



Who is 'highly skilled'?

A couple of months ago, I was in a local residential home: they used to call them 'old people's homes'. I had been invited to a tea party that the staff were laying on for residents and various locals.

As I waited for the cake and tea to be distributed, I got into conversation with various people. One elderly man was not actually a resident. He was visiting his son, who is one of the youngest people there, at around fifty. Six years ago, his son suffered from something akin to a stroke. He survived, but his movement was much slower and his memory was massively affected. While his temperament is placid, and he is reasonably content, his cognitive function is highly limited: conversation can only really be about quite basic things. He is a shadow of the person he once was.

For his father, who visits him every day, this is understandably painful. As he spoke to me, he laid down a challenge. With a sweep of his arm, he took in the residents sat in their chairs, many of them suffering from dementia, all of them with impairments, mostly just to do with the onset of old age, though in his son's case, it was more particular.

"Where is God here, then?" he said.

It was a tough question, and I could feel the pain that lay behind it, the pain of watching so many people, who were so obviously debilitated, and one of them his own son, prematurely condemned to being

among them.

At first, I didn't know what to say. Even now, I don't know the whole answer. But one thing was pretty clear to me.

"You see those staff," I said, pointing at the staff, eagerly laying out the cake onto plates, passing it round, ensuring that everyone had their cups of tea to their liking, "God's at work in them."

I can't say *all* of them are kind and caring, but a great number are. One of them spends her Sunday morning first taking one resident to our 9.15 service at St Mark's; then taking another resident to our 11am service at St Andrew's. Each time, she has to help transport them in her chairs. She's a saintly person, and, ironically, she's an atheist, but she just wants the residents to go where they want to go.

She is also an immigrant, I think from eastern Europe, but I am not sure.

When I hear about immigration policy for 'highly skilled' immigrants, I do wonder. 'Highly skilled' seems to imply brain surgeons, Michelin star chefs and the like. But what about her and what she does? It's not an academic skill; what she has may not be a skill at all. What she has is immense love, love for people who are not easy all the time and the most vulnerable in our country. This is beyond skill and you just can't buy it. But you can try to stop it entering the country, which is a shame.

Oct 2018 Thought for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.