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WALKING AMONG THE REFUGEES – A TESTIMONY

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I was in Calais with my friend Phil, his wife Anna, his youth worker Sam. These three were on their third visit to the refugee camps, but they also brought with them a young teenage lad called Craig who helps Phil's Anna with her bouncy-castle business. My daughter Marthaa, who is 17, immediately wanted to travel with us and my son Joel, who's 20 and at university, asked to come, too. That's how my own Anna decided she must be involved. So eight of us drove to Calais in our car and 2 vans full of donated food and clothes. It was a strange experience of feeling we had little to offer that was going to make any distinctive difference. Willingness and honesty seemed the most important qualifications we could bring unless we stayed long enough to be trusted with particular tasks. With 8 of us it was cheaper and easier to hire a holiday cottage out-of-season and sort our own meals from there. It also gave us somewhere to regroup and reflect together at the end of each day.

Here's some of what I remember through meeting particular people:

Hettie is British and a volunteer working with L'Auberge in conjunction with other agencies. They have a large warehouse space in Calais, where food and clothes donations are sorted for distribution. The aim is to bring thousands of people one hot meal each day, supply tents, build shelters, and have shoes, sleeping bags and other necessities available. Each day she organises the constant flow of volunteers, mostly British, and regularly posts updates as to what is most needed. I'd found her reality checks helpful and wise, so it suddenly felt real to be checking in and briefed by her. When we were there in February a judge was about to inspect the camp so we had been gathering litter to be removed. Much of it was piles of refuse that had been put in empty cardboard boxes to keep the area clear but these had not been collected before winds and snow destroyed the boxes and created more rubbish visible as litter. Phil recognised and greeted another volunteer **Toby** who lives in a caravan on-site as a first point-of-contact for new refugees arriving, and mans this station especially at night. His vehicle had just broken down, and he took our phone-number in case he needed us urgently to drive him.

Solomon is Ethiopian, and looks after the Orthodox church built in The Jungle camp in Calais. He is a refugee himself, and unsure where he may settle long-term. We were able to refill the gas bottles that heat the church. It occurred to me later that his real name may not be Solomon but what he is known as for building a compound and shelter there as a place for prayer, worship and refuge. It is dedicated to Michael the archangel, and also has pictures of Daniel among the lions, and especially the 3 young men in the fire. I returned there each day, danced 'The battle belongs to the Lord' towards the Michael altar and felt it helped to create a clear, peaceful space in a place that has absorbed so

Daily Prayer 2' there, then walked around outside the church compound perimeter, encircling it and singing 'hearts courageous', and praying protection from the scheduled bulldozers. Despite the legal appeals much of that southern part of The Jungle was demolished not long after our visit, though some shelters were able to relocate into the north of the camp, whilst many refugees just fled with no real strategy except the hope of safety somehow. The church still stands alone amongst the debris of the demolition. Jungle Books [the library and language tuition centre] and the Women-and-children's centre have shifted their shelters into the north end.

Johannes is a large blonde quiet man from Iceland, and was working as a volunteer in the L'Auberge warehouse, sorting gloves, socks and underwear quickly and efficiently. We spent some hours on the adjoining tables sorting through trousers, coats and other clothes. Unlike him most of the men needing clothes are small or medium in size! Meanwhile parcels of donations arrive unsorted and unlabelled, including items as unhelpful as high heels and wedding dresses!

Danni is a young Eritrean, taken out from school one day at 15 and forced to become a soldier. He saw most of his young companions killed, and escaped crossing Sinai and other places before reaching Calais. He is a Christian, and we were able to leave a guitar with him, (that is probably now with Debora, who sang for us, and her husband). We were welcomed into the wooden shelter he shared with 3 others. With the demolition he fled within France, and sometimes messages Anna or Martha to say he is safe, but last we heard he was in a vulnerable impromptu camp outside a Catholic property. We had returned his hospitality by bringing him home to our hired cottage for a shower, a hot meal and an evening of relaxing among friends. So many of these refugees have tales of faith and courage, but have survived horrific things on their journey or in their countries of origin. When Anna and Martha delivered requested art supplies, and other small items to the Children's shelter they were able to sing for the children, too, but they all seemed traumatised and unable to engage even with the music. Only volunteers staying long-term get to be involved with these children, and become a safe presence. At the Dunkirk camp not far away the story is different, and there are many families, mostly having spent all their money being brought there in hope of continuing to the UK. Often they have lived or worked in the UK in the past, or have relatives there, and know the language.

When we went to the Dunkirk camp we carried sweets, sewing kits, thermal underwear, toy balloons, vaseline and other small items, but not our passports or letters of authorisation. I finally managed to find a genial **Gendarme** about my age and girth whose command of English matched mine of French, and I bribed him to let us in with Haribo for his colleague. He saw we had gifts for the littlest ones, and probably has grandchildren of his own. The police presence is very different at the Calais Jungle, especially at night. Danni and the others had been routinely beaten by police imported from various parts of France, legs broken trying to escape, shoes taken from them after over-nighting in cold jail-cells. Sam and I worked in damp weather, and cleared spaces there for a few tents and promised pallets as walkways.

We were soon co-opted into transporting firewood, unloading it and walking with armfuls of it to be stored in a school-room cabin, rigged up with a small woodstove. Heading up these operations seemed to be a guy called 'Dylan', and I was impressed by his caring and tirelessness. The systems at the Dunkirk site were more basic, with most refugees in thin tents, rather than wooden framed structures which each tent can be replaced with eventually. Some amazing people and a huge privilege to be amongst them all.

Since we came back, Martha has found A-Levels even less appealing and says she may gap-year abroad with YWAM, and work as a birthing assistant before pursuing midwifery. Joel was very moved; angry and indignant, he filmed conversations with some of the refugees but handed that footage to another film-student for a documentary as he no longer has the impartiality required ... I was proud of both of them. Soon after we got back Anna sang Ken Medema's 'Song of a Refugee' which I've often taught as a dance. It's very heart-wrenching, and could be a song for our time. In the dance people rush to and fro, freezing occasionally as the refugee moves instead. They are in a hurry, but he has nowhere to go, no-one to befriend or take him in. The song is his interior cry for help, and his numbness, his preoccupation with all he has seen, the land he has left and its sufferings... 'for I'm a stranger here in your land'. I'm crying or holding myself still. We check the bulletins and international news.

I may teach 'Song of the Refugee' for a long time to come ...

Andy Raine