

Welcome (1): Immigration and Work Permits

Scripture

Ex 23.9; Lev 19.9f; Deu 26.5; Ps 87; Isa 56.1-8; Jer 7.1-7; Amo 8.4-8; Mic 4.1-4; Zec 7.9f; Mt 8.11; Rom 15.7; 1 Cor 12.12f; Gal 3.27f; Eph 2.11-22; Phi 3.20f; Heb 11.13-16; Jam 5.1-6; Rev 7.9f.

Graih

1): Matthew first came to the drop-in with a friend. He had been working in the kitchen of a local restaurant for about three years, following a period of time in the UK. His wife and three teenage children were abroad and he hadn't seen them for some time.

The owner of the restaurant, Matthew's boss, refused to give Matthew holidays or sick pay. Matthew regularly worked long hours and was paid late at a rate that fell below the minimum wage. Matthew didn't want to report his boss as he was scared of losing his work permit and therefore his ability to stay on the island. Under current rules you need to be resident for five years on the island before qualifying for both state benefits and as a Manx worker.

Matthew endured the injustice and exploitation of this situation in the hope of getting his residency. As his five years approached his family joined him. The only accommodation they had was two rooms in an unregulated boarding house with few facilities. Matthew, desperate to help his family, moved into a flat. The landlord had not made any attempt to maintain the property and as winter approached water ran down the walls when it rained.

At the same time the fees for gaining residency on the Isle of Man changed. Now Matthew would not only have to be resident for at least five years (and fulfil other requirements such as an English language test), he would also need to pay roughly £5,000 for residency for himself and his family. Despite being exploited by his employer Matthew managed to save, borrow and acquire the money he needed. He gained residency for his family, moved into better accommodation and found better work. He was promptly sued by his ex-landlord for leaving the flat that was subsequently deemed 'unfit for human habitation' without paying his rent arrears.

Throughout all of this Matthew remained a cheerful and generous man, regularly bringing extra food to the drop-in and working incredibly hard to support his family.

2): Graih frequently see people at the drop-in who have fallen foul of the island's immigration and work permit system. Take Ian, who had worked on poverty piece-work wages at a fish factory for over three years before losing his job over an argument with a colleague. When he found a month or so of work at a takeaway they withheld wages from him and fired him. Some of those we see are Christians, like Guy who came and participated enthusiastically in Graih's prayer meetings until he was forced to leave the island. Neither is the problem contained to immigrants. Richard, a Manx worker who had spent time off-island, returned thinking it would be easy to get a job as the Job Centre had hundreds of vacancies. Little did he know that most of those vacancies were already filled but needed to be advertised to fulfil work permit requirements (to advertise a vacancy for at least three weeks). He struggled to get any work.

Almost all of the people in such difficulties are employed in the hospitality or service sector (such as food processing). They are paid at minimum or below-minimum wage levels. Often they are not articulate or knowledgeable enough to know their rights in law or where they can go for help. They are too afraid of losing their precious employment to complain.

The island seems content to accept these workers, often hidden away preparing our food or cleaning our offices, and then require substantial amounts of money (particularly from non-EU immigrants) for the privilege of remaining as a resident in a society they have contributed a vast amount of labour to.

Questions

1. What are your experiences of the island's immigration and work permit system?
2. Do you think the current system exhibits the justice demanded by the prophets? Why? If not, what needs to change?
3. Does the knowledge that we have a family history of being slaves, refugees, wanderers and aliens, and a current identity as 'citizens of another kingdom', change your perspective on 'foreigners'?
4. Should being a Christian make a difference to the welcome we offer? Is it acceptable to reject fellow-believers from being in our midst because they are in a difficult position before the law?
5. One day there will be no division between nations, as all confess that Jesus is King. In what way should this hope inform our response to the 'foreigner'?
6. The campaign group No One is Illegal calls for abolishing all immigration controls. They claim that immigration law is inherently racist and unjust, being the only law where the person rather than the act becomes illegal. Do you agree? Why?

Ideas for further action

1. Write to your MHK(s), as an individual or as a group. Even better, ask them to come and discuss immigration and work permits with you.
2. Make your church more aware of the island's immigration and work permit system and the effects it has.
3. Get to know some people working on permits on a low wage. Invite them to come and speak to you about their experiences.
4. Check out No One is Illegal (www.noii.org.uk) and consider if something like this is needed on the island.

Prayer

Father, thank you that in your steadfast love and mercy you have adopted us into your family. We are strangers brought to your love and transformed into children. Thank you for the hope of one day joining in worldwide worship with all races, tongues, people and cultures, in the kingdom of which we are already citizens.

Jesus, thank you that all the old divisions of male and female, Jew or Greek, slave or free, Manx or foreign are abolished as we live in you, the Messiah. Help us to embody that same radical equality in our life together.

Spirit, enlighten our minds and hearts. Help us to seek justice for those who are vulnerable and exploited. Inspire us to welcome others as you have welcomed us, to the glory of God.

Amen.