

## PRESTON FAITH FORUM SECOND AID TRIP TO CALAIS

*Dear all,*

*Following an initial aid trip to 'the jungle' refugee camp in Calais, Preston Faith Forum are planning a second trip for the weekend of 6th - 8th Nov.*

*Below is a report of the previous trip - its probably too long for church notices, but makes for interesting reading and can be found on the PFF website.*

*Also attached information about the forthcoming trip: what is required, where it can be dropped off, how to make a financial donation, who to contact. Please would you ensure that this information is made available to our good Methodist folk over the next three Sundays and invite them to consider responding.*

*If anyone is interested in going on this aid trip please get in touch with me.  
Yours in Christ,*

**Rev Mark Slaney**

*Superintendent Minister*

*Preston Ribble Methodist Circuit*

*Tel:01772 726216*

Recently, members of the Preston Faith Forum set out on an expedition to Northern France where they delivered much needed supplies to refugees and migrants. They visited in a camp situated toward the North East of Calais called "The New Jungle". They heard the stories of many people from many countries. They witnessed the squalor and deprivation to which these unfortunates are subjected and condemned to remain. They were the representatives of nine religions in Preston, importantly they comprised the three Abrahamic faiths. They were Rob Jones a Christian, Nadeem Ashfaq a Muslim and myself Jeremy Dable a Jew.

The journey had its beginnings months ago. There had been a growing awareness that the PFF, needed to respond to world events if it was to play its part in strengthening the links between the different religious identities within the City. Division and conflict elsewhere needed to be acknowledged in order to maintain a united community in Preston. Religion might



be a factor of conflicts in other places but we wanted to do our best to prevent religion from dividing the people of Preston. If we could set a powerful example in Preston, others would match it. Given time, we might even play a part in healing the conflicts elsewhere.

Following the tragic drowning of Aylan the Syrian Kurdish boy on the shores of Kos on the morning of Wednesday 2nd of September 2015, there had been such an outpouring of public feeling that we had to do something. So we wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister telling him that Preston can look after refugees, just send them to us. The moment the letter was printed in the Lancashire Evening Post, David Cameron announced that he would arrange for 20,000 to be given refuge in the UK over the next 4 years. Well, at least, it was a start.

Then we had our next public meeting on the 9th September. The mood of the meeting reflected that of the public. There was a resolution to send a van to Calais as soon as possible. The date was set for the 25th September. Longer preparation risked loss of momentum. The journey was intended to focus the contributions of supplies and love of everyone involved. And that's exactly what happened. No sooner had word gone out that donations were needed than money and supplies were received from all corners. Only days later, we were delighted to receive over £1,000 in cash and more than a van full, stacked to the very top with bottles of water, food, clothing and bedding for men, women and children, tents, cooking pots, toiletries and shoes.

Efforts were made to link up with other charities with reliable experience of the problems and the needs in Calais. We were surprised that the main known charities were not there at all. Some guidance was provided by smaller charities. Reports were grim.

Bags and boxes were collected from individuals from Mosques, from Churches, from cafes and from as far away as a Synagogue in Cheshire. Easy-Rent vans were very accommodating in letting their vehicle leave the country.

After a speedy journey, an easy crossing and uneventful night in Calais, we met up with mainly Muslim volunteers from Dundee, Leicester, Derby and South Wales. They, and others whom we spoke to later, were impressed to see a Muslim, a Christian and a Jew working together. Their leader was delayed so we made our own way to the camp.

The main slip road from the peripherique had a Police road block; not just any Police but the CRS, notorious since 1968 for their very firm hand in public order. We went found another route around the road block and found ourselves on the other side right up at the edge of the camp. We saw a sea of little shelters made of polythene sheeting stretched over whatever framework could be found. The ground between them was strewn with rubbish. Thousands of people of African, Asian and Middle Eastern appearance walked back and forth, some purposefully, some aimlessly. Some just stood around and coughed. It did not look like a good place to

go down with a chest infection. Nationalities noted were Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Kuwait and Syria.

What became increasingly clear was that, call them migrants or refugees, most needed good winter footwear but were wearing flip flops or sports shoes which didn't fit.

We were on the point of working out how to start distributing supplies when vans with blue lights sped through the underpass and stopped beside us. There was a red emergency vehicle and two CRS riot police vans. The Police got out and formed a military style cordon around the red vehicle which turned out to be an ambulance. Cautiously, I walked over to a Policeman to ask what was going on. A few 'Si'l vous plait' later his stony face cracked into an unpleasant smile and said "Quelqu'un est blessé" which could translate either as someone is injured or wounded. For all their toughness, the Police would not enter the camp, nor did the ambulance men. Apparently, if anyone is injured or sick, they have to make their own way or be helped to the edge of the camp to the emergency services. The emergency services will not enter the camp. Nadeem offered to shake hands with the policeman I was talking to. He looked offended and refused.

It was clear that we were standing at the edge of European civilisation. Beyond the boundary of the camp, there would be no emergency services, no civil structure, no law, no order and precious little access to medical attention.

