

SUNDAY DECEMBER 27<sup>TH</sup>

## INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME

Throughout Advent we have been aware of the movements of peoples, of refugees escaping war, of migrants searching for work and more recently those who have had to leave their homes because of flooding. Pauline's evocative picture invites us in, to empathise with and to accompany them on their journey. So Ellen and I have chosen the theme of walking the edges, of travelling with the outsiders in order to discover more of the divine.

From our two readings we are introduced to the idea of escape from danger. In the first, the Christmas story draws a parallel to Moses. Jesus like Moses will be a liberator. Both Moses and Jesus as children are saved themselves from evil rulers and then grow up to defend the weak and oppressed. In the second reading Jesus explains the lifestyle he will follow – one that avoids security and takes him into the borderlands. He even encourages his followers to share a nomadic life for a short while, experiencing dependency upon others and simplicity of living.

What was it that Jesus expected his followers to gain from that experience? What today can we learn from the example of those who have given up everything to journey towards a more hopeful future?

I think in many ways they have done what Jesus suggested – they have taken up their cross. They have met a situation where they have nothing more to lose but life itself. This has made them take the courageous step of going out into the unknown. Like the 70 they carry only the bare essentials and they become dependent upon the hospitality of strangers.

I in no way want to idealize their situation or minimize the problem that such a huge magnitude of migrants causes for governments in Europe. There is little in our experience that draws close to theirs, but we can perhaps think of the value of living more simply, of treading the borders with the outsiders in society and above all keeping alive a vision of a better world.

Some years ago our family has joined in the pilgrimage of trust organized by the Taize community. Each year after Christmas young people from all over Europe have travelled to a host city where they have been welcomed by strangers into their homes to share their lives and faith together. The experiences and encounters of those visits have been some of the richest of our lives. They gave a small taste of living with uncertainty and dependency on the generosity of others – often those with very little material wealth.

There is a Buddhist story I am very fond of which tells of three travellers in search of an oasis in a desert. Day after day they travelled in the burning sun, their water supplies diminishing rapidly until in the distance, shimmering in the heat they saw a walled enclosure. There was no gateway and the wall was so high that it took two of the men all their energy to help the third reach its top. When he did so they could see his face fill with joy and with a shout he disappeared from view over to the other side. The two remaining men struggled even longer before one of them was able to pull himself to the top of the wall, and with a cry of delight he went head first out of sight. It took almost a day for the last man to create enough holes in the surface of the wall for him to pull himself to the top with his fingers and his toes, and exhausted he sat astride the wall. He looked back the way they

had come. The desert stretched as far as his eyes could see in waves of featureless sand dunes. He looked ahead into the oasis with its shadows, dates and palm trees, colour and life-giving water. He could have enjoyed it all.....but he chose to stay on the wall – on the boundary – where he could help other travellers to find refreshment and life.

We need people on the margins. They are the ones who can provide a bridge between the outsiders and those safe inside, and we need visionaries to keep hope alive through dark times. I think this piece of music by John Rutter speaks of this hope.

Distant Land by John Rutter.