

Amidst relentless rain, and biting cold: Hope, and Faith.

Aid to the Calais Refugees, November 2015

The relentless, soaking, miserable rain, and the biting, to-the-marrow cold, will be my abiding memory of yesterday. From ten minutes after stepping out of the minibus, to some hours after getting home, I was not once warm or dry – and it feels pretty indulgent to write that, because for those living in Calais that is their permanent reality, with precious few places to become warm or dry. It is bleak, and heartbreaking: the Calais Jungle is 22 miles from our coast. Would any of us want our brothers, our sons, our fathers, to be living so cold, so miserable and so forlorn?



And still they come – in the last three weeks another thousand have arrived, and more come each day. **The camp numbers 7,500 now, with 10,000 likely to be there by Christmas.** Liam is a young volunteer from our parish who has been on each of the three trips, and he had photos on his phone from September; look at the same areas now and any grass there once was, or walkways, are filled in, tents packed together as tightly as they can.



The last few days have been very windy here, so the site is full of tents which have clearly been blown down and in the hastiest of ways re-erected, patched up. Just look at the photos. It is awash with mud and Liam, who studies geology, is anxious about the terrain; there could be mud slides here, he says. It is salutary to remember that **this area now home to 7500 people is, in fact, just muddy sand dunes next to a grim industrial estate and a motorway, and certainly never intended for human habitation.**

Many refugees are ill; the medical centre is treating 300 a day with the most basic and limited supplies. We have brought 100 bottles of cough medicine and lozenges on this trip; they are very eagerly received by the nurse, who is desperate for more supplies, which we promise to bring next time we visit.

Our main aid this time is 1000 hats and gloves; on such a wet day there is no point in people queuing for those, so we leave some at the warehouse and take some to distribution points on the camp, run by the refugees themselves, where they can be easily reached when they are next needed.





Is there hope here? Despite the leaden skies, the raw cold and the ever-present rain, despite the fact that some refugees still only have flip-flops and that those with boots often have the wrong size; despite the fact that a group of activists had to go to the European Court of Human Rights a few weeks ago just to get a ruling that the French Government needed to put in an extra 50 chemical toilets so as to meet the most basic possible standards; despite all that, yes, there is hope.

There is hope in the palette and talent of the Eritrean artist who has painted a magnificent icon of St Michael that stands in the centre of the chapel. It is a work of faith, and love. Why St Michael, we ask? Because in the Book of Daniel he is the one named as the great protector, when the Israelites were in exile, in Babylon. For the Refugees, in their miserable and forlorn time, the image of St Michael is an image to inspire them with the truth of faith: God has not forgotten them, never forgets them. And in the tents, the wind and the

rain, the creation of such a work of art is in itself a minor miracle.

There is hope in the work of “Auberges des Migrants” who are – very gradually – building timber framed shelters that have the ability to withstand the wind. We see a line of them (pictured); definitely, they make a difference. But there are still acres and acres of makeshift tents, now soaking and utterly depressing.



There is hope in the warehouse where aid is being sorted, boxed and distributed; though there is also fatigue in the eyes and stature of the small team of core volunteers who are now into their third month of tireless effort. It seems impossible, inhuman even, that such a massive task is being left by both UK and French governments to nothing more than the goodwill of volunteers who have – often – left jobs and comfortable lives to be here, helping. On cardboard boxes names are listed: “Who? From where? Why?” – and **the answers to “Why” are very telling. Simplest of all, one volunteer has written just four words: “How could I not.”**

Another young volunteer with me, Idriss, reflects on the way home: “We can’t be guilty about all this. We can only do what we can. But it certainly makes me appreciate what I have.” He is right – guilt is not going to be productive here; instead I find myself spurred on to try to keep finding the most useful ways to help, and to keep reminding myself that although our aid from Basildon is only a drop in the ocean, many drops make a different ocean. Right now, the volunteers – who come from Scotland to Southampton and all points in between, as well as numerous French and Irish volunteers – right now, the volunteers are the hope-givers, with work that is literally saving and changing lives, every day.

