

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 13th June 2010

Refugee Week

Hello everybody and welcome to Essex Church where this community known as Kensington Unitarians meets each week for worship. We meet here each Sunday morning throughout the year to spend an hour together in reflection. This is an opportunity for us to turn inwards, to quieten our busy individual selves and to link in with something that is greater than ourselves, be that the power of community or the power of the divine. Here in a Unitarian congregation we are free to make up our own minds about matters spiritual and religious but we support one another in that journey in our speaking and listening, in our education programmes and in our worship together. It's good to remember I think that we are not alone – in a world that can at times seem a lonely and fragmented place. We are walking our individual paths through life but we share the path. Welcome to Essex church, welcome to this part of the journey.

So let us take a moment to bring ourselves fully into the present – let us rest for this moment on the forming edge of our lives, let us resist for a while the headlong tumble into the next moment, let us claim for ourselves a brief time of stillness and calm amidst the bustle of everyday life. It's good to make time for awareness and gratitude and reflection, here together in this peaceful place, blessed by the divine spirit of life and love. Welcome one and all.

Chalice Lighting:

Each week here at Essex Church we light this chalice, symbol of our worldwide liberal religious community of Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists. Although a cup, a chalice and light within it is an ancient and much used symbol – in its present form it was designed only in the 1940s when Unitarians working to help Europe's many refugees wanted to create a symbol that would let people of all faiths and no faith know that this organisation would help them find safety once more. There is something powerful isn't there of a light shining out, welcoming people whatever their creed, nationality, gender, colour, sexual orientation, age – this is the message that this liberal flame shines out to our world.

Prayer:

I call on the divine spirit of life and love to be with us now and to illumine all that we do and say together here today. At the start of Refugee Week let us pray for all people who have had to leave their homes for any reason. It is hard for many of us to imagine what that must be like, but those of us who are blessed with homes of comfort and safety can give thanks for the blessings we have.

There are some among us who are far from home. Let us think of those far from home with love and with commitment to help all people feel welcome here in our church community.

The issue of refugees and displaced people is a concern throughout our world. Let us pray for the lawmakers and enforcers who have such a difficult task. May they be blessed always with compassion in their words and actions – may they never forget that they too might find themselves without a home and in danger at some time.

May our world community find ever new creative ways to help one another and to overcome the problems that cause people to leave their homes – economic uncertainty, hatred and oppression, warfare, hunger and shortage of water. Let us be people who rise to the challenge and keep searching for humane ways to resolve complex issues.

And in our own lives let us never slip into complacency in our thinking – but rather be ever grateful for that which we have, ever attentive to the needs of others, doing what we can, however small – to make this world of ours ever more just, more humane, more compassionate – and may this be so for the greater good of all – amen.

Address:

Do you remember the adverts when the National Lottery started here in Britain? A voice boomed out "It could be you!" – encouraging us all to buy a ticket and take a chance that we might be this week's winner of the jackpot prize. That phrase "it could be you" has been there in the back of my mind all week as I've been reading about National Refugee Week that started yesterday here in the UK and leads up to World Refugee Day – next Sunday 20th June. It would only need the course of world history or climate or tectonic plates to shift in some way and it might be us in Britain desperately seeking a way to leave our

country in order to survive. Instead the lottery of life has given us a gentle and moderate land in which to live, it has given us freedom of speech, relative equality and an economic steadiness – all of which are envied the world over.

Our freedoms and our security are well known throughout the world – and is it any wonder that people from other lands seek to join us when their own lives and countries fall apart? Jill Roberts the chief executive of Refugee Action writes that “it can be easy to forget that refugees are normal men, women and children who find themselves in extraordinary and traumatic situations which force them to flee.”

As a world community we face a stark reality about displaced persons. For whilst there is nothing new in the reality of people having to flee the lands of their birth because of, for example, warfare or famine or oppression – yet as the world’s population grows so too does the number of displaced people – the United Nation’s estimate at present being 40 million people who cannot return to their homes in safety. And as countries guard their borders and their resources ever more carefully the plight of people who have had to leave their homes becomes ever more distressing.