The Police and ambulance drove away and we opened the van door ready for business. An orderly and patient queue formed. We offered tee shirts, trousers, fleeces food, water, toothbrushes, hygiene kits, tents, sleeping bags and other useful things. The inside of the van became a magnet attracting the curiosity of the queue to draw ever closer. The requests for specific items, most especially shoes, became louder faster and more insistent. We tried to call for patience and a two metre space in as many languages as we knew. They didn't seem to understand. The crowd pressed upon us. We called for space and order again. This time we realised that they understood but some of them were just not going to budge. An old man said "Its always the same; the strong push forward and the weak are left out". While some were making their way into the van to try to loot items we were there to give willingly, others urged us to close the van doors to restore order.



There was a tug of war lasting a couple of minutes to close the van doors. Rob drove away with several men and one woman still in the van. Some bags tipped out or were pulled out of the back as he left. Nadeem and I picked up a couple of bags and items of clothing that fallen out and had not yet been 'distributed'. We walked up the road to catch up with Rob. Meanwhile Rob was busy inviting his guests to leave the van with his inimitable Scouse manner. One was reluctant but as he weighed about half as much as Rob the discussion did not last long. While this was happening, Police stood by bent double with laughter. They did not appear to recognise occupants of the camp as human beings to whom they owed a duty.

We met up with the young woman who had been in the van. She was sitting down in tears. While in the van, a man of Arab appearance had placed his hands down her trousers and had sexually assaulted her. She explained that her name was Salaam and that she had come from Darfur with her brother who was beside her doing his best to comfort her. She went on to say that of all the trials that she and her brother had gone to in reaching Calais, The New Jungle was the worst. She had relatives in England which was why she wanted to come here. We asked her to wait and that we would come back with supplies for her, which we did.

We met up with Rob and drove to a place out of sight of the migrants and refugees. We spent some time sorting the remainder of our cargo, looking especially for men's shoes and boots while putting women's clothes and shoes further back as they did not seem to be so much need for them. Then we drove back toward the camp to have another try. This time we stopped short of the camp alongside a collection of cars of volunteers from England, France and the Netherlands who were handing our supplies but seemed too nervous to enter the camp. We told them our experience which confirmed their choice to remain where they were. There were still large numbers walking past to whom we continued to give water, clothing, men's footwear and toiletries. For some reason the men seemed to want roll on deodorants but were not so keen on toothbrushes and toothpaste. This time the numbers were more manageable and we asserted greater authority and with success. Oddly when we offered a perfectly brand new fleece jacket to a queue of men, they declined it because they said that it was too big for them; though it was not all that much bigger. We wondered why and how they could retain what seemed like an impractical personal refinement.

We met Iranians who came up to us insisting upon showing us texts in Farsi which I thought were from the Quran. We quickly learned that they were Christians. I knew from prior work with asylum seekers that Iranian Christians do not have an easy time and that converts from Islam risk the death penalty. We had language difficulties but when I asked "Trouble with Basij?" the name of the Iranian secret police, they shuddered in understanding.

The decision was made that we should go into the camp to find out if there was anywhere we could leave the rest of our supplies. We drove up the edge of the camp again, passing dozens of volunteers who were cheerfully picking up litter, placing it in bags and taking it away in wheel barrows. They were wearing a kind of uniform of overalls, many of them wearing surgical masks over their faces. Their appearance was re-assuring in that they were clearing up but alarming that a good number of them feared air borne contagion. Most of them were English. The thought occurred that there task would be easier and more sustainable if they had been helped by the residents of the camp.

We parked and locked the van before walking in. Within a few minutes we passes ramshackle shops and tea houses stocked mainly with food items and serving hot sweet tea. We sat down to drink tea with a headman who was wearing the rounded cloth caps favoured by the hill people of Afghanistan. He looked about 60 and was the one of the oldest people we saw. Most were in their teens or twenties. He explained that he was a builder who had fallen out with the Taliban and had been there 9 months. He had a younger friend, similarly dressed, who said he was from Pakistan but had to leave because he was the driver of a senior officer in the army and had been told that he would be killed if he stayed in Pakistan. They talked about



the Taliban, explaining that they were originally there to help the people but that the Taliban to their disgust had been infiltrated by extremists. We were so surprised by this revelation that we did not think to ask how he defined extremist. At any rate he seems very relaxed to be in the company of a Muslim a Christian and a Jew. He reserved his prejudice for the Africans.

There was indeed a tension between the Muslims who do not drink alcohol and non Muslim Africans who were pushing shopping trolleys full of cans of beer into the camp. We were told that alcohol was the fuel for mischief and disorder after dark.

We were directed to a group called Salaam deeper in to the camp. We passed a makeshift line of showers

which amounted to a Heath-Robin son extension from what looked like a fire hydrant. A dozen semi-naked men were showering in the open in a manner that I had seen before only in Calcutta. They did not seem to feel the need to screen themselves; possibly because, other than visiting volunteers, there were very few women and even fewer children in the camp.

