

Thank God for immigrants – lessons from Babel, Jerusalem, Ireland and Chile

These days we often hear comments such as “foreigners are taking our jobs” or “why do these people have any right to be here?” or “we’re being taken over by foreigners”. In this context I want to say, “Thank God for immigrants”.

Do you know I have even heard Irish people criticising asylum seekers who have come to Ireland by saying, ‘Oh but they are just economic migrants’. Given the history of migration from Ireland in recent centuries I can think of few statements more hypocritical.

We’re seeing a rise in far-right nationalist populist movements who want to argue that there should not be diversity in a country. In recent months we’ve seen headlines from Chemnitz in Germany associated with the rise of the far right AfD Party there. Then of course we saw the news from Sweden of the increase in the vote for the Far-Right Party in the latest election there. It’s been a similar story in Italy. We’ve seen the kind of sentiment which brought Donald Trump to power. Plus, of course, some have used this kind of language in the Brexit conversation and there are fears that the forthcoming European elections will see further surge of support for populist candidates. Indeed just yesterday it was announced that the Nationalist Parties from various European countries are coming together to form an alliance called the ‘European Alliance for People and Nations.’

In all of these contexts, the argument goes something along the line that they represent the pure Swedish or German or Irish or British or whatever race and that it’s damaging to their country for people to come from other places and that the country should be homogeneous rather than diverse.

I am reminded of the what the American novelist Saul Bellow called “...the grey net of abstraction covering the world in order to simplify and explain it...”¹

In this context everybody seems to forget that in fact that all people are migrants. Since the beginning of human history people have travelled and moved from one place to another settling for a while before future generations move on somewhere else. Modern DNA analysis is now demonstrating that every single human being comes from a family of migrants with genes from all around the world.

People have been migrating for as long as there have been people. For example, in Ireland we talk about our Celtic heritage but the Celtic peoples migrated to Ireland in previous centuries from central Europe!

Furthermore, we as Christians must never forget that it’s God who created the diversity amongst us – it seems to be God’s plan that we are diverse and that there is movement of peoples. If God had wanted us all the same, then He would have made

¹ Quoted by Eugene Peterson in *The Jesus Way: A conversation in following Jesus*.

us all the same – if God had not wanted any of us to be moving around the world then He would have made it that we couldn't.

Let me read you a prayer which I came across recently in a booklet produced by the Methodist Church in Britain.

'Creator God, in the beginning, when all was chaos and colour had yet to be born, you painted across the blank canvas with your brush strokes of love. From your palette, grace, colour, diversity and passion blended together and a universe of contrast, beauty and drama was created'.²

In the famous story of the Tower of Babel we read that in ancient history people gathered and said to themselves "Come and let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves".

Very little has changed! People still say that, nations still say that. In any city of the world every time a new tower is built it's often attempted to make it taller than any other tower in the world. There are lots of villages in Ireland with two church buildings, one Roman Catholic and one Anglican, with tall spires and built on the two highest spots in town trying to outdo the other.

But back to Babel where the end result of the tower building was diversity and movement. Then we are told that 'the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth ...'.³ And not only were people physically scattered but they were scattered through language as well.

Furthermore, as we look around our world and as we see headlines from various places, we have no doubt that this scattering continues. There are over 68 million refugees in the world and countless millions of other people who move and migrate within countries or across borders for all kinds of reasons.

Now let's move on to the New Testament where we see that on the day of Pentecost many peoples from around the world received the blessing of God that day. Again, we see a picture of a very diverse group of people who travelled to Jerusalem from all over the known world speaking many different types of languages. Yet God, by His Spirit through the disciples, touched each one of them.

Sometimes sermons are preached in which Pentecost is described as a reversal of the Tower of Babel. The sermon goes that at Babel people were divided and separated and spread all over the place because of their language but now at Pentecost all of that is undone. So, Pentecost is described as a reversal of Babel. Or is it? It was an American Methodist Minister in Denmark last year that helped me think of it differently.

