

*When I was hungry, you fed me;  
When I was naked, you clothed me;  
when I had no shoes, you gave me shoes – and dignity*

**Waitrose Essentials, walking boots, and a gifted young man called Jack:  
Reflection on taking aid to the Calais Jungle, October 2016**



**It was twelve degrees in Calais last Wednesday; the wind coming off the Channel cut through clothing and the sides of tents, and people shivered.** There have been many new arrivals in recent weeks and the charity volunteers are working flat out to get aid to the ten thousand people for whom the Jungle is now home. One of the biggest needs is for shoes – walking boots, or decent trainers. Many people are wearing just the simplest of flipflops. This means cold and wet feet, slipping on pathways that are becoming muddier as the winter rains begin.



This week, 215 pairs of walking boots are being delivered because of money that has been donated to our project in Basildon. That is 215 people who will now have decent walking shoes instead of flipflops – a fraction of the camp, of course, but for each individual an important piece of help. On Wednesday we took part in a distribution of such boots and **it is hard to describe how amazingly joyful and deeply humbling it is to see an adult putting on a simple pair of trainers with a great smile and such relief in their eyes.** During the shoe distribution we also saw the consequences of not having such footwear; feet that had been cut, and become infected, as well as being freezing cold.



**The camp is packed; there are precious few gaps between tents.** Many are pitched precariously at the top of sand dunes, looking ready to slide away at any time; these will surely collapse when the rains of winter begin in earnest. Up to 15 people can be living in tents of just a few square feet, with barely enough room to lie down. Cooking is on blackened little pots, over wood-fuelled braziers, with the most basic commodities. There was a particular irony in spotting – of all brands – a Waitrose pack



of salt, next to these rudimentary cooking facilities. It was labelled as a “Waitrose essential” – I wonder if they realised the depth of the word essential when they branded that particular product. Thank God for those who donated it – and all that has been donated; piecemeal charity is the only thing keeping these people clothed and fed.

The Calais refugees are often called “economic migrants”, coming to England for a better life. I have met many people in Calais over these months, and I have yet to meet one who has made the seven month, perilous journey for reasons of finance. Today was no different. I spent time with Jack, a translator for Care4Calais. **Jack is 24 – but look at his life-weary eyes and he could easily be a decade older than that. He is a bright, gifted young man who speaks five languages, including Pashto, Farsi, Arabic and English.** I asked him where he learnt his English. “Here,” he said, “In the Jungle.” He speaks fluently and clearly. He has been in Calais for five months, and he has been translating for the last two months. The reason I am with him, together with another Care4Calais volunteer, is to visit a section of the camp with sheets that picture some basic items – a hoody, jogging bottoms, body spray deodorant, a razor, toothpaste, a blanket, a T-shirt, boxer shorts and socks. Each person we meet can choose one high value item (hoody or joggers) or three of the cheaper items.

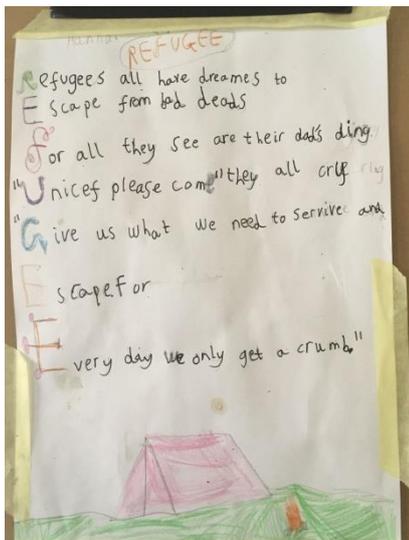


This system reflects what is in the warehouse, and the sheer volume of people: within 90 minutes, I had written out requests – known as “tickets” – for over 150 people requesting about 400 items; Jack translated constantly, patiently; he shifted between languages as we moved between Pakistani, Afghan and Sudanese refugees, all living perfectly peaceably together in the part of the camp we are ticketing. In the evening, volunteers at the warehouse turn the tickets into parcels with the specific items requested, and the next day there will be a time for collection in the camp. It is a superb system, developed just within the last few weeks. It gives the refugees an element of choice, it stops long queues in bad weather, and it means the refugees are not stuck in queues for items that may not be suitable or may run out. Multiply our 400 or so items by five – as five teams were out in different areas of the camp – and we have covered about 10% of the camp, with requests for 2000+ items.

Jack is from Afghanistan. He was a commander in the Afghani army. He looked at me with his intelligent but exhausted eyes and said, “It is very difficult. I cannot go home.” This bright, gifted and purposeful young man should be contributing to building a magnificent society in Afghanistan, but for reasons he cannot bear to speak about he has had to flee. Having spent the afternoon with him, I can see that his gifts would bring him into employment in many different spheres. **And yet he is stuck – exiled from his country, where they would kill him, and unable to go to England, where he dreams of rebuilding his life. Why not France, or Germany? Very simply, as part of the Afghan army, he fought alongside British troops; he feels an identity with Britain.** It is desperately sad, and unjust, that there is no British Consul in Calais, no-one with whom he can share his story (and, yes, for it to be verified, checked, substantiated), no compassionate heart to meet him, listen to him, and offer him welcome. Our response instead is to put up fences and send in demolition crews.