The issue of refugees is often in the news and like so many hot topics it can be blighted by misinformation. Hence the role of National Refugee Week, which was started back in 1998 to counteract the negative messages that were too often appearing in our news. The campaign has famously highlighted the positive role played by refugees throughout human history, naming famous refugees like the scientist Albert Einstein, sculptor Anish Kapoor, model Alek Wek, Songwriter Mica, founder of Marks and Spencers Michael Marks, artist Lucien Freud – to mention just a few – such names underline the economic truth that every study ever carried out has shown - that refugees have been an asset to the British economy rather than a drain on our resources, that ordinary every day people – the unknown and un-named millions of people who have come to this country as refugees have made a great contribution to our society.

One of the campaign highlights for this year’s Refugee Week is called Simple Acts and it asks each of us to take one simple action that will help to raise people’s awareness of the positive role of refugees in our society – these acts can be very simple – such as taking part in a service like this one here at Essex church today and the suitcase exercise we tried earlier on – a simple act could be learning a song in a foreign language or learning how to say hello in a language you’ve never tried before. Some people are exploring the contributions that refugees make to London’s cuisine and trying to list just how many different types of food can be bought here in our capital city.

The writer Michael Bond – famous as author of the Paddington Bear books has written a story that you can read online - about the bear’s own status as a refugee – and how differently his story might have unfolded if he had not been treated with kindness by the family who found him at Paddington Station.

There’s nothing new is there about this message of being kind to strangers. I often think of it as a Biblical injunction – found from the earliest times in the Jewish scriptures, the Torah, in the Christian Old Testament, a message repeated again and again in the Qu’ran – that one should treat the wayfarer, the unknown, the stranger as an honoured guest, as one would welcome a family member or neighbour in need. It’s understandable that the world’s religions would tell their followers to care for the stranger – for this injunction to be compassionate to others is a basic building block of human society – we must help others for we never know when we ourselves may need help. Moses’ powerful description of himself as ‘a stranger in a strange land’ could speak of each of us at some time in our life.

This ability to put ourselves in the position of others becomes more of a challenge the more complicated our world society becomes. But to counteract that we have the power of modern media to bring us the stories of others. This week I’ve read about the work of the UNHCR – and their website contains powerful stories of individuals whose lives have gone through radical changes. Two stories that touched me were that of Sonya a well regarded photo journalist from Zimbabwe whose campaigning work on behalf of people arrested and tortured by Mugabe’s security forces put her own life in danger. She was beaten and threatened and eventually fled Zimbabwe leaving her two year old son behind. It took her several years to be reunited with him. I read about a 16 year old boy from Afghanistan whose family sold their land and fled, only to be captured by militants. Gulam Reza’s mother saw a chance for him to escape whilst she remained in Afghanistan with her other children – she gave him all the family’s money - he is now in Indonesia being helped to find work and education by the United Nations.

I heard on the news of the young asylum seeker who hid in the wheel arch of a jet travelling from Dubai to the UK – he survived only because the plane was flying at an unusually low altitude due to bad weather. Oh the desperation and determination that you must have to risk life in this way.

And like you I read this week of government plans to send asylum seeking teenagers back to Afghanistan and I wondered how we are going to face the challenge of remaining humane towards our fellow human beings when we face economic problems here at home. In John’s gospel there is a famous and much studied saying of Jesus’ –“the poor will always be with you”. This statement has been used to justify inequality and injustice – it can also be used to galvanise people to action. The poor, the dispossessed, the homeless, the sick, the criminal, the bigot, the despairing, - on one level we could say that nothing will change here on earth – it will always be thus – and yet we can make such a difference to the lives of individuals – by finding out about

their lives, by listening with an open heart and mind to their life stories and taking small, simple steps to break down the divisions that too often separate us one from another.

For who knows when we might feel like the stranger in the strange land. Amen.

Benediction:

And so let us go now with the spirit of kindness and hospitality guiding our words and our deeds in the week ahead, aware of all those we share our world with, committed to the causes of justice, peace and love in how we live our lives and shape our world community, go well, blessed be, amen.