² Radical Hope, Transforming Grace. A Booklet by the 2018/2019 President and Vice President of the Methodist Conference.

³ Genesis 11:8

If we look carefully at what happened in Pentecost what we see is that redemption came to the diversity. We see people experiencing and receiving the redemptive grace of God in Christ where they were and whoever they were. At Pentecost all the people weren't made the same and weren't all made to speak the same language or to have the same culture. Rather, what happened at Pentecost was that people speaking different languages and from different cultures and different ethnicities all received the same touch of God by His Spirit.

This theme continues in Revelation where there is that wonderful vision of heaven and 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb'.⁴

So, it's clear that at the birth of the Church at Pentecost it was not God's intention to remove diversity from the world or to make everybody the same but rather to meet people where they are and to offer His grace and love and forgiveness in the context of every language and every nation.

It seems very clear to me that God celebrates the diversity of humanity and has no intention of us all living in homogenous units. As we have just seen, in Revelation 7:9, heaven celebrates diversity.

So, can I suggest that as we say 'Thank God for immigrants' we are thanking God for the diversity He has created and which He celebrates.

Another reason to say, "Thank God for immigrants" is because they are a blessing. Of course, there are always some who travel to another country with the intention of taking advantage of or even attacking the system in that land but let us not forget that the vast majority of immigrant peoples have come to our islands to work hard and to enter into our society while making a valuable contribution to our nation(s). To quote Noel Castellanos, a Mexican background UMC Pastor in USA commenting on the way immigrants were treated after 9/11 and during the great recession of 2008, "Large segments of our economy depended on the cheap labour provided by undocumented workers who were now being scapegoated and blamed for problems with which they had nothing to do."⁵ Similar reactions were seen here during the Brexit referendum debate.

Thomas Kemper, the General Secretary of the General Board of Global Ministries of the UMC writes that, "to suggest that migration might be a blessing sounds somehow subversive. But even a quick glance at the historical record indicates positive results from the movement of people."⁶

⁴ Revelation 7:9

⁵ 'The Plough' (Autumn 2014). p29.

⁶ 'New World Outlook' (September/October 2016) the Mission Magazine of the United Methodist Church

A few years ago I completed some PhD research on the methods of mission of the early church and found lots of evidence that migration had a key role in the dispersion of the good news of Jesus. This began, according to Acts 8:4, with those who were scattered due to the persecution after Stephen's death who "...preached the word wherever they went."

Further evidence that ordinary Christians spoke of their faith as they travelled is provided by the fact that the spread of Christianity often followed the trade routes of the Roman Empire and beyond. For example, Christianity appeared very early in Puteoli, which was on the Bay of Naples on the main route to Rome. Also when Christianity is first seen in Gaul it is in an area with which there was regular trade with the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.⁷ Similarly there were Christians in Bantia in Southern Spain by the early fourth century and this is a region which was important in the trade of olive oil.⁸

As well as merchants and tradesmen, many others travelled, perhaps as part of the Imperial civil service or those whose travel was involuntary such as slaves and deportees.⁹ It seems apparent that those travellers who were Christian shared their faith as they went. For example, in Ethiopia we see the royal family converted through ordinary Christians who became missionaries when they arrived as captives in a strange land and of course, long before Patrick, Christianity first arrived in my native Ireland by various means and through people whose names will never be known.

Later in his article Thomas Kemper, who is German, continues by noting that the first Methodists in North America were migrants from Ireland and England and then some time later German immigrants to the young USA returned to their homeland taking Methodism back with them.

As a 2016 report from JPIT, the inter-church Joint Public Issues Team, puts it, "God is at work in the movement of people today.... Churches are providing warm welcomes and sharing stories of new arrivals bringing fresh life and energy to their congregations. Incredible stories are emerging of individuals arriving at our shores with a new-found commitment to become faithful followers of Jesus."

Kemper says something similar, "Notably, in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf States, the only Christian a young Saudi may ever meet is a Filipino maid or other migrant domestic worker. Faith in Jesus Christ goes with these migrants and they witness as situations permit - mission through migration."

