

Tea with the Kuwaiti Bedouin

reflection on our latest visit to Calais, May 23rd 2016

Every visit to the Calais Refugees is different, and today was no exception. The minibus was packed full; 200+ blankets, 1000 bars of soap and hundreds of packets of toothpaste - all donated through the kindness of many, many people. What made today different was that I was reminded in a fresh way of all the preconceptions about the refugees. Those travelling with me were – for the first time since September – an entirely new “crew”, on their first visit to Calais. Conor and Niamh are from Basildon - their brother has travelled before; Joe and Liam are on this year's Walsingham House Team - our retreat team, working with 5000 young people in our Diocese each year.



All of them were curious, they wanted to see things first hand, to not simply go by press reports - and each of them had a certain apprehension. **Could they even carry a wallet in the camp with them, they wondered, or would they be robbed?** One told of conversations with parents and friends that portrayed the refugees as dangerous people, rioting, with knives and fights prevalent. This, of course, has been part of the media portrayal - and how wrong it is. On the ferry I did my best to reassure them that the refugees are as normal as you and I, that they are good hearted, hard working people, caught in hideous circumstances. But in fact, **I did not need to do anything - the events of the day did it all.**

What today brought home so powerfully, and the absolute key to Calais, is in seeing the refugees as our sisters and brothers. Recently the writer Owen Jones shared this picture. It was drawn by an 11 year old girl from Yemen, who was asked, **"draw a picture of what your life is like."** This is the reality of what the refugees flee from, why they get on perilous boats in rough seas, why they need and deserve love, compassion and care. **If the girl who drew this was our daughter, our sister, our granddaughter, our cousin - wouldn't we move heaven and earth to bring peace and hope to their life?**



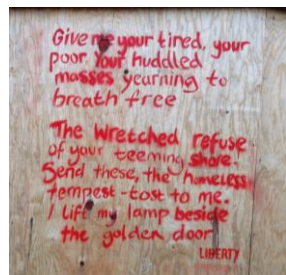
In Calais we went first to the Care4Calais warehouse, and unloaded the minibus - then loaded it again with art supplies, for a therapeutic project called "HummingBird." This had been located in the part of the camp callously bulldozed in February - **now there was a little bit of hope, a fresh joy, as the Calais Prefecture had earmarked a small piece of land as "protected"** - and on this land (where



the minibus is pictured) there is space for the art project to restart, as well as legal and medical services, and a special area just for those under 18. It is so absolutely vital - and, like most things in Calais, this was started by small group of dedicated volunteers, drawn by the needs, and using their gifts and talents.

After unloading at HummingBird we met with some Care4Calais refugees who had just finished distributing toiletries, and an engaging young African called Imad got talking with us about football. With few words, some signs and some drawing in the sand he talked with the deep passion of a Man Utd fan about the 2008 UEFA Champions League final when Man U played Chelsea, and that he had seen on TV. It felt like he was delving back for a happy memory. Joe, Conor and Liam (also devoted to football) were amazed by his recall - including the moment where he remembered Chelsea scored just at the time when his mum offered him some food. "I couldn't eat anything," he said, "until it was all over" (the

game and extra time ended 1-1 and Man Utd won after a tense penalty shootout ended 6-5). He smiled broadly, and his description of not being able to eat until the end was so vivid, so real and something the lads (and any sports fan) could so readily relate to.



We made our way to the church, walking along by the little tents, the plastic and tarpaulin shacks, and an ever greater number of buildings that do have some timber construction. The slogans on the side of the buildings focus on the freedom of the human spirit, with irony, humour and hope. "We borrow the hearts of nomadic birds who don't recognise borders," reads one; another cites the words from the Statue of Liberty. There are also shops here, and cafes - all self-started, by refugees who use their talents for cooking, or who get together a few things for sale and gradually make a business. **This was unexpected for the young adults I was with - and caused them to reflect more on the refugees, their entrepreneurship and their sheer grit and courage to make some normality.** The cafes are community hubs, places to gather and chat; an inexpensive cup of chai lasts a long time. The other striking thing was

the friendliness of the refugees to us - "hello" and "how are you?" called out with smiles and warmth. "You'd never get this in Seven Kings High Street," said Liam.



By the church is the play4calais football pitch - it has goalposts now, and we were told it is in use very often. Next to the church door is a wonderful and beautiful new painting by the refugee artist who some months ago painted the large St Michael. This painting is just as vivid, portraying Our Lady with Jesus, painted with deep care and tenderness. Inside the church we prayed - individually and as a group.



