

## Homily, 24(B) 13<sup>th</sup> September 2015

Today's Gospel pivots on one central, direct question. Jesus asks the disciples, "But you, who do you say I am?" As we know, dear friends, that means he asks you and me precisely the same question: "You, who do you say I am?" It is the answer to this question that defines our lives.

On Tuesday, I met an Eritrean Christian called Mima, and there is no doubt at all about how that question has defined his life. I stood in the door of the little tarpaulin and timber church at Calais and he told me that he and his friends had built the church as soon as they arrived in the Calais Jungle. "Why did you build it?" I asked, and the reply left me utterly humbled. We built it so that people could know God is here, said Mima, and we built it not only for ourselves but for everyone who comes after us. He said that they always have a sense of mission, wherever they are. And right now the mission is here, here in the Calais jungle. And when we are gone from here, the church will be here for others, because God will still be here, is always here.

It was such a direct and clear statement of faith. There is no doubt that Mima knows, and lives, the answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?", and to give it full weight I should describe what I saw on that day. The Calais Jungle is scrubby sand dunes next to an industrial estate. Heavy lorries roar along the roads by the camp. The shelters – such as they are – spread out between the dunes, and alongside the motorway is bordered by a high metal fence topped with spikes and barbed wire. It was a dry day on Tuesday – I can only imagine what it is like after heavy rain, when the soft sand and earth turns into appalling mud. The shelters are made of bits of old timber and – literally – bin bags. Black sacks, mixed sometimes with tarpaulin, to provide shelter from the rain and shade from the sun. Inside, if they have one, an old mattress, quickly stained with sand and mud. Now some of this is getting better; Secours Catholique is part of Caritas, the international Catholic aid network, and they are building some timber framed shelters that will withstand the wind and rain much better. But from what we saw, there are very few of those and very many more makeshift tents and shelters. Three thousand five hundred people live there.

So it is in amongst all of that where the church is built – and its extra height, its utter simplicity, and the love and faith with which it was built and is looked after – this makes it a real beacon of hope and faith. Mima, incidentally, is a journalist, and he had fled because his reporting against the Government had put him in jail, with no hope of release. He had literally escaped from the prison hospital, and fled to safety. I only met professional people on Tuesday – they had good jobs and good lives in their homes, and have fled war, oppression and terror.

Two hundred yards away is a Mosque. Later in the day I asked Mohammed, an architect from Syria, about the relationship between Christians and Muslims. He told me he had left Syria because Aleppo was completely

bombed out and he had nowhere else to go. He has a fiancée, who is still in Turkey. He told me about the journey he had made; a boat of 125 people when they set off; by the time they landed there were only 65 on board. The boat was so overcrowded that many had been washed away, many drowned and some saved by the Italian navy. And that matters for Christian & Muslim relations because he said “On that boat we were Christians and Muslims together. Once you have been through such strife, you understand each other. We have all lost friends, family, people we love. So here in Calais, there is peace.” I asked him where he wanted to go next, and he looked at me with deep sadness and said, “Home. I want to go home. But I cannot. My home is in ruins.”

Dear friends, in today’s second reading St James could not be clearer. “If one of the brothers and sisters is in need of clothes, and has not enough food to live on, and you say to them, ‘I wish you well. Keep yourself warm and eat plenty’ without giving them the bare necessities of life, what good is that. Faith is like that. If good works do not go with it, it is quite dead.” This is a superb parish for generous hearted response, always, and over the last month we have seen and lived faith in action. Of course it is a drop in the ocean of all the suffering, but many drops make a fresh ocean, of hope and faith, dignity and decency. On Tuesday I learnt a lot about the best way to bring aid to the camp, and together with Ben at Seeking Sanctuary, we are going to pilot a scheme called “Building Bridges of hope and love,” which will mean sending “Little packets of hope and love” to the Calais refugees – in every packet will be a bar of soap, tube of toothpaste, toothbrush, two pairs of pants, two pairs of socks and a message from one of our schoolchildren so the refugees know they are not forgotten. There are new posters by the doors, and together with other churches in Basildon we will keep this going for a while. I know everyone here will do what they can.

This week, as the refugee crisis has filled the headlines, and we see such crowds at borders and on buses and trains, and hear numbers like 800,000 or twenty million, we might feel pretty lost in it all. I do, and my experience at Calais was sad, and shocking. And yet there is hope. These are gifted, talented people and God willing their talents will soon grace our country, and Europe, and not be festering in a forlorn part of Calais. And as Helen Keller said, “I am only one, but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something, and I will not refuse to do the something I can do.” So we send our little packets of hope and love, and in doing that we will be living faith with action, in the way St James is so clear about today. And through it all, we will be doing our best, in our own struggling and stumbling way, to answer Jesus’ question “Who do you say I am?” “You, Lord Jesus, are the Son of God. You were crucified for speaking pure love, you died and you rose from the dead. You came among us as a refugee, you were a friend to the poor, you never judged anyone because of their nationality, sexuality, gender, skin colour, or background, and you told us that whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters, we do to you.”