

Interfaith Prayer Service



In support of women seeking refuge
Standing together against Hassockfield
23rd May 2021 at 3pm

Introduction

The government is planning Hassockfield as a new detention centre for women seeking asylum. It will be part of a new network of Immigration Removal Centres for women being planned by the Home Office, contrary to previous pledges to reform the system.

Due to open in the autumn, it will be based on the former site of the notorious Medomsley Centre, near Consett in Co. Durham, itself a place where hundreds of young men were abused.

This move towards detention in immigration centres is contrary to previous Home Office commitments to reduce the number of people in detention, especially vulnerable people. It will detain around 80 women. The Home Office has said they will be women who have served their time for an offence, or who have claimed asylum and had their appeal refused. However, it is recognised that most women held in immigration detention are known to be survivors of trafficking, torture, or sexual violence. They are often refused asylum because they cannot prove their right to asylum due to lack of documentation.

There is also the proposal under the New Plan for Immigration currently being considered that people claiming asylum who have been judged to have arrived “illegally” will be housed in institutional reception centres where they will be prevented from rebuilding their lives.

Often the refusal to grant asylum is based on there being insufficient evidence to validate the circumstances of their asylum claim. Women repeatedly share how the process of being disbelieved and accused of deception has a devastating impact on their well-being and mental health, which even if their claim is later accepted and they are granted asylum, leaves them emotionally scarred.

We believe this is contrary to the way that society should act and contrary to what we are being urged to do by Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* who calls on us to ensure that “all migrants are entitled like others to participate in the life of society” and reminds us “that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person”. Seeking asylum is a human right. Thus there is no such thing as an illegal asylum seeker.

Today we come together to pray for our sisters. We turn to our God who encourages us to welcome the stranger and love our neighbour. A God who is with the abandoned and marginalised.

Statements

From the earliest days of his life Our Lord Jesus was a refugee fleeing persecution. We do not know what kind of welcome he received in Egypt, this land where his ancestors were formerly slaves, but we do know that he returned to his homeland when the time was right.

So many who seek asylum do not do so on a whim or to escape justice but are fleeing from threats to their well-being and indeed their very lives. They too wish to return home when the time is favourable. As Christians we cannot stand by and do nothing. We must help to end the causes of those who flee but in the meantime we must welcome, support, heal and help them.

Pope Francis has made this very clear. "The Holy Spirit enables us to embrace everyone, to build communion in diversity, to unify differences without imposing a depersonalised uniformity. In encountering the diversity of foreigners, migrants and refugees, and in the intercultural dialogue that can emerge from this encounter, we have an opportunity to grow as Church and to enrich one another." *107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees*. Here Pope Francis reminds not just that the duty to serve comes from the recognition that all are sisters and brothers but also that in serving we enrich the entire church and world.

Fr. Adrian Tuckwell, Episcopal Vicar for Caritas, Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle

People seeking asylum should be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve as people made in God's image and loved by God. Their claims should always be treated justly and with appropriate speed. Even when on the occasions that it is right to decide that they should be returned to their home country they should still be accorded this dignity. It is deeply debatable whether detention is appropriate for most people. In the few circumstances where it is it should be very brief and in conditions where that dignity continues to be upheld, and the removal conducted in a similar way.

I have deep concerns regarding the appropriateness of the use of the Hassockfield site because of its history. To place potentially very vulnerable people in a place with a deep history of people not being treated with dignity and respect, but rather abused, is troubling. It would also be inappropriate to mix a variety of asylum seekers in the same setting. If it were to proceed then every effort must be made to ensure all respect and dignity is undertaken and appropriate support legally, in terms of healthcare, and access to support from lay support from relevant bodies and organisations (including chaplaincy) must be in place.

Paul Butler, Bishop of Durham.

Opening Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8Vp5vR85_8&t=127s

Opening Prayer

(from European Methodist Council liturgy for Migrants and refugees 2019)



Leader: We are gathered for worship today in the name of God
who takes care of every creature as a father and as a mother;
Who is on the side of the weak
and those who are treated without justice;
Who in his Holy Spirit gives us the capacity to give solidarity to those who suffer
and the power to resist all that threatens and destroys life.
We believe that our help comes from the Lord
who made heaven and earth
for that we bless His name forever.

Congregation: Be blessed His name forever. Amen

Hymn: All our welcome - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlnVLP0qFEo>

Readings

Jewish Tradition

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.

Moment of Silence

Christian Tradition

Matthew 25: 35-40

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Moment of Silence

Muslim Tradition

from Surah 4:36

Do good unto your parents, and near of kin, and unto orphans, and the needy, and the neighbour from among your own people, and the neighbour who is a stranger, and the friend by your side, the wayfarer, and your servants.

Moment of Silence

Hindu Tradition

from Taitiriya Upanishad 1.11.2

Let a person never turn away a stranger from his house, that is the rule. Therefore a man should, by all means, acquire much food, for good people say to the stranger: 'There is enough food for you.'"

Moment of Silence

Sikh Tradition

(from Guru Granth Sahib)

None is our enemy, none is stranger to us, we are in accord with one and all.

Moment of Silence

Secular Humanism

(from the writings of Pablo Neruda)

To feel the intimacy of brothers is a marvellous thing in life. To feel the love of people whom we love is a fire that feeds our life. But to feel the affection that comes from those whom we do not know, from those unknown to us, who are watching over our sleep and solitude, over our dangers and our weaknesses - that is something still greater and more beautiful because it widens out the boundaries of our being and unites all living things.



