

**Sermon Hannover International Worship, 19 July
2015, with MID II students**

May the peace of God who accompanies us on our respective journeys through life be with us – now and every day of our lives. Amen

Reader I: “Song of Mary, by Lydia Gatwa:

*God, I am a mum, you made me a mum,
God. And your angel said, there is a
future for my child, for our child, God.
But you know what? There is no future
here, no life, just violence, violence,
violence and death. Brutal death, God.*

*The slaughterers are out there, hiding
behind the bush, ready to strike when
you don't expect it. We are not safe, God,
and your new-born son, God, he is not
safe.*

*When I hear the noises of the night, I get
afraid, because I hear the danger, but I*

*can't see it. Then my heart, it beats so
loud, like a drum, God, like a big drum.
And when the little Jesus is laying at my
breasts, he hears this drum, he feels that
drum – he is not safe.*

*God, I want to trust in you, help us, help
us to escape. Give a future to your son,
he is still so small, so many things can
happen to him, so many. He's your son,
God, and you won't forget your son, will
you?*

*Help us to cross the border, help us to get
out of here, anywhere, God, anywhere
where there is life. For us. And for your
son, the refugee Jesus.”*

I got to know Lydia, the writer of this poem, twenty-one years ago, in a small village in Rwanda, near the border to the Democratic Republic of Congo. I was searching for a friend of mine in post-genocide Rwanda, she had stopped searching because all the

members of her immediate and extended family had been confirmed dead.

Sitting on a slope, Lydia shared her experiences with life and with death, and she introduced me to a God who himself is a refugee and a Bible that reflects the experiences of many people on the move, one of them Godself – as the Schechinah accompanying the exiled people in the history of the chosen people and as the divine Son, who is depicted as the one who had no place to lay down his head as an adult and as a refugee child during his earlier years.

In Matthew chapter 2 this flight to Egypt is narrated:

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

[14](#) So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, [15](#) where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

[16](#) When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.”

Broad strokes, bare of emotions, bare of the reflection of experiences. Just the general plot: Being made aware of danger – taking the decision to leave – the onward route to a place that promises safety, the sojourning there. The rest is up to the empathy of the reader and to the deciphering of what is ‘in-between-the lines’.

At the end: return. Return to a situation that has become seemingly stable, the immediate threat to live removed. Matthews chapter 2 recalls:

19 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt [20](#) and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” [21](#) So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.”

Return journey accomplished. But like the many return journeys, voluntary and involuntary ones of today, the seemingly stable situation hid the poverty of the majority of the population, the lacking freedom of speech, the clamp down on opposition movements and the restrictive and exploitative structures in the country: Jesus, though a returnee, remains an internally displaced person through the larger parts of his life.

What, then, does it mean to believe in a refugee God, in a Saviour whose acclamation ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ got essential backing? Lydia tackles that question in the second part of her poem, ‘Song of Mary’:

Reader II: “*Song of Mary, by Lydia Gatwa*”

It’s me again, Lord, it’s Mary.

You know how it feels to hold your dead son’s body in your arms? Yes, I think you would know, because somehow, Jesus must have died in your arms on this bloody cross.

Is this, where it ends, Lord?

At the cross? In the torture chambers? Execution somewhere out in the open field? Shot at the border?

Your son was a refugee, God, and you know what that means:

No real belonging. Always a thorn in the flesh of the authorities. Struggling for the fish and the bread. Betrayal – so that a so-called friend can survive. You name it, God, you know it.

*The machetes did not spear your son,
piercing his side after the torture on the
cross. Were you there with him, God?
Were you next to him? Or were you right
in him, a refugee God united with the
refugee Christ?*

*Wherever you were, God, I know and I
feel that you are with me right now. Push
open the gates and borders in this world
so that your love and your life that you
promised can be spread.*

*Push open the gates and borders, God.
And comfort those sitting somewhere at
the rivers of Babylon and weeping for
home. Amen.”*

Lydia’s ‘Song of Mary’ offers glimpses of a God whose essential nature was not only being the way but also being on the way, with all the wayward experiences involved. At the core, she sings a song of love to the divine migrant who incarnated from

heaven to earth. A gate-opener to humankind, inviting those as cherished members of the kingdom whose belonging, status and reputation was, to many, of a dubious nature. Maybe even a gate-crasher, constantly seeking and identifying with those ‘outside of the gates’. And a border-crosser – at the end of the day overcoming the barriers of death, flinging the gates to life wide open in doing so.

