

# THE BIBLE AND THE STRANGER

## A Bible study of the stranger and the strangers in our midst

### *Sources:*

André Jaques. "The Stranger Within Your Gates. Uprooted People in the World Today (World Council of Churches).

"Menigheten i møte med innvandrere og flyktninger". Pamphlet from Oslo diocesan synod. Bible study by Anfinn Kolberg.

What does the Bible say about strangers, refugees and immigrants? The people of God in the Old Testament had a tradition that emphasised hospitality towards strangers whom they encountered – even though circumstances also led them to exterminate their enemies, those who were opposed to the Lord.

In Leviticus, hospitality is a natural element in God's word to his people.

Abraham and David were involuntarily on the move at certain times of their lives. Joseph and Ruth had to adapt to new cultures, different from her own. And many of the Psalms reflect profound feelings and needs among uprooted, exiled people.

In the New Testament we find corresponding themes, for example love for one's neighbour and trust in God's care. Questions about refugees and strangers belong here. The Bible shows us who we are and how the word of God can affect our behaviour – also in this sphere.

Let us take a look at some parts of the biblical message.

### **God wants us to care for the stranger**

The Bible's unambiguous assertion about people who are strangers or refugees is that they should be met with friendliness and caring.

Leviticus 19:33-34

"When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Paul's words in Acts, that God let the nations inhabit the whole earth, and allotted the boundaries of the places where they would live, cannot be read in isolation, and least of all be used to justify

Acts 17:26-27

separating people according to their race or culture. It is true that Leviticus states that God separated the people of Israel from the other peoples, and ordered them not to mix with others. And the Christian church should also be a special people. But when Scripture says that we do not belong to the world, it means the Christian community as the people of God. The church must never forget that it is a

Leviticus 20:24-26

1 Peter 2:9

John 17:16

community in the world. Christians must interact with their fellow human beings outside the church with openness and gentleness. The Bible is full of accounts of people who are on the move, who are strangers, immigrants or refugees, and who have nowhere they can call home.

Philippians 4:5

### **The story of the stranger**

The story of the stranger really begins with Cain. After he murdered his brother Abel, he was a fugitive on earth. He was to be homeless and outlawed, a stranger, but not without God's care and protection. Abraham was also a stranger and homeless. He left home when God called him and lived as a stranger and alien, relying on the promise God had given him. Faith and trust made him confident about the future, even though the only piece of land he owned was the site of his grave at Hebron.

Genesis 4:8-15

Genesis 12:1ff

Genesis 23

Joseph came to Egypt as a stranger and a slave, but it became his destiny to save Egypt from a famine. He was appointed chancellor. When he had established himself in his new country, he summoned his father and brothers to come to Egypt. It was what we today would call a "family reunion". Not long afterwards, these refugees were persecuted. A new king who didn't know about Joseph came to the throne. They became slaves in the country they had fled to. The story, which has close parallels in the world today, illustrates how vulnerable aliens are in a foreign country. Their relationship with the nation's own citizens is always difficult. The latter naturally want to defend their rights, and the strangers have to adapt and negotiate with their new neighbours. Aliens must constantly assert their own human dignity. And when problems arise in the new country, it's always immigrants that get the blame.

Genesis 37:36

Genesis 41

Genesis 45:16ff

Exodus 1:8

### **Jesus was also a stranger**

At the deepest level, Jesus was also a stranger, without a home, with nowhere to lay his head. John puts it like this, "He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him."

Matthew 8:18-20

John 1:11

In Luke the same idea is conveyed through Jesus being born in a stable far from home, when "there was no place for them in the inn"

Luke 2:7

Matthew tells how Jesus became a refugee in Egypt. Joseph and Mary had to flee with him because king Herod was full of fear and fury over the new-born heavenly prince.

Matthew 2:13ff

When Jesus tells the parable of the Judgement of the Nations, he shows solidarity with the homelessness that his people had to endure, and with all the homeless, refugees and aliens, when he says, "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me..."

Matthew 25:31ff

### **The Church is on its way**

In many contexts, the Christian Church is described as being like a stranger in the world. It isn't at home in any country or city on earth, it's on a journey towards the heavenly homeland, it's on its way. The account of the people of Israel wandering through the desert from Egypt to the promised land is therefore often interpreted as a precursor of the believers' lifelong journey towards the kingdom of God. It is

Hebrews 13:14f

1 Peter 2:11

made use of in this way in spirituals, where one of the themes is "My home is over Jordan". This theme should help the church to show solidarity with the world's refugees and strangers, just as the Lord himself does.

### **Responsibility for strangers**

Jesus expects and demands that his disciples will care for strangers. This is nothing new. The demands are the same as those that God made of the Israelites through Moses and later through the prophets. The children of Israel should constantly be reminded that they had been strangers and slaves in Egypt. The stranger should therefore not be oppressed in their own land. The stranger should enjoy the same regulation of working hours as the Israelites, through the commandment to observe the sabbath. Those who owned land should always allow some of the produce to remain unharvested, so that the poor and strangers could gather food. In this way Ruth, who was not a Jew, was able to glean grain from the Jew Boaz' fields.

Hebrews 13:2

Romans 15:7

Deuteronomy 6:20f

Exodus 20:10

Exodus 23:10-12

Leviticus 19:9-10

Ruth 2:2-3

### **People with resources**

We can see from these examples that God is always on the side of the stranger. Time after time we hear the exhortation to show solidarity and care for widows, orphans and strangers. They live difficult lives, but that doesn't mean that they are pitiable. Joseph is one of the best examples of how someone who comes as a stranger can become a resource. The same can be true of the strangers in our midst.