We in the Methodist Church in Ireland, have a special reason to thank God for immigration. Many of our churches, particularly across the Republic of Ireland, have been enlivened, enriched and blessed by people coming from all around the world to

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Humphries, *Early Christianity*, p119.

⁹ Latourette, *op. cit.*, p117.

be part of our congregations. Psalm 107 is one of the passages that I was reflecting a lot on during my year as President as I followed my theme, “the rhythm of grace: meet Jesus, share Jesus”. v2 calls out, “let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story ...”

That, in a nutshell, is the theme I followed painting a picture of people having met with the Lord and been redeemed (bought back) by him and therefore motivated to tell that good news story to others so that they can be redeemed too.

v3 of the Psalm then goes on to describe “the redeemed of the Lord” as “...those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south”. During most of the years of my ordained ministry I have been so blessed to be stationed in places where I get to listen to and share in the stories told by the “redeemed of the Lord” who have gathered in Ireland “..from east and west, from north and south”.

I currently serve as Superintendent Minister of Dublin Central Mission. 15 - 20 years ago the worshipping congregation at the heart of the Mission had got very small and was mostly comprised of people travelling from the suburbs. They wondered should they close and go to churches near where they lived. However, at that time the people felt a clear call to stay in the City and so they continued. Soon after that Ireland began to change and the church began to grow. Now on a Sunday I rejoice to look at a congregation of over 20 nations where no nation (including Ireland) has more than 10 - 15% of the people. So it really is a multi-ethnic congregation rather than an Irish church with visitors from overseas. On different Sundays of the month we’ve worship groups from Philippines or Zimbabwe or India etc and the Church Council and leadership of the church normally represents about four continents. In that context then we believe that part of our witness in Dublin Central Mission is to model for the nation that multiculturalism can work and that immigration can be a wonderful blessing. We try to live out No. 3 of the 10 affirmations on migration, diversity and interculturalism which the Irish Council of Churches has committed to, namely, “to work towards inclusive communities, paying particular attention to addressing racism and xenophobia in attitudes, actions, practices and policies.”

In this context then, it is clear that the church has a huge role to play in welcoming migrant peoples and enabling them to find a community which can support them and resource them as they seek to settle in a new land. However, we must be careful not to be paternalistic about this. Yes, we have things to give to immigrants who arrive amongst us but we also have so much to receive. We need to realise that welcoming and integration of visitors, if it is to be real, must mean that *everyone* changes. It’s not that we welcome those who come amongst us and help them to change so that they are like us. Rather it’s about a joining together so that everyone is changed as they come together. To quote Ullas Tankler the Europe Secretary for the United Methodist Church, “we need to be totally engaged with proclaiming the gospel of grace to everyone. The opposite is just as true, we need to be open to receiving the gospel of grace from everyone.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Unpublished paper submitted to European Methodist Council, September 2016

Not only can migrants bring blessing but we can also thank God for the challenge migrants bring us.

An example. A year ago in the town of Chillan 5 hours south of Santiago in Chile the local Pastor told me how the recently arrived Haitian migrants had really challenged his congregation with regard to their giving to the church because, poor as they are, the Haitians always tithe and so this has put it up to the local Chilean Christians and church collections have increased as a result. Similarly, Christians in Ireland have been amazed to discover that asylum seekers whose weekly cash allowance is only €19 are careful to tithe it.

Migrants also challenge us about family values in the way they so often send money home to loved ones even though they could really do with the money themselves here.

I want to suggest that a further reason to thank God for migrants that they can help us further our understanding of the Incarnation. That might sound strange to you. How can migrants further our understanding of the Incarnation? Well, let me explain what I am thinking. In September 1990 I arrived in Haiti as a very raw, young agriculture graduate. It was towards the end of three years of political turmoil since the overthrow of Baby Doc. A few months later Haiti had its first ever free and fair democratic elections. A new President was installed in February 1991 and all seemed well for a few months but then he was overthrown by the army in September 1991. Haiti was in turmoil. I almost lost my life because I was on an overnight bus trip on the night of the coup d'état but many others did lose their lives during those days.

