

Many of the Easter stories in our scriptures share a common theme of recognition. When the women reach the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for a gardener. On the road to Emmaus, the two disciples not only fail to recognize who Jesus is, but can't believe that he hasn't heard what's been happening in Jerusalem. In both cases those around Jesus cannot recognize him, because they are living out of a particular narrative of events, which stops them from seeing the reality in front of their very eyes.

In the case of Jesus' resurrection, for a time this single narrative (that Jesus had died and been buried) stopped those around him from seeing the reality (that Jesus had also risen from the dead). But in other cases the reality of a situation may be hidden beneath multiple strong, competing narratives, each of which obscure the truth in their own particular way.

In the British press, I think that the refugee crisis is subject to these strong, competing narratives which pull and push us in different directions, no matter how well-intentioned we may be. Firstly, the refugee crisis is associated with overwhelming and unsubstantiated rhetoric around immigration including the myths that Britain is full,¹ and that refugees claim more in terms of state benefit than they contribute to society.² These myths are not only wrong but dangerous, and are associated with racism³ and Islamophobia⁴ among many other harms. Such rhetoric has gained political power, to the point that the British government currently plans to send some asylum seekers entering the UK to Rwanda⁵ - a policy which is strongly opposed by the UN refugee agency UNHCR as it abandons the responsibility of the UK, as a UN member state, to care for the vulnerable.⁶

On the other hand, the Russia-Ukraine war has created an additional, very different narrative around refugees in the Western media. As coverage of the Ukrainian resistance has reached the UK, the Ukrainian people have been hailed as heroes⁷ and the British government has pledged support for Ukraine in the ongoing conflict.⁸ Various media commentators have noted with shock that these refugees "look like us" and come from a "relatively civilised, relatively European" country. A former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine was moved by their suffering, as they perceived them to be "European people with blue eyes and blond hair". As an ITV journalist reporting from Poland summarised, "Now the unthinkable has

¹ 'Nigel Farage's anti-migrant poster reported to the police'
<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants>

² 'The Fiscal Effects of Immigration to the UK'
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/economics/about-department/fiscal-effects-immigration-uk>

³ 'Racism and the UK's immigration system'
<https://migration.bristol.ac.uk/2021/05/11/racism-and-the-uks-immigration-system/>

⁴ 'New statistics confirm what we already knew – Islamophobia is thriving in all parts of British society'
<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/islamophobia-new-statistics-hope-but-hate-british-muslims-society-a9006516.html>

⁵ 'Rwanda asylum seekers: UK government criticised over 'cruel' plan'
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-61110237>

⁶ 'UNHCR 'firmly' opposing UK-Rwanda offshore migration processing deal'
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1116342>

⁷ 'Ukraine takes us into a new heroic age'
<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-03-19/the-heroes-of-the-war-are-extraordinary-ordinary-ukrainians-and-also-russians>

⁸ 'The UK stands with Ukraine'
<https://ukstandswithukraine.campaign.gov.uk/>

happened to them. And this is not a developing, third world nation. This is Europe!”⁹ For these commentators, white Ukrainian refugees look ‘like us’ - but more than this, they come from a nation currently being hailed as heroes. Meanwhile, many black and brown refugees from Ukraine have been prevented from leaving or detained at border checkpoints.¹⁰ In short, Europe’s compassion towards Ukrainian refugees has been somewhat selective along lines of race.

So, our fractious and polarising conversation around the refugee crisis now holds two competing narratives. European Ukrainian refugees are worthy of our compassion, and are even heroes - but refugees from African or Asian countries are so-called villains, sponging off our limited resources. The outpouring of support and hospitality towards Ukrainian refugees by the British people can only be seen as a good thing, and is by no means something I wish to condemn. However, in the midst of this discourse, I want to suggest that refugees are neither heroes nor villains. They are something infinitely more important - they are real people. They are neither abstract symbols of courage and resilience nor undeserving objects upon which valuable resources will be wasted. They are, each and every one, our neighbour. This is a reality which cannot be seen unless we relentlessly strip away the narratives which distance us from it, disfiguring and distorting its truth.

This stripping away is a journey of recognition, but it is also *the* journey of recognition that we tell and re-tell each Easter. In recognizing the real-ness of refugees and every oppressed person, we recognize the indwelling presence of the crucified and risen Christ. The work of this journey is part of our living as Easter people - it is the work that we must do, through God’s grace, if we are to love and be loved authentically. As the late feminist author and activist bell hooks reminds us, “Love is an action, never simply a feeling”.¹¹ The work of love for us today, in our world pregnant with Easter longing, is perhaps a task which is surprisingly similar to that of those early disciples - striving to recognize the face of Jesus.

⁹ ‘They are ‘civilised’ and ‘look like us’: the racist coverage of Ukraine’
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/02/civilised-european-look-like-us-racist-coverage-ukraine>

¹⁰ ‘Europe has rediscovered compassion for refugees - but only if they’re white’
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2022/mar/10/europe-compassion-refugees-white-european>

¹¹ All About Love: New Visions (2000)