

Sermon by The Revd Nadim Nassar, Director of the Awareness Foundation

St. Paul's Cathedral, Awareness Sunday, 25th September 2016

Over the last decade, the Mediterranean Sea has become a graveyard. Many boats which carried people with stories, hopes and dreams, became floating coffins. What makes people throw themselves into those death boats, heading into the unknown, staring into the abyss, defying the very instinct for survival? The power that enables them must be something extraordinary.

I believe that this power is the power of hope, armed with the power of the dream. I am saying that because I believe that our God is the God of life and love. In order for those people to put their own lives and the lives of their children in such enormous peril, life and death must have become equal. This is what should challenge us as Christians today: that people are driven to the point where their life seems without worth, where they feel that they have nothing left to lose. Many thousands of young people, sustained by a thread of hope, are leaving everything behind; they are doing this because they know that to stay in their homeland would have meant being forced to kill or be killed, or if they avoided the fighting, to face a life without dignity and purpose and with barely even the most basic necessities.

Both readings this morning talk about the impact of wealth in our lives. We must admit that we are created to seek a better life in every way, even materially. Those people who reach to the edge of life and death, and take that existential decision to give their destiny to the sea do so in the hope that the boat will take them through the hell of the sea to the safety of a harbour where they can start a better life.

What is this better life that they are seeking? Is it the absolute basic safety that they can close their eyes without fearing that they would be murdered, kidnapped or raped? And if they survived the journey and they found safety, for how long would that be enough? This wave of people, flooding the shores of Europe, scares many of us because we see these migrants as a threat to our lifestyle. We know that, after giving the new arrivals the basics of life and safety, we will need to help them to make new lives for themselves in our own countries. Sometimes we forget that our God is the God of hospitality and generosity. God Himself was so generous in His love that he came and became one of us so that He could teach us how to live a generous life. God's ultimate generosity was on the Cross that led to the Resurrection. We are the people of the Resurrection and we should not be afraid to be generous or hospitable.

Most of the discussion in Europe concentrates on "what to do with the refugees?" Of course we must help the refugees, and we must treat them as human beings, no different from us. But what we are not talking about is how we can help to end the wars which are driving people to leave their homes in the first place. As long as those wars are raging, then there will be refugees, people who will take any risk to flee the fighting. Alongside the discussion and the debate about the refugees, there should be even deeper discussion about how to make peace in those countries. We should remember always that the Risen Lord said to His Disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." This is a mandate for us as Christians to be Ambassadors for Peace.

All of the wars that are burning so many countries to ashes today are proxy wars, local conflicts fuelled by the involvement of regional and international powers. The only way to end the wars is to dry up the financial and material resources that are feeding the fighting. Simply, if the international and regional powers ceased to support the war, then the local parties would be forced to come to the negotiating table and find a solution through dialogue. As long as any belligerent party is resourced with weapons and money then they will continue to think that they can win their war militarily.

The reality proves to us that it is not possible to win a civil war in the 21st Century. The best example is my country, Syria, which has been torn apart by civil war, with the loss of almost a million lives. Half of my country, over 13 million people, are either refugees or are 'internally displaced'. The fire of war has consumed everything, even religion, which is being manipulated and abused to serve political agendas. Another example, which I lived through myself for over 7 years, was the Civil War in Lebanon. That war destroyed one of the pearls of the Middle East, and it did not stop until the Lebanese realised that they were fighting a war which no-one could win; the only hope then was to come around the table to talk.

As Christians, we should believe more than anybody else in the power of dialogue. We should remember what St. John said, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."; he also said "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." If we believe in the Incarnation, then we must believe in the power of the Word, that Christ is in action throughout the world. Only dialogue can end the wars, and only the end of the wars will allow the refugees to return home. We all want a better life; but as long as war rages, there can be no 'better life' in the warzones. Didn't Christ say, "I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly?" When Jesus made this powerful statement, He gave us the example of that better life, a life of giving, a life of serving. He was the one who put the towel around His waist at the Last Supper and washed His Disciples' dirty feet. What are we doing as a Church to highlight the importance of ending those wars, and what are we doing to help those brave people who risked their lives to reach out to us for a better life?

I do believe, with all my heart, that humanitarian aid is not enough. The danger of focussing on humanitarian aid is that it eases our consciences; it is easy to give support to a refugee programme and "tick the box and move on". What we need is a wider awareness that only through stopping wars, and only through dialogue, can we help those guests who arrived here. If we are truly concerned about them as people, created in the image of God, and if we believe that God loves them as much as he loves us, then we still have a lot more to do to raise our voices against violence, against war, against the abuse of religion and the committing of atrocities in the name of God. As we celebrate Awareness Sunday at the Awareness Foundation, with our friends and partners of different religions and cultures around the world, we celebrate the power of forgiveness and the richness of diversity, and we boldly state that **violence in the name of religion must come to a full stop.**

Jesus did not just feed the people, but raised His voice against the corrupt system of religion in His own time. He Himself was a revolutionary, and He was radical enough to shake the ground under the leaders' feet. We should follow Jesus' example and not just do the least to help those who are in desperate need. We need to change the whole world and create a movement for peace that can challenge all wars in the world and challenge the basic idea that war can solve problems. Together with our Muslim brothers and sisters, and all those of other faiths, we must work tirelessly to promote faith as a force of love and peace, a power for harmony in every community around the world.