

Aliens, Strangers or Neighbours?

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A recent European and forthcoming General Election suggest that one of the ongoing high-profile issues is likely to be that of economic migration. UKIP's highly controversial poster of a British builder begging on the street may have been offensive and divisive, but it nonetheless captures the tone of a conversation that is without question prevailing in many local pubs and coffee shops. It is a narrative that few politicians are likely to ignore, and indeed one that some will no doubt seek to exploit for their own gain.

I am increasingly convinced that our sense of injustice is a deep-seated consequence of being made in the image of God, and have yet to discover a human being who lacks the instinct to cry foul when they believe that something is not fair. And therein, I suggest, lies the problem. Fed the right spin, presented with a particular "take" on things, our sense of injustice can easily become a hostage to someone else's agenda. Confronted with the narrative of "them" coming over "here" to take "our" jobs, should we be surprised that widespread popular support can be harnessed?

At the heart of this "us and them" agenda is of course the issue of work, and as those who are committed to a perception of employment that is founded on the teachings of the Christian faith, there are some important questions to be raised. This is an agenda that depends upon two core concepts, both of which are pretty much alien to the Kingdom of God.

The first is the idea of work as a solely economic activity. We don't have to listen for very long to the popular narratives of our society, before encountering a predominantly

negative perception of work itself. Work is something to be escaped from at weekends; the necessary grind; a reality in which we are trapped because of diminishing pension funds - it is primarily perceived as a means to an end, and that end is economic reward. We have built a society where we crave release from the graft and disciplines of work, and yet one in which we are keen to hang on to its economic benefits. It is not **work** that we begrudge "them", it is **wealth**.

The second is that rather than loving our neighbour, whoever they might be, we are invited to perceive the stranger as "other" – someone to be shunned and excluded. Who is the "we" who feel under threat, and why is someone whose birthplace is no further away than Newcastle is from Penzance to be branded as "them"?

Our faith compels and enables us to take a more rounded view of the situation. This came home to me in a recent conversation with a Christian leader from Romania. He pointed out that there has been a constant stream of "migrant workers" from his country for decades. They represent a whole generation of surgeons and clinicians who in helping the UK maintain for its citizens one of the best health services in the world, have left a country where their skills are much more scarce. Thanks to the economic injustices of our world, and the years of oppression that the people of that land have suffered, our nation is able to benefit at another's expense.

A further perspective was offered by Angus Douglas when he spoke at a recent ICF members and friends evening. He has been working in Nepal, and one of the graphic images he shared was that of the coffins of overseas workers being returned to the country's main international airport. With almost no opportunities of work in their land of origin, forced to seek employment overseas, they are easy prey for traffickers and opportunists who can hold them in conditions that are little more than slavery. In

such contexts, health and safety is virtually non-existent, yet we are quietly told that they are working on some prestigious and high-profile projects, including “world class” sports stadia.

Without doubt there are injustices to be addressed, and these are realities that become evident through the context of work. But I would suggest that as a people of faith, the place to begin is not by perceiving ourselves as victims of economic circumstances, but beginning to ask in what ways we have become the perpetrators.

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