son, to break open the door held tightly shut by death. The only way through that door is by accepting Jesus who declared, *The only way to the Father is through Me.*

Then, and only then, can we say, ***I know where I belong! I belong in my Father's family and in my Father's house, and that is where I will spend eternity.*** **AMEN.**