For the particular sadness is that **the Calais Jungle is about to be demolished**. Not because there will be any fewer refugees, or any less need, but because of the decision of the French President, Francois Hollande, backed by the Mayor of Calais and the British Government. **The consequences of this demolition – with no clear plan for the refugees, and no desire by the refugees to stay in France – the consequences will be that the 10,000 who are in Calais will spread along the coast of Northern France, just as winter is setting in.** At the camp, as basic as it is, they have access to some food each day (provided by Calais Kitchens, to whom we have now donated £25,000 from the money sent to Basildon), they have access to basic medical services, and – as I have described – there is now a system which means that on most days the refugees have some chance to get hold of some of the basic items for living in a way which allows for a bit of choice, with a bit of dignity, and without long queues. All of this will be demolished.

For the **children at Calais** this is a hideous situation. Unaccompanied, more than 800 are in the camp, and 387 of those have been documented as having relatives in the UK. For months, their fate has been the subject of political wrangling, even after Lord Dubs fought and won Parliamentary approval for action to be taken. That was in May. The hopelessness of the waiting meant they tried to make their own way across the channel, and at least three have been killed. They were run over by lorries or – in one particularly appalling case – froze to death within a lorry carrying frozen goods. **This week – finally – it does seem as if the children with relatives here can come to the UK. There are many more who do not have relatives in the UK, and who – when the camp is bulldozed – will be ever more vulnerable.** As a Christian, when I see the teenagers running around the Calais Jungle, I am always minded of Christ's words: "It is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs." What are we doing, and what are our Christian leaders in France and the UK doing, that hundreds of children are abandoned and alone, right in front of our eyes?



There are children's poems on the wall at the Care4Calais warehouse – I highlighted one last month, when we visited, and on this visit I spotted a new one. The broken English and spelling of the child somehow adds to the poignancy, the authenticity, of these desperately bleak words that evocatively describe what the children have fled: **"Refugees all have dreams to Escape from bad deads For all they see are their dads dying. Unicef please come they all cry. Give us what we need to servive and Escape for Every day we only get a crumb."**



After the ticketing, and before the shoe distribution, we head up to the little church. We do not know if they will spare it from demolition – they did in February, when the section around it was cleared, but the political rhetoric is far tougher now. One of the refugees, Henrok, paints beautiful icons and since our last visit there is a new icon, of the Last Supper. It is a very moving expression of faith not only in itself but because it has been painted in all the grit and struggle of Calais. At the request of the Pastor, Solomon, we have brought incense and candles

to the church, as aids to the worship there. The church remains an oasis of peace, with people constantly popping in to pray, but it, too, feels precarious now as the threat of demolition looms.

I have three abiding memories from this visit. The first is of Jack: such a gifted, purposeful and life-weary young man, just looking for (and deserving of) fresh hope. The second is the way that different nationalities were in neighbouring tents, living together with peace and friendship. Brenden and Samira, both on the trip for the first time, were very clear on the ferry home: “The camp was so friendly ... people smiled so much ... even though they have so little, they smiled.” Of course, the camp has its problems; any town of 10,000 people would have its problems, never mind all the additional challenges of the Jungle. But fundamentally these people – of many nationalities, who have all suffered great traumas – fundamentally they live together peaceably and with a welcome and friendship that has been a defining feature of the entire fourteen months we have been visiting.

My third memory is the **pairs of feet after pairs of feet in the line for the shoes; almost all in flipflops. One pair of those feet particularly stood out for me; they were in the most basic blue plastic flipflops, roughly held together by just three metal staples.**



I cannot imagine the difference it made to the person wearing those to get a decent pair of walking shoes on that cold afternoon in Calais. I do know that the volunteers of Care4Calais and all working there are living, day in and day out, Christ’s essential truth: “Whatever you did to the least of my sisters and brothers, you did to me.”

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*We travel from Basildon approximately once a month with aid; you can read all the reports back to September 2015 at [www.basildoncatholics.org](http://www.basildoncatholics.org). **As ever, thank you** to all who have donated so far. Financial donations mean we can buy large numbers of the same item, at wholesale rates, which is the best way to supply aid in terms of both practicality and value.*

*We will continue to use all donations directly to support the refugees - **literally every penny is spent on aid**, delivered directly to the warehouse (our ferry and petrol costs are privately funded).*

Cheques can be made payable to “Our Lady and All Saints”, and posted to:

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

Many, many thanks for any support that you can give.

If you want to volunteer or take donations **please do not just turn up in Calais**. Useful contacts are via [www.care4calais.org](http://www.care4calais.org) or email Phil and Ben at Seeking Sanctuary – [migrantsupport@aol.com](mailto:migrantsupport@aol.com). They are also selling Christmas Cards to raise money for supplies for the refugees.