

Dear Friends,

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” These words come from the poem “The New Colossus,” written by American poet Emma Lazarus, inscribed on a bronze plaque inside the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. It is the most well-known example of a country expressing a welcome to refugees to its shores. It would be rare to find its equivalent anywhere in the world today. It may not have inspired American practice for more than a couple of decades, but during those years many thousands flocked to American shores. Most were processed thru the nearby Ellis Island, which had hospitals for checking out infectious diseases and different disabilities, not to refuse entry but to establish how best to care for the different conditions.

This would change by the 1920s when the economic recession and the growing influence of the theories of eugenics turned this attitude of welcome round, only allowing in those who were fit and able to contribute in an obvious way to the further development of the American way of life. By the 1950s Ellis Island would be closed, and the symbol of the recent attitude towards refugees is the wall being constructed on the Mexican border.

The attitude of the people of Israel to outsiders in the Old Testament swings between two extremes. There is a fearfulness of the hostility of surrounding foes, but there is also an ongoing attraction to their gods and practices. The prophets in particular weigh against this temptation and threaten its perpetrators with exile and destruction. At the same time there is a growing sense of the universal power of their God and a sense that all peoples will be called to the recognition of God and ensuing salvation.

How welcoming to the strangers are we? For many of us the stranger can be a source of fear and danger rather than the friend we have not yet met. Our society’s attitude towards refugees and economic immigrants is all too often unwelcoming and even hostile. Within our church practices we also face a difficult conundrum in our response to those we see as outsiders. If God’s salvation is open to all, why do we refuse outsiders full participation in the Eucharist? This could apply whether we are talking about those who may share elements of faith with us or those who are in irregular marriage or partnership relationships. Is there a way forward?

First of all, we can take heart from the fact that things are not as cut and dried as they might first appear. Many refugees and immigrants do eventually find entry and acceptance, even if that journey may be difficult and protracted. And in the Church it’s possible for outsiders now to be offered full access to the Eucharist at times such as weddings or funerals, when the desire for unity on such occasions takes precedence over the unity we have still to reach. Following the lead of Jesus, our first step may be to have the conversation with those seeking a welcome. As we come to know them better we may find shared understanding. Secondly, we are called to look forward rather than always define ourselves by the past. How could things be different in a way that would reflect greater unity rather than disunity? Looking to the past may help inform our understanding, but we also need the future, even if it means a step into the unknown.

Your friend in Jesus
Msgr. Zach