Clearly, there is no quick-fix to Calais. Any lasting solution is going to take a long time to work through; each individual story is complex and needs individual care and kindness. But I am so deeply saddened that the British Government, French Government, and United Nations, seem to be doing literally nothing in relation to Calais. It is a humanitarian tragedy, and a total crisis is only being averted by volunteers slogging their hearts out.



The appalling and atrocious killings in Paris are becoming part of this narrative. Today, the day after we have visited Calais, and just before I write this, a local journalist has called me, because there is an online petition, signed by 400,000 people in Britain, that essentially asks the UK government to close our borders to all refugees until ISIS is defeated. In Basildon, he tells me, the highest number of people from any part of the country have signed that petition, and he asks me how I respond to that. Firstly, I thank God that the people of Basildon have been so generous in money and aid to support the three trips we have made so far to Calais, with money for at least two more. Those giving aid are, I think, the vast majority. And secondly, **to equate the refugees in any way with ISIS is to miss the key fact that the refugees hate ISIS; some have been tortured by ISIS, some have had family members killed by ISIS. The destruction they flee has – in many cases – been caused by ISIS.**

So here is one final sign of hope; a volunteer told me in a moving and passionate testimony that on the day after the Paris killings, at 3pm, Christians and Muslims in the Calais Jungle gathered in their many hundreds, together, and prayed for peace. **They spoke of their sorrow at all that had happened in Paris. They spoke against ISIS. And they stood, shoulder to shoulder, silently remembering the victims – raw, because in this they also remembered their friends and family: those killed in Syria and Iraq by ISIS; those killed in Africa by Boko Haram; and those who drowned in boats on the crossing to Europe – they, too, as surely killed by ISIS as if by bullet, bomb or torture.**

Throughout this week Tim Blake, who travelled with us from the Living Word Community Church in Basildon, has reminded me of Matthew 25. At the end of life, we gather with Jesus, and he tells us that when we have welcomed, fed, clothed, visited the poorest and those most in need, we have done this to him: “When I was a stranger, you welcomed me; when I was naked, you clothed me; when I was ill you visited me ... Whatever you did to the least of my sisters and brothers, you did to me.”



And so in the end there is a simple truth to banish the xenophobia that would close borders and build fences, a truth to inspire renewed donations of aid, and to give continued hope. The truth is this: **In the face of each Refugee every Christian is asked by Christ himself to see the face of Christ. “Whatever you do to the least of my sisters and brothers, you do to me.”**

Additional Information:

The aid being delivered from Basildon is inspired by the work of *Seeking Sanctuary*, who are working with *Secours Catholique* in Calais.

Wherever aid will best and most effectively be used, we deliver a package about once a month, and we adjust it based on what those in Calais all the time are telling us is most useful.

- In September, we took mainly shoes and clothes.
- In October, we took toothpaste, soap, toothbrushes, pants and socks, packaged into “1000 packets of hope and love”, with messages from our schoolchildren.
- In November we took blankets, duvets, some cough medicine, and 1000 hats and gloves.
- In December we will deliver direct to the warehouse medicines, toothpaste and soap.

We have found that as donated items come in a wide variety of sizes and styles, they can be hard to sort and distribute. We aim for multiple units of items, and have found wholesalers that will support us in the quality, price and uniformity of what they offer.

We therefore accept donations of any amount, as cheques payable to “Our Lady and All Saints.” Please mark the envelope “Calais” and post to:

**Fr Dominic Howarth
Calais Appeal
Holy Trinity Church
71 Wickhay
Basildon SS15 5AD**

The money is strictly ringfenced and used only for items to support the refugees. The petrol, ferry and any other costs of the journey are covered by private donation, and so every penny received is spent on the items for the refugees.

If you are a group or individual wanting to help, then it is best to use the website www.calaidipedia.co.uk which has all the information you need, and co-ordinates a wide variety of aid deliveries and volunteer offers of help.

For additional information specifically about the Basildon project, which is supported by a number of churches and individuals in Basildon, and other parishes within the Diocese of Brentwood, please feel welcome to email frdominic@basildoncatholics.org or call 01268 281732.