For the young adults seeing the little church for the first time the very building was a deeply moving statement of faith. As Niamh said, "Their faith inspired all this – and they built it out of nothing." She is right. From the simplicity of the holy pictures gaffer taped to the walls, to the freshly planted flowers in the shape of a cross outside the church, this is a tended and nurtured place of faith, and it stirs the spirit. We met the pastor – he is weary, now, after months of being here, but he was grateful for our presence. Last time we were here he asked for incense, candles and charcoal, and it was good to be able to

hand them over, as a way to support the people who pray there, and who use incense abundantly in the Eastern Orthodox Christian services celebrated in St Michael's.



We walked back, and saw close up the containers behind high fences built to house the refugees - sterile, uncomfortable, and looking in every way like a prison. What a poverty of imagination and what a lack of kindness to use such containers for people already deeply traumatised by what they have fled from, and after the harsh journeys they have made.



Then, from the side of a little hut outside the fence, a gently offered invitation - "do you want some tea?" I was so mindful of wanting our young adults to encounter refugees, to dispel the myths. 'Yes,' I said - and how glad I am to have said yes.

The little timber frame and tarpaulin had been padded out with blankets and sleeping bags for insulation. It was tiny - about 6ft by 6ft - and Sammy, the man who had invited us, was insistent we came inside. So we did, and sat on the blankets that formed the floor, while Sammy made the tea outside. UHT milk boiled over a little wood fire, a kettle of water boiled in the same way. Tea bags - Lipton's - added to the brew. And a great heap of sugar. We were joined by Sammy's brother Sa'ad - and with his few words of English we made a conversation.

What a conversation it was – football at first (especially joyful was the moment when Sa'ad pointed out that Conor has a "face like Messi"!) and then onto hair styles, along with a fair bit of Arabic lessons thrown in, as we counted from one to twenty, learnt words for brother, sister & friend, and much more besides. **Sammy and Sa'ad are Bedouin, from Kuwait,** and I read more about that when I got home. **What a persecuted people!** They have lived in the deserts for thousands of years, troubling no-one. They are nomadic, stateless. And as the desert lands have become more valuable (both for oil and for the building of new palaces and playgrounds of the uber-rich) so the Bedouin have been forced more and more to the edges, reviled by citizens who want to be rid of



them. Sammy and Sa'ad told of arrests by police - handcuffs and violence - just for being Bedouin. Sa'ad showed us his mouth, a tooth missing. "Police," he said, and mimed a vicious punch to the face.

We asked, "Why England? Why not France, or Germany?" So often people in the UK have asked this. Sa'ad's answer matters; "My sister is in England," he said, and spoke of the Bedouin community that have settled around London's Edgware Road. **England is not a**

random destination, and it is not about benefits or health care, but family, and community. If only this was understood, perhaps hearts and minds would change.

As we left, I quietly offered Sa'ad some money, at least for the milk and the tea. "No" he said, and when I pressed it, thinking he was being polite, he was very clear. "No. We invited you. We take tea with you. Thank you." Reading more about the Bedouin I see how tea is a very important part of their culture of hospitality - entirely understandable and rather vital in the desert, of course, where it is solace for weary travellers. **Here in Calais they showed us a valuable example of dignity, human company, kindness - and brotherhood.** We left promising to certainly bring them the one thing they had told us they were missing - hair styling gel!

On the ferry home we considered the day. "Humbling," "Unexpected," "They are so welcoming," "They have built so much out of nothing." And the very interesting question – **"If it happened to us, if we suffered from war and terror so much that we had to leave home, I wonder if we would cope."** Indeed.

Today was one of the simplest trips so far – easy distributions, easy journeys – and yet also one of the most profound. Seeing it through the fresh eyes of the young adult volunteers, my heart returned to the words Pope Francis spoke in Greece a few weeks ago: **"Refugees are not numbers; they are people who have faces, names and stories, and need to be treated as such"** Today we had the privilege of sharing Sammy and Sa'ad's story – and their tea. We know their names, their faces – as well as having very fond memories of their kindness, their desire for hair gel and their immense, simple and profoundly generous hospitality. As Joe said, **"They have almost nothing themselves – and they are sharing it with us."** Such encounters remind us that we are all, truly, sisters and brothers.

To read reports from Calais visits since September 2015 and for links to charities working in Calais, to volunteer or offer other support, please visit www.basildoncatholics.org. Please do not visit the camp without first making contact with one of the charities working there.

To donate, please send a cheque payable to "Our Lady and All Saints" to Fr Dominic Howarth, Calais Appeal, Holy Trinity Church, 71 Wickhay, Basildon, Essex SS15 5AD