Hymn:

Good Grace - Hillsong UNITED - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CW3OuAaDyZ8>

Testimony

Dear friend,

Yesterday, with the JRS detention outreach team, I visited the disused barracks turned asylum accommodation at Napier. The setting is bleak, institutional, and prison-like. It is gated and flanked by security guards. The buildings are largely dilapidated, dark, and cold. The site is removed from the nearby town. It is the recent site of a severe COVID-19 outbreak, predicted by public health authorities who were ignored. The setting itself seems calculated to generate hopelessness. And such hopelessness is mirrored in the responses of the newly arrived.

Whilst I was there yesterday, asylum claimants newly arrived at Napier barracks, many from temporary hotel accommodation elsewhere in the UK. They had either not been told where they were going or had been given the impression that they were being taken to longer term dispersal accommodation – likely a flat in a town or city somewhere. We saw and spoke to people shocked at being there – one of whom tried simply to refuse to get out of the van when they saw where they were. Hope of a more secure home turned to horror when they noticed their surroundings.

This is not only about accommodation. Many of those accommodated at Napier do not have solicitors, and good ones are hard to find. As all of their hope hangs on the outcome of their asylum interview, they struggle to access the basic tools to help them navigate it.

And yet, there is hope here still. Some of the men accommodated here laughed and chatted with us. Others asked us to pray for the outcome of their asylum interviews. Down the road, out of a local church hall, JRS and other charities come together to run a day centre offering food, tea and coffee, activities, and a safer, more comfortable space to listen to people, link them up with legal support, and have a simple human conversation.

God can be hard to find in bleak places, but God is there. And as we pray with those in Napier, we can rejoice in their tiny moments of rejoicing. We also weep with them as we weep.

In solidarity,
Sophie

Sophie is the Senior Policy Officer at Jesuit Refugee Service UK, leading their work advocating for those held in immigration detention centres and de-facto detention sites like Napier.

Prayer (from European Methodist Council liturgy for Migrants and refugees 2019)

Dear God, source of life,

we gather together in the name of Jesus who had nowhere to lay his head,

no safe place, no secure home, no passport or visa, no certified citizenship.

We gather around him in our safety, security, and we are afraid of the 'illegal immigrants'.

We are closing our borders, thinking that they are a threat to our life, that they will take our jobs.

We are also glad for cheap seasonal workers who take care of our tomatoes and fruit.

But we also know very well that you are the God who welcomes strangers,

that you do not withhold good from those in need.

We feel this deep tension between your truth and the way we live.

We do not ask for an easy way out,

but for courage and honesty and faithfulness to face this.

That we may meet them not with our prejudices,

but with open eyes and open arms fed by your word of mercy and love,

the only nourishment that makes us human.

Forgive our trespasses, so that we may change our habits and inclinations

and conform to your vision of a new world where everybody can live in dignity.

You are the God of all forgiveness.

Amen

Intercessions

Themes:

1. Refugees
2. World Peace
3. Freedom
4. World Leaders
5. Solidarity

All of these prayers are written from a Christian background, but please write your own intercessions following the general themes above so we can be united in prayer.

We pray for all refugees and those seeking asylum, that You may stay with them and comfort them as they make often perilous journeys for the sake of finding safety. We pray that as people of faith, we may show compassion and welcome the stranger in the same way Jesus did, recognising that we are one global community.

Lord, in your mercy...hear our prayer.

We pray in hope for World Peace, that one day we may all be united in a peaceful world you intended for us. We pray for all people working towards World Peace, that they continue to build your Kingdom on Earth, where all people are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve as children of God.

Lord, in your mercy...hear our prayer.

We pray for a world where all people are free from discrimination, fear and repression, and are free to be who You intended them to be, in a safe environment. We pray that we can walk in the freedom that You gained for us on the cross. Help us to be bearers of Your light, through all darkness.

Lord, in your mercy...hear our prayer.

We pray for all World Leaders, that they may be inspired by the Holy Spirit to work for the good of all people and defend those who are unable to defend themselves. We pray that they look with compassion on all people, especially refugees and those who are displaced from their homes.

Lord, in your mercy...hear our prayer.

We pray for solidarity during this time. We ask that You help us to be reminded of how much strength and goodness comes from standing together, united as one people.

Lord, in your mercy...hear our prayer.

We join all our prayers together as we say, Our Father...

Final Prayer (from the Jesuit Refugee Service women day of prayer):

For the final prayer please picture in your own heart the face of a woman who has been terribly important in your life. That woman could still be alive or she may be dead. Just try and bring her face before your eyes.

We call on all the holy women who have come before us, channels of God's word and givers of God's life. We want to know their stories, celebrate their lives and share their wisdom and in remembering them, release their power in our lives. And we remember all our mothers, grandmothers, and fore mothers, who handed on to us the wisdom of womanhood and the womanly vision of God.

May the God who dances in creation, who embraces us in the human love of our friends, who shakes our life with thunder, bless us and send us out to continue our journey toward wise faith, blazing hope and generous love.

Amen.

Hymn: In Christ Alone - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16KYvflc2bE>

At 3.30 pm we will have 10 minutes silence together with people from different faiths in support of women seeking refuge.

Prayer wall

As part of the prayer service you could ask people to write a message of peace on the dove, in support of women seeking asylum. The dove could be cut out of cardboard, paper or cloth or could be left as it is. It could be coloured in.

We would like to place the doves on the wooden wall at the west and south side of Hassockfield and as such create a 'prayer wall'.

You can send the doves to:

Lya Vollerling
Minsteracres Retreat Centre
Consett
DH8 9RT Co. Durham

I will make sure they will be attached to the wall

