

When I was a child, we spent most of our summer holidays in Sheringham on the North Norfolk coast, and on some years we would be there for the annual service of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. The service was held by the lifeboat station on the beach, and we would always sing the hymn that we just sung as the gradual: “Eternal Father strong to save” with its famous and poignant refrain, “O hear us when we cry to Thee for those in peril on the sea.”

I hadn't really thought much about the RNLI since then, until in 2021 when Nigel Farage (now leader of the Reform Party) attacked the work that these volunteer lifeboat crews do in coming to the aid of immigrant boats that are capsizing as they attempt to cross the Channel. As I read about that, I remembered these service on the beach, and I realised that the RNLI represents something indispensable from my Christian faith. That is the belief that every person is created in the image of God, every human life should be saved, whatever the reason for their predicament. And on that day, I made a donation to the RNLI. Apparently and encouragingly, my reaction was not unique; the RNLI experienced a 3000% surge in donations as a result of Farage's comments.

Migration is one of the greatest challenges of our times. 90 million people around the world are classified as displaced people. Many are refugees from war like the huge numbers of Syrians that have come to Europe over the last decade. Many are seeking greater economic opportunity for themselves and their families. But what we will see over the coming decades is ever greater numbers of people fleeing parts of the world rendered uninhabitable by climate change, whether that's rising sea levels or intolerable temperatures.

There is no obvious solution. And for a long time we have had a rather facile debate between those saying that immigration is “a threat to our way of life and should end” versus those telling us we need immigration for economic reasons

and opposition to it is simply racism. The levels of mass migration we are going to see in coming years are both inevitable and deeply disruptive to the stability of our societies. So the question is not whether we need to address the challenges raised by mass migration, but rather whether we address those challenges with a ruthless inhumanity, or with a compassion that reflects our values, even indeed our Christian faith.

The miracle of Jesus's calming of the storm is not principally about compassion towards those in need. Like all the miracles, it is fundamentally about the identity of Jesus, as indicated by the rhetorical question with which it ends, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Through his words and actions on the boat, Jesus is associated with the Creator God who speaks to Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" This is the Lord who has power over all creation, the wind and the waves. The lesson for the disciples is that they should discover and deepen their faith in who Jesus is to overcome their fear.

But as we read this miracle today, we cannot help but associate the experience of the disciples in the boat with the terrifying ordeal faced by migrants off the shores of this country and around the world every day. So, as we confront this reality, what does this miracle say to us today on an issue where (aside from giving money to the RNLI) we can feel very helpless, and where so many people are understandably tempted to just wish the problem away, as if we can really just "stop the boats."

Perhaps we might reflect on three things. The first is that the story begins with Jesus saying, "Let us go across to the other side." From this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are very much itinerant. They make a number of sea voyages from the Western Jewish side of Lake Galilee to the Eastern

Gentile side. They are, to all intents and purposes, migrants. In Matthew's Gospel it is stated explicitly that the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Underlying prejudice against migrants is a sense that people should stay where they belong, that mobility is intrusion. But Jesus is always on the move. Perhaps that helps us see the presence of him and his disciples in the anonymous figures on these boats.

Second, as we interpret this parable, we should remember that the storm is both literal and metaphorical. Jesus' power over the wind and the waves is a sign that he is the source of peace over the whole tumult of human society. His evocation of "peace" points to the Hebrew understanding of how "Shalom" really refers to the right ordering of all things, including the structures of society. Mass migration is caused by multiple human failures – war, inequality, ecological exploitation – and the crisis of migration causes us to look at what God is saying to us about all aspects of how the world is ordered today. We may not feel we can do much about all these big challenges, but we must have an awareness of them that stops us from exonerating ourselves from complicity in injustice by demonising those who are in fact victims.

And third and finally, we should always focus on this central question of who Jesus is and what this means for our lives. This is at the heart of all the writings of St Paul who was transformed from the angry vindictive character of Saul of Tarsus into the apostle who travelled far and wide to reach out to others. Paul helped shape our understanding of Jesus as the full manifestation of God's love in the world, bringing the day of salvation to all God's creatures, Jews and Gentiles. And so, he urges the Corinthians to model the life of Christ in the way that he has:

“Our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return – I speak as to children – open wide your hearts also.”

We may feel helpless in the face of mass migration. We may even feel threatened and defensive. But if we are Christians, we have no choice but to open wide our hearts. The volunteers of the RNLi risk their own lives to save the lives of people in distress who they do not know. What greater illustration can there be of Christian love than that? May God protect them and all in peril on the sea, as we pray and work for a world of peace and justice for all.