

# caring for asylum seekers

*Elisabeth Redman and Richard Roberts offer a Biblical perspective*

A man sits alone in the corner of a busy room. He looks gaunt and sad. As we talk, he soon reveals why. He cannot sleep; he doesn't want to eat. He explains he is completely alone in the UK. He has a ten year old daughter in Sri Lanka, but has lost contact with her. All he knows is that she is somewhere in the Tamil region - the same area where a massacre is taking place.

Zaineb<sup>1</sup> has just arrived in the UK and doesn't speak English. She has a large family of ten children, but when she fled her home country of Somalia she could not bring them, and now she doesn't know where they are. Zaineb was severely beaten before fleeing, receiving injuries to her face and body, with the worst injuries inflicted as her attackers tried to rape her.

These two individuals are examples of asylum seekers who have recently arrived in Cardiff, and no doubt many more with equally horrific stories are being sent to different areas of the UK. What can I do to help them as a Christian medical student?



I have no doubt that both individuals are telling the truth, but many asylum seekers are not truthful about their situations - does that affect my response? What is a biblical perspective?

*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament was originally written in Greek, and in this language there are four words for love. *Storge* is the Greek word meaning family affection; *philia* means friendship love and *eros* sexual love. These three 'loves' are given and received by Christians and non-Christians alike. However there is another Greek word for love, which is the highest love imaginable - 'God is *agape*'.<sup>3</sup> *Agape* is a divine love, selfless and self-giving. God has demonstrated his *agape* love for us through his own son Jesus, and throughout the Bible there

are many verses telling of God's steadfast love for us. His love is particularly emphasised for the 'unlovely' - the oppressed, the fatherless, the widow and the alien.<sup>4</sup>

*[Jesus prayed] I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.*<sup>5</sup>

There are clear biblical commands to love one another and live a life of love as Jesus did.<sup>6</sup> Before Jesus was arrested, he prayed for all believers, that they may have this *agape* love in them. However Christ's perfect love is expressed differently for different people. For example, Jesus showed his love for the Pharisees through seemingly harsh words, because they needed to understand they wouldn't be saved while they held on to their lack of faith and to their hypocrisy. For the woman caught in adultery, it was a softer approach, diverting attention (from her probably uncovered body) to the ground and from her sin to the sins of her accusers. He didn't say that she didn't deserve to be punished, but by his grace and

in his wisdom, he saved her from being stoned and gave her an opportunity to repent.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, we are to love the people around us, though this may be through different means. Paul wrote to the mature believers at Philippi 'And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth in insight'.<sup>8</sup> He prays that the believers may be wise in their love.

### how can we apply this to asylum seekers?

Firstly and most importantly, we can support them through petitioning our Father in prayer. We can pray for specific individuals, for organisations working with them and for wisdom to know how to love them.

The 'wise way' of practically loving asylum seekers does not need to involve money, as they are supported by the government whilst their application is being processed. The greater need, and what they are often lacking, is social and personal support. Many asylum seekers have experienced very traumatic situations and arrive in the UK

alone, as the Sri Lankan man did. Appropriately loving them should involve showing them that we care, for example through supporting community projects. Some are believers, and need to be welcomed as brothers and sisters.

It is true that some individuals may not be honest about why they have come to the UK. But God has established governing authorities to make just decisions for the individual and for our country - pray for wisdom for them too. God is sovereign. He may have brought them to this country to hear the gospel. For example, there are a large number of Kurds currently coming to the UK, and in the past there have been large influxes from Somalia and Bangladesh. All these are among the nations 'least reached' with the gospel. Often situations that seem 'bad' to us can still be used for God's glory. For example, Paul's unjust removal to and imprisonment in Rome resulted in the whole imperial guard hearing the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

For many medical students, asylum seekers are not individuals you regularly meet. However, they are a group that have received a lot of medical

media attention recently, in regards to treatment of failed asylum seekers. Therefore it is important to consider your own views, and to walk as Jesus did,<sup>10</sup> loving our neighbour in whatever way we can in obedience to God's word.

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Some useful organisations and opportunities to volunteer

- Refugee council<sup>11</sup>
- Student action for Refugees (STAR)<sup>12</sup>
- Local church based projects eg Oasis in Cardiff<sup>13</sup>

### REFERENCES

1. Name changed to protect confidentiality
2. 1 John 4:8
3. *Ibid*, authors' translation
4. Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19; Jeremiah 22:3
5. John 17:26
6. Matthew 19:19; Luke 10:27; John 13:34-35; Romans 12:10
7. John 8:1-11
8. Philippians 1:9
9. Philippians 1:12-13
10. 1 John 2:6
11. [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/volunteering](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/volunteering)
12. [www.star-network.org.uk/index.php/about/find\\_a\\_star\\_group](http://www.star-network.org.uk/index.php/about/find_a_star_group)
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