

**30<sup>th</sup> August, 2015.**

**Reading: Luke 6: 27 - 42**

**Sermon: Reaching Out**

In their desperation to flee Syria, seventy-one people suffocated in the back of what I understand to have been a refrigerated lorry. They died at the hands of a criminal gang.

As they tried to find a place of safety away from the war that is raging in their own land, another two hundred people drowned in the Mediterranean on the same day, thanks to another criminal gang. The list could go on and on.

Those criminal gangs prey on people's vulnerability and their desperation. They promise them an escape and a great life for huge sums of cash and once they have their cash, they abuse their power by treating them inhumanely and by putting the migrants at great risk of death and they migrants, by that time, are helpless to do anything to help themselves. They know they may well die but there is no way back.

Many thousands die and those deaths are all the fault of the criminal gangs. How can they behave like that? How can they treat people in that way, men, women and children? How can they just lock people in a lorry knowing that they have very little, if any, chance of survival? How can they overload their boats to such an extent that

they know the boats are more likely to overturn causing the deaths of all on board than they are to reach safe shores? What those criminal gangs are doing is so wrong and yet they are doing the same thing day after day after day. It's quite incredible.

However, just as the migrants are an easy group for the criminal gangs to prey upon, you may have noticed that the criminal gangs are an easy group for us to judge and condemn. What they are doing is so clearly wrong but they are so incredibly well organised and so difficult to track down.

It's good, isn't it, when something is someone else's fault. It's good when the blame so clearly lies elsewhere and we carry no responsibility for what is happening? We can be like the man in the temple who said: Thank God, we're not like them. We care about people.

How realistic a picture am I presenting of the current situation, I wonder? Is it really all someone else's fault? I can't help thinking that if Jesus were here in the flesh, He might ask us the following question: **Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?**

We may not be putting those people into vans and into death boats but can we really say that we have no responsibility for the outcome? After all,

it's not as if we don't know what is happening. It's not as if we don't know where those people are attempting to come ashore. We may say we care but are we really all just talk? Are we really all that different from those we condemn? What are we doing that makes us different? We may not personally be loading the migrants into boats but are we maybe not partly responsible for them being in the boats in the first place? It's worth considering while we take the moral high ground and condemn the traffickers.

The Italian government has realised that it can do something. It can prevent hundreds of deaths by sending out boats to rescue the people. Even cruise liners are being used. The Italians had a choice, to rescue the migrants or to condemn the victims to certain death and to stand by and watch them die. Their government chose to help.

A woman who was speaking on behalf of the Austrian government the other day - I can't remember her name or her position - she also offered us a solution. All we have to do to prevent those deaths and to take away the power which the criminal gangs have, she said, is open the borders. If people could cross over legally, they would not have to pay huge sums of money to criminals and they would not have to get into death boats to escape or into vehicles in which

they could suffocate. By providing no escape for those people, we are actually as guilty of their deaths as the criminal gangs.

That doesn't sit well with us, does it? After all, what can we do, living in Argyll? We're so far away from the action. It's not like the migrants are drowning off our shores or walking hundreds of miles across our country. It doesn't really affect us.

Surely, it's down to the EU to sort it all out, after all, it's on mainland Europe that the problems are, not here on our shores. We're alright, Jack. Let them deal with it but, as we all know deep down and as many of us voice, Europe's MEPs should be doing more. We see what other people think often enough on Facebook and on Twitter.

My goodness, but it's easy to sit here in Argyll and judge the world and at the same time to place the responsibility for action at someone else's door. Sadly, though, the world is no longer a small place and what affects one group of people or one country, one way or another, affects all of us, and we all have a responsibility to do what we can to relieve the plight of others. **Do to others as you would have them do to you**, says Jesus.

People are leaving Syria in their thousands and they need homes, food, clothes and jobs. The vast majority are not coming to Europe on the

scrounge. They are coming because they are living in fear of their lives and being ill-treated at home, and even if they were coming simply because they wanted a better life for their children and their families, is that so bad? Is that not why people used to head to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and America from here in their droves? But then, they weren't Syrian or Muslim.

If the migrants were coming because they simply wanted a better life, they would work for it and they would build up our economies within Europe. We have to fight their corner.

What if it was us who had to flee for our lives? What if everyone turned their backs on us and left us to walk miles without offering any assistance? **Do to others as you would have them do to you.**

Can the worldwide Church, of which you and I are a part, can the Church not step in and help? Can the worldwide Church not provide transport and shelter and food for those people who are coming into Europe whether the EU says they are illegal immigrants or not?

Would Jesus just have said 'Keep walking'? Would He have passed by on the other side? It's like the story of the Good Samaritan all over again. Will the Church, you and I continue to pass by on the other side or will the Church, you and I, reach out and do something to help those who are in

desperate need? We are the ones who need to lobby the establishment and who need to lobby our politicians to treat those vulnerable, desperate people with respect.

But what of the traffickers? What about those who exploit the vulnerable? What of the criminal gangs who cause so much pain and distress? Should we simply be condemning them? Jesus says: **To you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you.... Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.**

Mercy is not a word that I have ever heard used in connection with the traffickers. Mercy is not a word I have ever heard used by the Churches or by the politicians or by any individuals. It's not a word I have used myself either when talking about the traffickers but mercy is what Jesus calls us to show.

We could be merciful to the traffickers, to the criminal gangs by removing their power, by preventing them from being able to exploit people, by allowing people to move around freely and to find safety without having to pay huge sums of money on the pretext of finding it.

Can we continue to stand by and watch countless thousands more face almost certain death? Can we begin to take the planks out of our

own eyes so that we can see where our responsibility lies and what we as God's people can do to help others who are also His people?

Jesus said: **Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you.**