

St Mark's Lent Course 2026

Exploring Social Justice: Critical Issues Defining our Time

Week 4: Asylum

Please select from these resources to explore the interests of your group.

4.1 Visual



Photo by Stuart Brock

4.2 Gathering

Gathering together, we are invited to be open and to listen to each other with respect and love. Here lies the path to new insights, new ways of being. Let us begin by calming our thoughts and becoming aware of our companions as we hold silence together.

But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God.

R S Thomas.



Photo by Shri on Unsplash

Now is the time to be silent and still
Now is the time to tune into Love's will
Now is the time to abandon all fear
Now is the time to let time disappear.

Now is the time for awareness of grace
Gifting each breath and anointing each space
All time and no time – together they're bound
By mystery beyond us, yet sensed all around.

Thanks be for Love, that most pure precious gift
Anchored in Love we shall not go adrift,
Wakened by Love we'll be fully aware
Wherever our path leads, then Love will be there.

Eve Saunders;

Eve is a long-standing member of St Mark's.

4.3 Briefing

According to the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Migrants](#), a migrant 'should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of "personal convenience" and without intervention of an external compelling factor' (Article 1.1a). The principal reasons for migration include education, economic opportunities, family reunification and globalisation.

By this definition, asylum seekers are not migrants because their relocation is made under duress as they attempt to escape from political instability, persecution, conflict, famine or other life-endangering drivers. Asylum seekers are persons who have fled their countries of habitual residence 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' ([UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#), 1951). Under international law, anyone has the right to apply for asylum in any country that has signed the 1951 Convention and to remain there until the authorities have assessed their claim.

At the end of 2021, the Refugee Council reports approximately 89.3 million people were forcibly displaced across the world, 41% of whom were children. Of these, 27.1 million were seeking asylum abroad, while 53.2 million were internally displaced within their country of origin. Of the 53.2 million, 72% were living in neighbouring, often developing, countries. Only 1% were refugees residing in the UK. More than two-thirds of displaced persons across the world come from just five countries: Syria (6.8 million), Venezuela (4.6 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), South Sudan (2.4 million) and Myanmar (1.2 million). Of Syria's 6.8 million, Turkey, the world's leading refugee-hosting country, provided safety for 3.7 million; the UK resettled 20,319.

Currently, the Office of National Statistics includes asylum seekers in its long-term (a year or more) migration figures. In its latest report relating to 2024, 517,000 emigrated from, while 948,000 immigrated to the UK, giving a net migration figure of 431,000. However, most of the 948,000 immigrants arriving in the UK did so through legal channels, such as work, student or family visas. The ONS identifies 95,000 of that number as asylum seekers and a further 50,000 as refugees, the latter having been granted permission to remain in the UK before arrival (eg special arrangements for Ukrainians, British Nationals resident in Hong Kong, some 'at risk' Afghans). These ONS figures are provisional.

With the exception of these special schemes, it is not currently possible to apply for asylum outside of the UK. As no asylum visas are issued that would permit a prospective asylum seeker to arrive in the UK legally, the only way to apply for asylum in the UK is to arrive via an illegal route, such as small boat crossings, or to obtain, in the first instance, a legal temporary visa to study or work and then apply for asylum once in the UK.

Oxford University's 'Migration Observatory' estimates that the average wait time from applying for asylum to receiving an initial decision was 413 days in 2024; however, as applicants are usually able to appeal, the process can take much longer. In 2024, 47% of initial applications were successful.

During this 'limbo' period between application and decision, asylum seekers are not usually permitted to earn a living through employment, but they are entitled to support from the Government, including accommodation, healthcare, education, legal representation, some travel expenses and subsistence living costs (£49.18 per week for self-catering accommodation; £9.95 per week if meals are provided). During the financial year 2023-24, the UK Government spent £5.4 billion on supporting its asylum system.

If granted leave to remain in the UK, an asylum seeker's status changes to refugee, at which point most of the Government support ceases within 28 days (unless there are extenuating circumstances), including accommodation and financial support. However, refugees can access their eVisas (digital proof of immigration status, including conditions) which enables them to apply for Universal Credit, access healthcare and education, seek paid employment and accommodation, and open a bank account. In reality, unless they already have family or friends settled in the UK, without the help of support services and charities, new refugees are likely to experience homelessness and destitution, at least initially.

