

## THE JUDGEMENT OF THE NATIONS

*Matthew 25:31-46*

### Jesus as the stranger

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

### *Discuss:*

Konrad Raiser, The World Council of Churches General Secretary, says this in his challenge to the world's churches to show solidarity with "uprooted people":

"We challenge churches throughout the world to rediscover their identity, their integrity and their vocation as **the church of the stranger**. Help for uprooted people has always been recognised as a diaconal activity. But we declare that it is also a question of being the church. We are "the church of the stranger" – "the church of Jesus Christ, the stranger" (Matthew 25:31-46).

In the encounter with the stranger we meet God. In Jesus Christ, God has come into our midst. But God is still an unwanted stranger. God shares this fate with others who don't fit into our acceptable categories. Even today, people are trying to prove that Jesus' claim to be sent by God is false. Just as many Western governments try to prove that asylum seekers are swindlers.

For those who receive God in Christ, the world changes. To meet God is to discover the truth and to discover that we are children of God.

God is continually on his way to us. We can shut the door in his face. We do it every time we deny uprooted persons protection and asylum. We can also open the door. Through the

refugee, the traveller, the uprooted person... Jesus comes to us again. To let him in is to receive God – the stranger – he who wants to share our situation and our life."

- What do you think of Konrad Raiser's appeal? What would it imply for your local church, if you took it seriously?
- Matthew 25 makes it clear that we are the church of the stranger. Jesus identifies himself with the stranger, and if we reject the stranger, we reject Christ.
- Who in your local community are
  - the hungry
  - the thirsty
  - the stranger
  - the naked
  - the sick
  - the prisoner?Work out a plan to include these groups in the fellowship of your congregation.

## **STORIES FROM NORWAY**

### **MEET A MAN FROM SOMALIA, 35 YEARS OLD**

I wanted to escape from war and insecurity. That I came to Norway was just a coincidence. I went first to a neighbouring country, and there I heard that it was possible to come to Norway without a visa. I had heard of Norway, because my father was a seaman. I was prepared for the change of climate and the culture shock – I was already interested in other countries and cultures before the war broke out. However long I live in Norway, I will always be an alien. I am a stranger here. Because I have a different coloured skin, no-one will accept me as a Norwegian. I hope that will change in future years – perhaps it will take 100 years? Racism? I have never experienced it. But I have often encountered nationalism. And I can understand that. That as a nation, people want to protect their land. I recognise it from Somalia and other countries. Some people are worried for their culture and their identity. In fact, there are many of them. A few politicians use them deliberately in order to win votes for their own party.

I know that in the future, I will live in Somalia. I know it now. I have a dream: that I will earn a lot of money so that I can return as a businessman, if the situation calms down. I know many who have returned. There is big potential if you have money or a profession.

### **MEET A FAMILY FROM KOSOVO**

#### **The church and people's hearts were big enough**

"We endured many years as fugitives. All we want now is for our children to get a good education, and to live in a house that is so big that they don't have to do their homework in the living-room."

The family has been displaced for many years, but has now settled down in a new local community. The father proudly tells us that his youngest son is the best player in his football team, and that his youngest daughter has just started school. He has reasons to be proud of the

other four children too. On behalf of the family, he is worried that three children sharing each of the six metre square bedrooms will be too many when the children grow up.

The family is one of the many that came from Kosovo and fled into churches in the summer and autumn of 1993, because they were afraid of being sent back to Kosovo. Previously they had lived in Sweden for two years, and after that had stayed in various parts of Norway. It's a combination of luck and some cunning that has made it possible for this family to live a normal life today.

The children also remember dramatic episodes when the police came to fetch them, but they managed to escape. "Papa jumped out of the window when the police came, and hid in the woods", one of the boys explains enthusiastically. From Northern Norway the journey took them to Finland and on to Sweden. In Sweden they stayed with a friend who had heard of a church in Oslo where it was possible to live.

In August 1993 – in the middle of the night – they came to the church, and were met by a night watchman. Another church heard of the family, and let them live on the church premises all the autumn – until a joint declaration by the Ministry of Justice and leaders of the Church of Norway made it possible for them to leave the church. But it wasn't until this summer that they could feel safe, when the whole family was given humanitarian protection – after four years in Norway.

The family still lives in the parish that housed them for those unforgettable months. "We can rely on people in the congregation", the mother says. "We still have contact with many of them." It's the children that spend most time in the church now. The parents are Muslims. The children call themselves Muslims too, but for them it doesn't matter so much whether they are Christian or Muslim.

Only one of their grandparents is still alive, and none of them want to go back to Kosovo. They all agree that life is better in Norway, and the children have different plans as to where they are going to live when they grow up. The mother thinks that six children is enough work in itself. The father receives disability benefit, but hopes eventually to get a job as a welder.

After three years moving around between Sweden, Norway and Finland, the children have experienced more insecurity and restlessness than most people experience in a whole lifetime. The family was forced to flee, and was also forced to live in rootlessness during very decisive years in the children's upbringing. The children are now happy for the new opportunities they have, but the parents are worried.

They take me up to the bedroom after the children have fallen asleep. They ask me if I can help them to get a new and bigger house with more room for the children to play and do homework. But the worries are not big enough to prevent me taking two deeply radiant faces with me into the night. The church was this Muslim family's salvation.