Last time I preached in this pulpit, back in July, I was talking about being on holiday on a pilgrimage island. Bardsey, just of the North Wales coast, is a place to which people have fled for sanctuary and peace over centuries. A place to rediscover salvation, and to know the healing presence of God. This time I am once again only recently returned from holiday on an island: again, a place to which people have been fleeing, making a pilgrimage of sorts - but the story isn’t quite the same.

We’ve been on Samos, in the Aegean. Just off the coast of Turkey, and not many miles north of the island of Kos. We chose it as our destination many months ago: we hadn’t been to Greece for years, and were attracted by the thought of visiting Patmos, a few miles to the south. We did make it to Patmos whilst we were there - though only a fairly short distance, the crossing took well over two hours and the large boat we were on pitched and rolled extraordinarily. I was very ill on the way there, and on the way back sat on the deck talking to the Archdeacon of Tonbridge, who we had met on the island, with my eyes riveted to any fixed point on the horizon I could find in a barely successful attempt to hold body and lunch together.

How strange to make these journeys of choice, and find ourselves in the midst of news stories. Only once did we really see migrants and refugees during our holiday - a group of perhaps 50 or 60 people gathered in a little area of benches and trees by the harbour, washing and hanging out clothes, and later in the evening being escorted along the bury harbour past all of us enjoying our Moussaka and Ouzo’s bought with the Euros carefully brought with us from the prosperity of our home countries. Another time, on a short walk on one of the island’s promontories reaching out towards Turkey, only a couple of miles across the water, I came across the piles of discarded clothing in the scrub of which I’d read.

What are we doing to each other? What is going on in this human family? We found ourselves drawing on John Donne to find the words, as Kathryn has done on the front of Cathedral Matters.

\[\text{No man is an island,}\
\text{Entire of itself,}\
\text{Every man is a piece of the continent,}\
\text{A part of the main.}\
\text{If a clod be washed away by the sea,}\
\text{Europe is the less.}\
\text{As well as if a promontory were.}\
\text{As well as if a manor of thy friend's}\
\text{Or of thine own were:}\
\text{Any man's death diminishes me,}\
\text{Because I am involved in mankind,}\
\text{And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;}\
\text{It tolls for thee.}\]

Yet to be moved to action means somehow entering the world of the other. It’s no good simply to know - we have to feel. For me and for many, it has taken the particular image of the young boy face down on a beach in Turkey, to make it real. Aylan Kurdi, 3 years old, dressed in his red tee shirt, blue shorts and trainers, lies in the surf, dead on the shore. His brother Ghalib and mother Rehan are also dead. Their father, Abdullah, is still alive. They had fled the fighting in Syria, lived in Turkey for 3 years and were trying to make their way to Canada to join Abdullah’s sister, Tina.
The images in the newspapers and circulated on the internet have helped us find a connection with the human face of the refugee crisis. What was just numbers - even numbers like 70 bodies found in a lorry in Austria - was just too remote. Now, there is a human face. For me, it’s the photograph of Aylan and Galip in a family photo. Aylan is fiddling with his ear with his right hand, and has a yellow zip top on. He looks bright, and smiling, if a little unsure besides his elder brother.

All of a sudden, we have discovered our common humanity. For months - years - the refugees seeking entry to “our” space have been “them”. Now, suddenly, many of have realised that this is about “us” - the human family, in crisis. Issues of blame are no longer sufficient to barricade and protect us from responsibility. This is our problem: we are one human family, and our children are lying dead on a beach. We have to do something.

The lectionary readings today point us in the right direction. James warns us that ‘Faith without works is dead’: how dare we claim to believe, if that is not somehow embedded in our actions. We are deluding ourselves. His are challenging words in a cathedral, where it falls to some of us to do exactly what he warns against - to sit on fancy chairs (quite uncomfortable, by the way), and wear fine clothes. All the more, in the place of privilege and pride, to attend to the words further down the passage, to love our neighbours as ourselves. If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? asks James. ‘Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead: we are called to transform the world, not to protect ourselves from it, or worse still save ourselves from it and leave others to perish on the shore. No man is an island, entire of itself, says John Donne. How true that is. (I’m reminded of the posters I saw all over South Africa ten years ago: the Body of Christ has AIDS. The Body of Christ is drowning in the sea off tourist beaches in the Aegean, is dying by the side of the road in France.)