However, two weeks later I was on an ancient DC3 Dakota aeroplane flying to Florida. I arrived with out of date airline tickets for an onward trip to Washington DC but my friends had already lined it up with American Airlines that my out of date tickets could be changed to take me where I needed to go. Three weeks later I ended up living on the island of Antigua where I served the final 10 months of that particular period in the Caribbean. Antigua turned out to be a very formative place for my life and ministry and, in the end, I was glad to have had that time there but I will never forget the first few months. I felt so guilty and embarrassed! Here was I sitting in safety, with proper status to legally be where I was and with no financial concerns. Yet as I listened to the BBC World Service on the shortwave radio I heard regular reports of thousands of Haitian people taking to flimsy boats and heading for Florida. Very often they drowned or else they were picked up by the US coastguards somewhere off the Bahamas.

I had arrived in Antigua with a suitcase and a rucksack and that was all I had there. The rest of my possessions were either in Haiti or in my parent's home. I had arrived

in a country where I knew nobody and where I didn't really have any intention of being in the first place. Yet I was so safe and so privileged and so fortunate. The limited sense of displacement and disorientation which I felt helped me to more fully understand, and be very troubled by, the desperate plight of the Haitian folk who were (sometimes literally) drowning in vulnerability. They had made themselves utterly vulnerable while seeking a better life or running from danger.

The Incarnation is about vulnerability. It's not about God seeking a better life for Himself - he lives in Heaven! Nor is it about God fleeing from danger because he lives in the perfect relationship of the Trinity. However, the Incarnation is about God making Himself utterly vulnerable out of love for you and for me.

I would suggest that the vulnerable uncertainty of migrant peoples around the world can offer us a parable of the Incarnation and following from that this gives Christians all the more reason why we should be at the forefront of thanking God for migrants and helping them move from utter vulnerability to safety and stability, to move from vulnerability to new life.

I'm sure you could mention many further reasons to thank God for immigrants but the last one I want to mention this evening before moving on to a case study is to say that migrant peoples can help to remind us that, as the old song says, "This world is not my home, I'm just passing through".

Deuteronomy reminds the people of God that their "father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there"¹¹ Centuries later a document from the second Christian century called Letter to Diognetus describes Christians as people who "... live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens and endure everything as foreigners. They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven." So, says Michael Nausner, Christians are called to "understand themselves as migrants [because] Christians share the basic human condition of migration as part of their innermost identity of faith."¹²

Let us as Christians remember that, no matter where we live or what our politics might be we are in fact strangers in our nation because our first loyalty is as "...a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God ..." (1 Peter 2:9). So, I affirm, in the words of my friend Nick Park who is Executive Director of Evangelical Alliance Ireland, that "I see myself as a stranger and a foreigner in this

¹¹ Deuteronomy 26:5

¹² 'New World Outlook' (September/October 2016) the Mission Magazine of the United Methodist Church

nation and this world, and I have a God-given duty to bless others, whether they come from next door or from the other side of the globe”.¹³

Now, for the rest of this lecture I want to move into what might be described as a case study. It will bring us some challenge from the Methodist Church in Chile where, last year, I saw a living incarnation of the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, “I was a stranger and you invited me in....”

I first heard about this work around a table in Santiago with 2 Chileans explaining their work in Spanish which was then translated into Haitian Creole by a Haitian lady who has lived for some years in Chile. I was then able to convert the Haitian Creole into English for 2 visitors from London who were also round the table! The meeting progressed slowly!

