

## SERMON FOR MIDNIGHT MASS 2018 | 24.12.2018



Digging in my sermon archive I see that the picture I talked about this time last year showed a Roman Catholic priest and a Muslim imam holding a banner marked Grenfell, marking the catastrophic fire in June 2017. The picture that has held my attention this year is the one on the front of your pew sheet and on the screen.

It is a new icon, painted by the American, Kelly Latimore. He writes of this picture: *While I want art to speak for itself, recent events have become so horrible that I feel compelled to speak out. Many will see this icon as a personal attack on Donald Trump but that would be a mistake. Because our President, who he is, his administration, his rhetoric and policies are just the tip of the iceberg to the overwhelming division, injustice, violence, fear, and hate that is being perpetuated by the very individuals we are most likely to meet in our everyday lives and in our various communities.*

*Without going into great detail, much of the inspiration for this refugee icon came from a conversation around a campfire with a young man who "illegally" came into the United States. His stories about his journey through the desert and the reasons he was in the US, about the fear and pain he carried, his homesickness and the way he misses his family – but also his hope - impacted me deeply.*

*So this icon, 'Refugees: La Sagrada Familia' depicts the Holy Family and it invites us to transcend our biases, to listen to new feelings about loss and vulnerability. It also challenges us to look again at our convictions, our inherited traditions and our favorite ideas.*

*What I want to encourage all of us to do is to see the journey of any refugee as the story of individuals with real names, faces and stories. Because they have so much to teach us about who God is, the world we live in and who are our neighbours.*

Whether it is through art or just by listening to the news, there have been some devastating news stories this year, from Saudi diplomats being abducted in Turkey to the constant headlines about knife crime.

And the temptation, as with Brexit, is to turn off and to let these events pass us by. Haven't we enough to deal with without being drawn into these situations which are one of our business? Let's find something entertaining to take our minds off all this gloom.

Yet that is precisely what Christmas is all about. Christmas tells the story of a God who could not and would not look the other way. His deep love for every single one of us meant that he had to get personally involved in our lives as they really are – symbolised by his ending up in a stable, then on Herod's hit list when the Magi turn up at the Palace and then as a refugee – forced to head for Egypt before the long arm of Herod's police caught up with them.

Kelly paints the Holy Family as South Americans because of his personal experience, but he could easily have made them Yemenis, or Burmese Rohingya, or Nigerians under Boko Haram or those trying to cross the Mediterranean.

What he has done is to show that this word Emmanuel, God is with us, is not some abstract idea but is real. Jesus was an alien, a refugee and a migrant.

Those of us who are lucky enough to travel - on holiday or for work – take these opportunities to see how the other half live. We put up with a bit of cultural and often personal discomfort/inconvenience/ upset because we know, in our heart of hearts, that we ought to try to find out what is going on in other place, learning in the meantime what it is that makes other people tick. We try as best we can to see life from their point of view.

**How sad it would be if we weren't changed by those experiences and remained tourists. Emmanuel: God is with us. So that he knows what we are going through - with the aim of helping us cope. Being present with those who are suffering.**

**The extraordinary thing about Grenfell was the response of the whole community way beyond Kensington and Chelsea. From Meghan Markle cooking with the women in the community kitchens to the network of groups supplying all the basics of life to those with nothing, people were 'present' in quite extraordinary ways.**

**As we look to this coming year, with all its uncertainties and challenges, the spirit of Christmas doesn't disappear with the tinsel. Emmanuel, God is with us says: be present with those who need you at home or abroad.**

**This journey of life is all the richer when we take the needs of others on board and act as Jesus would: responding and caring wherever we can, not least for those who share the experience of Jesus, alien, refugee and migrant.**

**Because we need to remember the words of Kelly Latimore: *the politics of Donald Trump ... are just the tip of the iceberg of the overwhelming division, injustice, violence, fear, and hate that is being perpetuated by the very individuals we are most likely to meet in our everyday lives and in our various communities.***

**And we declare to all who will listen that we have an answer to that restlessness and despair. Listen again to what the wonderfully upbeat passage in our first reading from Isaiah: *Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed his people. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.***

**Emmanuel: God making himself present in our world, making miracles happen. And when we are fully present and fully engaged with one another, great things happen among us too. It is that which enables us to have the confidence to say to one another tonight: **Happy Christmas!****