

Reflections on the Lectionary Readings for 22 June 2025 (Sanctuary Sunday)

We have chosen to focus on Old Testament reading, Psalm, and Epistle, as they offer very fruitful material for a Refugee Week service. It is worth noting, though, that the Gospel reminds us that God has authority over all things ... a helpful thing to remember amidst the uncertainties and troubles of the world.

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a

Having fought against (and killed many of) the prophets of Baal, Elijah is warned that Jezebel means to kill him ... probably a 'get out of town' message, as the Queen could simply have seized and killed him immediately, had she wished to do so. Today people still receive similar messages: one refugee once shared that he had been taken by people allied with the local leaders to 'visit' a lime pit in the wilderness ... a place where a body could easily disappear. He understood the warning and left the country immediately.

Elijah, too, flees for his life. Exhausted, discouraged, without the means to survive, he even asks God if he can die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." At the very moment of his need, however, an angel wakes him and shows him God's provision – food and water that will strengthen him for the journey ahead. And then, in a parallel with the great prophet Moses, he is led through the wilderness to a mountain – perhaps to exactly the same place where God appeared to Moses. And God appears again – not in thunder and lightning as with Moses at the time of the giving of the law, but in the 'sheer silence' that follows dramatic expressions of wind, earthquake and fire.

Christian refugees we have worked with have shared their stories about how God provided for them when they were without their own resources ... and how they have encountered God in their 'wilderness journeys'.

How can we, as churches in the UK, be challenged and strengthened by the experience of people who, like Elijah, have had to flee their home communities because of their faith?

Where do we hear God speaking to us in the quiet spaces of our daily lives?

How can we learn more about God by listening to people among us who have had profound experiences of God's presence and provision amidst the suffering and difficulties of their journeys?

How can we, as communities gathered by God from many different places, manifest God's love by helping people find the sustenance they need as we encounter them on their journey and as they join our communities?

Psalm 42 and 43

These two psalms are most likely originally one – the manuscripts show no separate superscription for Psalm 43, and the two share a common refrain. They form a song of lament and exile, which may reflect the experience of Israelites exiled to Babylon – and which may well resonate with the experience of people exiled today.

The Psalmist initially shares the sense of intense longing, expressed as a thirst for God and a desire to recall what it was like to serve in God's house. The bulk of the Psalm is a series of alternate laments and exhortations to hope. Instead of a clear stream that slakes thirst, the Psalmist experiences tears and storming waters that overwhelm him. Enemies taunt him. He walks about mournfully. And yet ... he returns to the exhortation to 'hope in God', He recalls God's presence with him in steadfast love, the fact that God is his help, and the possibility of God's light and truth leading him back from exile to praise God once more in the holy places.

In our communities, how can we be sensitive to and stand alongside people who are experiencing the mixed emotions of exile? How can we give space for complex narratives?

In our church communities, how can we offer opportunities for people to serve and praise God in familiar ways, if they wish to? How can we be sensitive to the mixed emotions that may be involved?

Galatians 3:23-29

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28 NRSV)

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul is writing to a community that is grappling with the implications of the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles. What does it mean when categories of people that once were distinct are being brought together by shared allegiance to Christ? How does the community come together?

Paul is clear: our baptism into Christ is the foundation of our identity – everything else is secondary. This doesn't mean that differences don't still exist: it simply means that they are subordinate to the unity of the Body of Christ.

As we come together in church communities that include people from different backgrounds, how can we focus on what we hold in common? How can we form communities that genuinely reflect our unity in Christ?

In the Galatian community, many people felt this should be done by asking the new Gentile converts to assimilate to the extant traditions of the Jewish community. Paul resisted this.

If we look honestly at ourselves, where are we asking people who come into our church simply to conform to the way we do things? How can we widen our experience of Christ by drawing on the different perspectives that we have because of our different backgrounds, giftings, and experiences?