Mariella opened the meeting with the words, “It’s a real expression of love that you can share in the work we are doing to welcome others”. I was quickly to discover that in fact it was the other way around in that all Methodists in Ireland (and I would suggest in Britain) can benefit from lessons taught to us by the Methodist Church in Chile. Mariella has been appointed by the Chilean Church since October 2016 as the National Co-ordinator for their work with migrants. Her salary is paid for by Methodists in Britain and Ireland under our ‘Nationals in Mission Appointment’ (NMA) programme. The motivation for this work is that in recent years over 80,000 Haitian people have arrived in Chile. This is because they could come into the country without a visa for three months. However, for most of them that’s when the trouble really starts. They are likely to have sold up all they have to make the journey and when they arrive in the country they struggle to find employment and can end up virtually destitute very quickly. They find themselves caught in a cruel ‘chicken and egg’ situation where they can’t get work without a work permit and they can’t get a permit without a job provided by a registered employer. They then quite often fall victim to being taken advantage of by Government officials because of their lack of Spanish. Some other Chilean people feel aggrieved because they feel that the Haitians and other migrants have taken their jobs. Haitians are often called derogatory racial names and those who work on construction sites have sometimes been subject to the fact that Chilean construction workers have even learned Creole swear words to use against the Haitians!

Mariella suggested that possibly the geography of Chile, at the end of a Continent, contributes to this discriminatory attitude and something of a fortress mentality. She mentioned that before the Haitians arrived people tended to discriminate against the indigenous peoples of Chile especially the Mapuche indigenous community. However, there have been Government campaigns to urge more inclusiveness along with the efforts of Churches and other groups and there is some evidence of a slow move towards acceptance. Over the next few days we were to see that the Methodist Church is playing a leading and pioneering role in this change.

¹³ Ministry to Migrants and Asylum Seekers. Published by Evangelical Alliance Ireland, 2015. p19.

Mariella spent the first period after her appointment visiting every District of the Methodist Church and meeting with mens', womens' and youth groups as well as whole congregations. Her goal was to share correct information and debunk myths. She noted that very often prejudices are held due to a lack of knowledge. The other part of Mariella's work is to co-ordinate the activities of many local congregations up and down Chile who are doing what they can firstly to give initial assistance to Haitian migrants and then to help empower them so that they can make their way in life in their new country.

I saw Methodist churches in various locations with doors flung wide open to receive Haitians into their midst. So, in some Church halls there are mattresses stacked up so that Haitians can sleep there until they find other accommodation. Churches are opening their kitchens so that people can cook and eat there because often the Haitians are forced to live crammed into small houses with little or no kitchen facilities. In terms of empowerment many Chilean Methodist Churches are offering Spanish language classes. In fact, when I was there just over a year ago one single Church in Santiago had already offered language classes to 500 people. At the end of the course, participants receive a certificate signed by the Bishop which encourages them to keep going with learning Spanish. Churches also try to provide a snack during the class because often the students are hungry. In Chillán the church is setting up Creole classes where Haitians can teach Chileans to speak Creole. Unlike the Spanish classes which are free the Chileans have to pay for these classes and then the money so generated is used to financially support the Haitians during the winter when there won't be work for them on the surrounding farms.

As I stood in the town square of Curico (3 hours south of Santiago) I realised how important this reception work is. I was chatting with a group of about 30 young Haitian men and women all of whom were looking for work and some of whom hadn't eaten for two days. One man explained to me that he had been asked to pay a large fee to renew his visa at the Immigration Office but this was a clear case of mis-information/corruption because there was no need for him to pay that fee.

Then the local Pastors, Irma and Ernesto, actually asked me to give out their phone numbers and the address of the Church to anyone who wanted it and to explain to them in Creole that they could find assistance there. And so I stood for 10 or 15 minutes with the details written on a piece of paper holding it up while most of the Haitians gathered in the town square took a photograph of it on their phones.

Church people not only open their buildings but they also offer food and toiletries to those in need. There has been a national bicycle collection across Methodist Churches in Chile so that those who find work can get there without having to pay bus fares.

Furthermore, many Methodists arrange to accompany Haitians to their emigration appointments so as to prevent them being victimised because of language. Increasingly local Methodist congregations in Chile are now offering vocational training courses to Haitians according to whatever expertise and skills that they happen to have in their congregation. This is to help Haitians get work.