In the recent white paper, '[Restoring control over the immigration system](#)' (2025) and accompanying consultation document, '[A Fairer Pathway to Settlement](#)' (2025), the UK Government has outlined major reforms to the current asylum system. These include: (i) refugee status will initially be granted for 30 months (currently 5 years), and only extended if continued protection is judged necessary; (ii) indefinite leave to remain (permanent status) will take up to 20 years (currently 5 years); (iii) settlement status will have to be 'earned' on the basis of character, integration, contribution and lawful continuous residence; (iv) ECHR Article 8 rights (right to family/private life) will be restricted, as will the right to appeal an adverse decision (single appeal only); (v) access to accommodation and other benefits will be discretionary for asylum seekers (currently statutory); (vi) increased measures to prevent illegal working during the application process; (vii) swifter initial decision, appeal and, where unsuccessful, removal. It should be noted that, at the time of writing, these proposals are not currently law.

The paragraphs above supply information about asylum in the UK. But behind these statistics are, first and foremost, not asylum seekers but human beings – persons with back stories and aspirations that have driven them from their homes to embark on long, perilous, gruelling and often costly journeys in search of security and a fresh start.

4.4 Voice

Warsan Shire's poem 'Home' is a visceral expression of what motivates people to seek asylum. Warsan, a contemporary British poet born in Kenya to Somali parents, has given permission for hard copies of her poem to be distributed among group members. A powerful performance of 'Home' by Sir Jonathan Pryce can be found here [\[LINK\]](#). Alternatively, the text of the poem can be accessed via this [\[LINK\]](#).

Here is a short video in which Gulwali, an Afghan refugee who endured a harrowing journey to the UK when a child, explains why persons seeking asylum should be given a chance [\[LINK\]](#). You may also wish to view those by Ernesto and Maria accessed via the same page.

4.5 Response

Take time to reflect on what you have seen, read and heard so far. What questions come to mind? How does it make you feel or want to respond? Does it resonate with your own experience or understanding?

Why not share your reflections.

Here are some further questions you may wish to consider.

- In what ways is asylum a social justice issue?
- How do you instinctively respond when encountering a person seeking asylum?
- Why has asylum become such a contentious and divisive topic in the UK?
- What contribution should our church make to the asylum debate and how can we become more hospitable towards persons seeking asylum?
- What insights can we glean from the story of Ruth or Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (see 4.6 below)?

4.6 Biblical Insight

Overview

Again, there are multiple, sometimes conflicting, biblical voices with respect to asylum. The first point to note is that the ancient Hebrews were probably nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes without homeland ('A wandering Aramean ...' Deut 26.5). However, accounts of the Hebrew/Israelite occupation of Canaan, the land they believed God had given them, narrate what amounts to divinely-sanctioned ethnic cleansing, resulting in the indigenous population being slaughtered or displaced (eg Exod 23.23–33; Num 33.50–56). That said, once in residence, the 'law of the stranger/sojourner' appears to have been observed: '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' (Lev 19.34). There may also have been cities of sanctuary (eg Num 35:9–15; Deut 19:1–13) and the Old Testament witness includes a strong prophetic voice advocating justice for the destitute and displaced (eg Isa 58.6–7 & Jer 22.3). Jesus picks up this prophetic imperative (eg Matt 25.31–46), although his attitude towards foreigners could be equivocal (eg Mark 7.24–30). He is remembered as practising inclusive hospitality (eg Mark 2.15–20; 6.30–44; 8.1–10), something that is evidenced in the early Christian movement (Rom 12.13; Heb 13.2; 1 Pet 4.9). Here are two passages of particular relevance.

Ruth 1.1–18

‘In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.’ Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people.’ But Naomi said, ‘Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.’ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ But Ruth said, ‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!’ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.’ (NRSVA)

When the Moabite Ruth returned to Judah with her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi, she eventually marries Boaz, a family member of Naomi’s Jewish husband, Elimelech. Ruth and Boaz conceived a child, Obed, a Gentile after his mother, who becomes a progenitor to Jesus, the Messiah (Matthew 1.5)

Luke 10.25–37

‘Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (NRSVA)

4.7 Closing Reflection

As our time together draws to a close, we are invited to return to the silence from which we began, before concluding with these words.

I believe that behind the mist the sun waits.
I believe that beyond the dark night it is raining stars.
I believe in secret volcanoes and the world below.
I believe that this lost ship will reach port.
They will not rob me of hope, it shall not be broken ...
My voice is filled to overflowing
with the desire to sing, the desire to sing.
I believe in reason, and not in the force of arms;
I believe that peace will be sown throughout the earth.
I believe in our nobility, created in the image of God,
and with free will reaching for the skies.
They will not rob me of hope, it shall not be broken,
it shall not be broken.

Confessing our Faith Around the World IV
(South America: World Council of Churches, 1985)

Acknowledgement

‘But the silence ...,’ a portion of which is included in section 4.2 above is reproduced under ‘fair dealing’ provision within UK Copyright Law, for non-commercial, educational purposes. The full poem was originally published in R S Thomas’ collection, *Counterpoint* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990).