But we know that among the worst things that can happen to a person, is to lose a partner, or for a child to lose its father or mother. In the same way, it is hard to lose your social network or your home. God knows this, and he shows a special care and love for people in these situations, through words of promise, comfort and encouragement.

Lamentations 3:19

Psalm 68:6

In our context, we must first realise that the stranger belongs in the same category as widows and orphans. Strangers are also desolate. In spite of their resources, they need care and help in their unfamiliar surroundings. They need a new sense of belonging, that we can give them.

Strangers are surrounded by God's care and love. And God's attitude towards the stranger must be the norm for our own attitude to the stranger. "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children", Paul writes. And he tells the Christians to remember how, before they came to believe, they were strangers to the promises, without God and without hope in the world. They had been strangers and aliens among the people of God.

Ephesians 5:1

Ephesians 2:12

Ephesians 2:19

### **Love without limits**

With this in mind, we can perhaps sense something of the profundity of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the eyes of the Jews, the

Luke 10:25ff

Samaritans were strangers. "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans", John explains when he writes about Jesus and the woman at Jacob's well. But despite this, Jesus talks to her. And in the parable, the Samaritan does not hesitate to help the mishandled Jew. He needed help! With this parable, Jesus tears apart the common conception, that my neighbour is my fellow-countryman, someone I know and have things in common with. Jesus teaches us to abandon that narrow way of thinking for the universal, "My neighbour is someone who needs me, whether he or she is a stranger or a friend. Just as Jesus died for everyone, Christians are called to serve everyone. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

John 4:9

Matthew 5:44f

Jesus came to proclaim good news for the poor. Right up to his death, he made himself one with the poor, including strangers. In this way he broke down the barriers that human beings erect and showed that the love of God is for everyone. It is thus correct to say that our treatment of the poor and of strangers is a test of how well we understand the gospel of the love of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. In the parable of the Judgement of the Nations, Jesus exposes the ignorance, indifference and lack of concern that people show towards the least of those who belong to his family. And today, these words penetrate our minds too. No-one can say, "I didn't realise..." Jesus says, "I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me." How do we treat the stranger?

Luke 4:18

Ephesians 2:14-16

Matthew 25:31ff

**From the study material "Church of the Stranger"** (Christian Council of Asia 1997) we have selected the following list of Bible passages. It shows which Bible quotations are considered relevant and significant in an Asian context. Use them – let them be a source of inspiration, reflection and conversation here too!

**Genesis 21:1**

Abraham is uprooted from his home country and sent out by God.

**Genesis 37-45**

Joseph is sold to Egyptians and must learn to adapt to a new culture.

**Exodus 23:9**

"You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

**Leviticus 19:15**

"You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour."

**Leviticus 19:33-34**

"When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

**Deuteronomy 10:18-19**

He "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and ... loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

**Deuteronomy 26**

The Israelites are commanded to pay a tithe to "the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows".

**Joshua 20**

The Israelites establish cities of refuge for those who need asylum.

**Ruth**

Ruth leaves her own country Moab in order to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem and adapt to a different culture.

**1 Samuel 23-24**

David hides in the desert because Saul "had come out to seek his life". Many refugees today have fled from similar life-threatening situations.

**2 Samuel 22:2-3**

"The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,  
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,  
my shield and the horn of my salvation,  
my stronghold and my refuge,  
my saviour; you save me from violence."

**Job 31:32**

"The stranger has not lodged in the street;  
I have opened my doors to the traveller."

**Psalm 2:12**

"Happy are all who take refuge in" the Lord.

**Psalm 46:1**

"God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble."

**Psalm 57:1**

"Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,  
for in you my soul takes refuge;  
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,  
until the destroying storms pass by."

**Psalm 61:1-3**

"Hear my cry, O God;  
listen to my prayer.  
From the end of the earth I call to you,  
when my heart is faint."

Lead me to the rock  
that is higher than I;  
for you are my refuge,  
a strong tower against the enemy."

**Psalm 88:1-2**

"O Lord, God of my salvation,  
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,  
let my prayer come before you;  
incline your ear to my cry."

**Psalm 146:9**

"The Lord watches over the strangers;  
he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin."

**Proverbs 31:8-9**

"Speak out for those who cannot speak,  
for the rights of all the destitute.  
Speak out, judge righteously,  
defend the rights of the poor and needy."

**Isaiah 17:10**

"You have forgotten the God of your salvation,  
and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge."

**Isaiah 58:6-9**

"Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
(...)  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn (...)."

**Isaiah 61:1**

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners."

**Zechariah 7:9-10**

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor..."

**Matthew 2:14-23**

Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee to Egypt. They had a well-founded fear of persecution. Christ was himself a refugee.

**Matthew 14:13-21**

Jesus takes five loaves and two fishes and feeds more than 5000 people.

**Matthew 15:21-28**

The Caananite woman – a stranger, a gentile, who didn't give up when she met Jesus, until she had been helped.

**Matthew 25:31-46**

"...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..."

**Luke 10:25-37**

The parable of the Good Samaritan. God chooses a stranger, the Samaritan, as a role model for actions of love. It is the stranger who helps, it is "we" who need help.

**Luke 14:13-14**

"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you..."

**Acts 8:26-40**

Philip shows concern for the stranger's (the Ethiopian court official's) spiritual needs.

**2 Corinthians 8:12-14**

"For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. 13I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between 14your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance."

**2 Corinthians 9:7-8**

"Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."

**1 John 3:17-18**

"How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."