In Chillán, a large town 5 hours south of Santiago, Pastor Alejandra explained how her Church are doing what they can to enable Haitians to get established. So, for example, they go with them to meet with landlords so the landlord knows that the Church is behind them and this can prevent the landlord from taking advantage. The Church also uses its reputation with local business people inviting them to inform them of job vacancies on the understanding that the Church will identify a reliable Haitian worker to fill the post.

During my week in Chile I got to preach in Haitian Creole five times and I must admit I loved seeing the surprised but joyful expression on the Haitians' faces when they realised this Irish preacher could speak their language! Four of those Services were mixed congregations of Chileans and Haitians and so the sermon was translated from Creole into Spanish. It was very moving to watch how the Chilean Christians welcomed the Haitians into the Church. As soon as a Haitian migrant came through the door they received a big hug from a Chilean Methodist which was in stark contrast to the reception that they often get in the wider community. Also every church went to great lengths to incorporate Creole into their worship such as projecting the words of songs and Bible readings in both Creole as well as Spanish. Chilean Methodists say that Haitians are changing the way they worship and bringing their particular way of worshipping God into the church. They also recognise that they have much to learn from the faith and devotion of their Haitian sisters and brothers. For example, the Pastor in Chillán told me that after he preached a sermon on how the Haitians tithe, as mentioned above, it challenged the Chileans in their giving.

One beautiful sunny afternoon we travelled to visit the church in Quinchamali.

This tiny church is located in a small village in a very rural area surrounded by miles of fruit and vegetable farms. Lots of Haitians come to this area to work on the farms during the summer and harvest but of course this work is only seasonal. At the back of the church there's a small room where the church already welcomes Haitians to stay.

However, they have a vision to erect a building with 20 beds on some land behind their church so that they can establish a welcome centre for many more Haitians. They have already constructed a good toilet facility for this purpose.

In addition to all of this practical support Methodists in Chile are also trying to offer counselling to many Haitians who are traumatised by their past and their present. Furthermore, the church is hoping to develop a discipleship programme for their Haitian members. There is already one Chilean/Haitian lady being trained as a Minister and it is hoped that it will be possible for a Minister to be sent to Chile from the Methodist Church in Haiti. In all of this, it's important to note that the Chilean Methodist Church is not wealthy and there is no big central budget for this work. Most of it is done on a shoestring and heavily reliant on volunteers.

Furthermore, and more recently, Chile, along with other neighbouring countries, has received an influx of Venezuelan migrants (over 3 million have left Venezuela since last year) and the Methodist Church in Chile is currently seeking funding from partners to strengthen its work with Venezuelan migrants in Chile. This again demonstrates how committed the church in Chile is to supporting migrants.

In addition Methodist partners in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil and Argentina are also responding to this mass exodus, with Colombia as a country receiving the most number of migrants (over 1 million).

In Chile we see a church actively welcoming people, so fulfilling Jesus' words in Matthew 25:35 'I was a stranger and you invited me in....'

But this is more than a welcome.

What I saw in Chile was a pro-active reaching out to people who are marginalised, excluded and ostracised.

It's more like

Matthew 22:9 'So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'

So let me finish by suggesting that the big challenge coming out of this to us in the Methodist Churches in Britain and in Ireland is how can we be more proactive in reaching out to immigrant peoples and attacking prejudice. We need to do more than just sit and wait for people to come to us, let us take the example of the Methodist Church in Chile and proactively reach out to find and welcome vulnerable migrant peoples in our midst.

I finish by quoting again from Nick Park, the Executive Director of Evangelical Alliance Ireland, "We need to recognise the fundamentally anti-Christian nature of any approach whereby we see ourselves as part of the 'in group' and treat migrants and asylum seekers as an 'out group' that is assigned a lesser status in our society."¹⁴

¹⁴ op. cit., p18.