The Gospel reading also helps us. The story of the Syrophoenician woman explodes the disciples’ understanding of who belongs and who doesn’t, who’s in and who’s out, who’s them and who’s us. There’s an extra resonance today for us: the encounter takes place in Tyre, the woman is Syrian. What’s she doing taking the time of Jesus, when there are others who should have priority? Is it a journey of understanding even for Jesus himself? We can’t say, but the story calls us, again, to make our own journey towards inclusion. And the second half of the reading prompts us to allow our own ears and mouths to be opened for the sake of the gospel: let’s hear the cries of those in need, hear the voice of God commanding us to go - and speak for those we find, allow the Spirit to inspire us to be Advocates, Comforters, sharing the Spirit’s words in private and in public.

And here in Coventry we inhabit a story which carries us towards these fleeing people. I have only been here for some two and a half years now, but I have lost count of the number of times I have told the story of that terrible Thursday night in November 1940, but the extraordinary following morning, when Provost Dick Howard wrote the words, Father Forgive, perhaps in soot, on the walls of the ruined and smoking cathedral. Why Forgive at all? and if so, why not ‘Forgive them’? Because we are all bound together in this tragic story of destruction. And so the hope for the future must be one not just for ‘us’ - that ‘they’ will never be able to do this to ‘us’ again: but that we are all ‘us’. We pray for a gentler, a kinder, a more Christ-child like kind of world which discovers the reconciliation which has been nailed into the heart of the world in the cross; in which the family of humanity cares for one another as family, by the mercy and grace of God. We banish the word ‘them’ from our vocabulary.

Let’s not pretend this is easy. There are real challenges about how to resource the care that’s needed for our brothers and sisters who are fleeing unimaginable terrors. David Cameron, and both national and local government leaders also need our understanding as they wrestle with these questions: but we too must play our part - once again, with the help of the God of all humanity, who will guide us an enable us in our efforts.

But our task begins by knowing that we are ‘us’ not them. I have been spending some time reading stories and looking at photographs to try to discover a sense of being able to enter, emotionally, the world of those who are seeking, physically, to enter mine. I believe it’s essential - like reading intimate letters from a member of the family, which you value and pore over. I came across this poem by a Kenyan born Somali poet, Warsan Shire. She lives in London and wrote it this week, I think. It’s called, “No One Leaves Home.”

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well
your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won’t let you stay.
no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it’s not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilets
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn’t be going back.
you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.
no one crawls under fences
no one wants to be beaten
pitied
no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching
or prison,
because prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is better than a truckload
of men who look like your father
no one could take it
no one could stomach it
no one skin would be tough enough
the
go home blacks
refugees
dirty immigrants
asylum seekers
sucking our country dry
niggers with their hands out
they smell strange
savage
messed up their country and now they want
to mess ours up
how do the words
the dirty looks
roll off your backs
maybe because the blow is softer
than a limb torn off
or the words are more tender
than fourteen men between
your legs
or the insults are easier
to swallow
than rubble
than bone
than your child body
in pieces.
i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home told you
to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind
crawl through the desert
wade through the oceans
drown
save
be hunger
beg
forget pride
your survival is more important
no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear
saying-
leave,
run away from me now
i dont know what i’ve become
but i know that anywhere
is safer than here
Heavenly Father,
you are the source of all goodness, generosity and love.
We thank you for opening the hearts of many
to those who are fleeing for their lives.
Help us now to open our arms in welcome,
and reach out our hands in support.
That the desperate may find new hope,
and lives torn apart be restored.
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord,
who fled persecution at His birth
and at his last triumphed over death.
Amen.