

Week Two: The Outsiders

Lina's Story



At nine months pregnant, when she should have been picking out her baby's first outfit, Lina received a letter from the Home Office stating that she would be evicted from her accommodation. "When I looked at the date of the letter, it was dated 27 April. On my due date", she recounts, "How could I remove myself from the house? I was heavily pregnant, where was I supposed to go, what was I supposed to do? I would be homeless, have nowhere to go".

The Home Office also stopped Lina's asylum support, and although this was a meagre £35.39 a week, it was a lifeline that while she waited for a decision on her asylum claim. "They took away my support – can you believe it? I was 40 weeks pregnant – 40 weeks! And they took away my support."

"It was hard, very, very, very hard. I was crying, I was so upset – I was crying all day". With no friends or family to turn to, Lina and her healthcare advisor were worried about the affect Lina's stress and upset were having on her baby.

Fortunately, Lina received help from ASHA, a charity who challenged the Home Office's decision to withdraw Lina's support, and informed the accommodation provider that they would be wrongly evicting the client. It took three weeks for Lina's support to finally be reinstated.

During the days preceding her birth and the first few vital weeks following it, Lina survived from weekly donations from a charity, organised by her worried healthcare advisor and midwife.

Lina has now been in the UK for five long, difficult years, and still longs to hear a final decision on her asylum claim. Lina struggles to provide for herself and her child on the low level of support offered by the Government, but the alternative – homelessness and destitution – is far worse. "£35 is so little to buy toys, clothes, nappies, food, baby stuff. It's not enough, but what can I do, I have to wait."

Despite Lina being entitled to asylum support, without the support of charities and Lina's concerned healthcare team, Lina would have been alone, heavily pregnant and on the streets.

"If we cut our hands, our blood is the same, you know? We are all human. When I think of that time, I don't understand how the Home Office thinks about us – I really don't know."



Lina's story was first told by Refugee Action. You can find it in full at www.refugee-action.org.uk/lina/.



Reflection

It's a familiar scene. A new born baby Jesus there at the centre, sleeping peacefully in a manger filled with of hay. His attentive and loving parents, Mary and Joseph, are kneeling beside him. Guests have come excitedly to visit this new family. Some Shepherds (and their flock!) have come hurriedly from the fields to see this new born baby; and a group of travelling scholars are also there, having made the journey from a distant land to offer gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to this new born baby.

To us, seeing these visitors at the manger is not surprising. We see it in every nativity play and every manger scene at this time of year. But for those hearing this story 2,000 years ago, there might have been a rather different surprise at the presence of these unusual guests.

Both the shepherds and the wise men were outsiders. The Shepherds were social outcasts, found on the margins of society. They were poor and uneducated; stigmatised and often excluded from the rest of society. Their ability to participate in wider society was limited by laws and customs that were very much designed to keep them out - a testimony from a Shepherd was not admissible in court. They weren't even allowed to be a part of temple worship as they were considered to be ceremonially unclean. They were always observing from the margins, not allowed in, not allowed a voice, not allowed to be part of the religious and political discussions of the day. Yet, here we find them, at the centre of the story which would change the conversation forever.

Whilst they might not have experienced the same stigma, the mysterious Magi travelling from the East were also outsiders in this scene. They were foreigners, bearing unusual gifts and attracting suspicion as they went on their journey. They were not from the people of Israel, and the culture and customs in Jerusalem would have been new to them. Outsiders to the city and outsiders to the community for whom Jesus was presumed to have come, finding the Magi at the bedside of this newborn King is entirely unexpected.

So why would these people, these outsiders, be the first to hear and witness the birth of the new born Messiah? Surely they would have been the ones quick to be ignored, never mind allowed a back row seat to the spectacle?

Yet even at the very start, as God enters the world incarnate in Christ, God makes room for the outsider. God prioritises those usually left on the margins, ushering in the last to be first in the queue. And not only are they in the room but they are central figures in a story repeated for centuries, given a voice and a place in the gospel message that will transform humanity. From the very start, the story of Jesus is one of radical inclusion.

Yet 2,000 years later, there still remain many places where the voices and contributions of those seen as outsiders are overlooked.

When asylum seekers come to the UK to seek safety, they arrive into a hostile environment. In a web of policies encouraging destitution, discrimination and distrust, they experience barriers towards accessing vital public services and are banned from working. They are kept out, unable to access the same rights and opportunities as the rest of society. They can't contribute their skills into the community through work, and as a consequence often left unable to provide for themselves and their families.

For people like Lina, this means they are left in situations risking their own lives. They are not offered the tools to build safe and nurturing homes in which the lives of their families can flourish. The situation in which Lina was left silenced her need, and silenced her chance to bring her child into a world where it would be offered care. Yet when her story *is* heard, it profoundly challenges our understanding of the gospel in today's world.

The way we see and treat those on the outside today, those who we consider 'other', is a far cry from what is modelled from the outset in Jesus' life. In the space God creates, we see radical inclusion. God brings in those on the margins to the centre of the most important story of all time.

The way we welcome the outsider in creates the chance to liberate a voice of challenge and change. How might we ensure the voices and experiences of those on the margins in our society are listened to?

Questions for reflection

How are we enriched by welcoming the outsiders in our communities?

What could we, as Christians, do to welcome and support refugees and asylum seekers?