Faith in a refugee God implies faith that death is not the final stage of our journeys – the cross has crossed and thwarted death. As Lydia described:

“The cross, I don’t really know how to say what it means for me as a refugee. In Rwanda in the genocide, I had a cross, you see, a very small one. I made it from nails, two rusty nails that I picked up on my journey towards life. Later I found a string and I fixed the nails so that they made a cross. That cross never left me, it let me feel that God, he was with me, somehow he was with me. And whenever

I touched the sharp corners of the cross, I think of life in the midst of death. Because there was resurrection after the cross. And reconciliation, reconciliation as well.”

Faith in a refugee God also implies a change in the tack of life: an openness for the seemingly ‘other’, a being in solidarity and vulnerability, and a thirst for justice and reconciliation along the way.

Lydia has adopted many names while she was on her journey towards life. She has lived in many states as an undocumented person: In the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Tanzania, in the Schengen area, in Kenia, in Niger, in Mali, later in the Sudan. Lydia was seeking out people on the move:

People seeking survival, trying to escape from gross human rights violations, rebel group violence, civil war, ethnic cleansing and faction fighting.

People seeking survival for their families, ready to leave home for any job that might help their beloved ones to survive and thrive.

People seeking dignity, trying to escape from harmful traditional practices, from arranged marriage, from gender-related violence.

People...

They all had one thing in common: They wanted to live, to live in peace, to live in dignity. Having escaped the genocide in Rwanda, Lydia’s single mission in life was spreading signs of hope and of reconciliation amongst the most vulnerable whose lives has been constantly endangered. And she did just that: burning her passport, at that point in time one that stipulated her so-called ‘ethnic belonging’, crossing frontiers at the dead of the night and just being were people on the move were: at the margins of refugee camps, at the taxi ranks, in the brothels, in the hideouts of along the classical

migration routes, at the market squares and bus depots.

Lydia offered an open ear and an open heart to the people around her. And she offered rusty nails that she was collecting in dilapidated buildings along her journey and a piece of string. Lydia shared her faith in a refugee God who wants to turn the tables. A God who accompanies on the route, a migrant God, a justice and reconciliation-seeking God. The last sign of life that I got from her was from Agadez, Niger, where the Transsahara routes are intersecting and ten thousands of people are hoping to cross the desert in gigantic trucks.

She wrote:

“Agadez, it made me think. Not only about the suffering of refugee people and our refugee God but also about our church. This church, if each and every Christian knows that our God is a refugee, than the doors of our churches would be wide, wide open for people like refugees. And maybe if we as

Christians, we open our doors, than the countries we live in, they will also do that. Maybe... And sometimes I think that God then would smile at us from the gutter and move on.”

Amen

Lydia was traveling light. A constant item of her luggage was a torn and worn out copy of the central prayer of the liturgy of reconciliation of the global Nail Cross Community which was initiated at the Cathedral of Coventry, UK. Their symbol is also a cross, a cross made from nails from the Cathedral which was bombed by the German Luftwaffe in November 1940. Lydia had found that prayer outside one of the churches in Rwanda that had turned into a mass grave for many.

We invite you to join in the 'Father forgive' that concludes the various prayer requests.

Coventry Prayer:

*Kanjo: All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class, **Father Forgive.***

*Drea: The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own, **Father Forgive.***

*Tecxavier: The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth, **Father Forgive.***

*Rebekka: Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others, **Father Forgive.***

*Castro: Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee, **Father Forgive.***

*Prince: The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and children, **Father Forgive.***

*Kanjo: The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God, **Father Forgive.***

Drea: Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Jointly: Lord's prayer together with congregation