Tent In with Intent

Refugee is a word that polarises. I am aware of this as I enter the week’s challenge.

I inhabit a tent. It is safely contained in my church’s foyer at St Ann with Emmanuel’s Church. The venture is regulated by my local vicar, the Rev Maureen Collins. It is overseen by Southwell Diocesan Board, but I am the refugee.

I am separated from the familiarity of my home, the companionship of my cats, the comfort of unlimited teas and coffees and the reliable structure of my working shifts. My decision to do this was informed by nightly BBC world news and born in a daily session of prayer and Bible reading.

My heart was in my mouth when I mentioned my resolve to spend one week isolated from my chosen surroundings to suffer a small measure of the displacement taken on by those fleeing from persecution, climate disaster and economic devastation in their countries of birth. Rev Maureen grasped the notion and ran with it, enlisting help from Tearfund, our designated charity for St Ann with Emmanuel.

So I sit here. I pray. I sing. I share space with regular users of our building. My only unaffected activities for the week are those conducted in church. A community friend has pledged to “Rent my Tent” almost every day at 4pm so I can exercise by walking in the Chase. I retreat to the vicarage floor at night for safety. Friends in the congregation plan to provide food.

The power of these contributions teaches me how much the migrants to our shores have to trust in those left behind to stand in their gap and to remain united until the first perilous journey is concluded, permissions completed and income is received as remittances and visas to rejoin the traveller.

This is the experience of the esteemed migrants from the Caribbean who came “to help rebuild the Motherland”. It is the experience of Indonesian farmers who are prompted by recruitment agencies to come to assist with our harvests. Most recently, it is the experience of those fleeing from forest fires or sudden floods across a world suffering from climate change. Currently and for the future, it typifies the determination of care workers from Africa and other continents who respond to the needs of our Health and Social Care sector.

The build up to this week has shown the love people have for each other in our bright and challenging community of St Ann’s. I am eager to see how empowered we all will be by increasing our understanding of each other. Without a doubt, we are surrounded by “Them and us” divisive thoughts and sensational reporting, but the life of the Chase demonstrates we are all one and diversity is our strength. I have used the words “refugee”, “migrant” and “traveller” interchangeably because we have a long and varied history of movement. May this phase of it become a phase of joy, not of shame.

Rosey Palmer