We came across the tidiest shelter in the camp erected by Medecins du Monde. We spoke to a Canadian young woman who said that she was a 'Mediator'. She provided us with a list of things that she was not able to do and explained that her group could only receive medical supplies. However, more helpfully, she told us more of what was going on in the camp. She explained that the organisation to which she belonged had broken away from Medicines Sans Frontiers and indeed was founded by the same man and did essentially the same work. Medecins Sans Frontieres have earned a tough reputation for being first in and last out to provide medical care at any scene of conflict, famine or natural disaster anywhere in the world. Their presence normally heralds the passing or imminent arrival of the 'Horsemen of the Apocalypse' as harbingers of Conquest, War, Famine or Death. I had read that they left Calais when the structures at the notorious Sangatte centre had been bulldozed by the French authorities following riots in 2002. Ominously, after a break of 13 years, they had arrived back in Calais to work along side Medecins du Monde that very day.

The young Canadian went on to tell us that her organisation stayed only during the day. At night time they left for security reasons. She confirmed that there was no law and no order. After dark, hordes would descend upon a 'night club' situated between a temporary Church and a similarly constructed Mosque. Not unlike our own towns and cities, each grouping or nationality would be affected by news elsewhere in the world responding to each crisis or conflict by blaming some other group. Unlike, our towns and cities, there was no one to stop them or impose order when they vented their fear and frustration upon each other in mass fighting, often sparked or worsened by alcohol. Despite the small number of women, rape was so common as to be unremarkable. Gangs, or individuals did as they pleased raising the level of fear after dark to complete terror. Some were reduced to lying awake all night under street lamps by the underpass, as close to the Police as they could manage. Tales of a violent Kurd who had a gun but whom no one seemed to be able to identify added extra darkness to the nightly cocktail of alarm.

We were told that the United Nations had been spotted but that they confined their activities to cruising around outside the camp in large, expensive 4x4 vehicles but had so far taken no part in improving the situation. Cynical remarks were passed that doubtless things could only improve now that Saudi Arabia has taken the chair of the UN Human Rights Council.

We moved on past large stagnant pools. We greeted vans and other vehicles filled with the volunteers we had met from the UK earlier that morning. They seemed happy and relieved to have left their supplies and to be on their way out of the camp. I recognised the driver of one vehicle as a man whom I had earlier mistakenly thought to be a refugee but who had reminded me, with some irritation, that we had met that with the large group from Dundee. The unstated implication was that for me 'they all looked alike'. I tried to make up for my faux pas by shouting that there would be no mistaking him for a refugee now while he was driving a BMW 4x4 and that it was so smart he must be working for the UN. To my relief, he gracefully accepted my joke by way of apology. We took their business cards so that we could exchange profiles on LinkedIn and to co-ordinate subsequent efforts. Their cards revealed that these volunteers were well to do businessmen and professionals who had given up their time that weekend.

Next we noticed a line of vans parked parallel to each other with their rear doors open. Beyond them were orderly queues of migrants and refugees being marshalled by volunteers wearing the uniform of high visibility vests. As each person reached near the front of the queue to collect an identical bag of unknown pre-sorted contents, they were obliged to pass through a 'gauntlet' of men in high visibility vests. The volunteers asserted authority by merely standing there and looking like they meant business; the clear implication being that at the first sign of pushing or disorder, the van doors would close before anyone got to them. So that was how it was done! We realised, with regret, that we had got it wrong. We had unwittingly

incited disorder. By contrast, these people were reinforcing civilisation. The lesson will not be forgotten. Next time there will be eight volunteers marshalling distribution. Three was simply not enough.

At the eastern edge of the camp on the Chemin des Dunes, we met a French group distributing food, water and milk from trestle tables. They were organised and wearing identical teeshirts. We arranged with them to distribute our remaining supplies of food and bottled water. Conversation was short. The queue was long, they were busy and

anxious not to take their eye off maintaining order.

We started our way back across the camp to the van and came upon a French lady photographer with a smartly dressed tall Asian gentleman. She asked if we had



found the people we were looking for. It turned out that she was preparing a report for the Museum of Migration in Paris. We explained our progress to that point. She gave us the telephone number of Auberge de Migrants, the French charity who had a warehouse which might take in the remainder of the clothing we had left. She called them for us. They were unable to take more that day but the situation would probably change as the winter set in over the following weeks. The decision was made, in accordance with our plan before we left, that whatever clothing we could not safely distribute, we would bring back with us rather than risk adding to disorder. We knew that there were refugees or, as the government prefers to call them, ‘asylum seekers’, back in Preston with Syrians already here and more arriving soon. Much of the clothing that we still had was for women and children for whom there was little need. We saw only a handful of children in our stay.

On our way back, our attention was caught by the noise of a generator. Looking around, trying not to be distracted by the smell of cannabis, we saw a groundsheet with dozens of smart phones hooked up to the generator. I went to have a look and caused much consternation by taking a picture on my own smart phone. I reassured the people there by showing them that I had not included anyone’s face. The reason is that if ever any of them manage to reach England, in order to apply and qualify for asylum, they can only do so by starting with the fiction that England was the first country they were able to make their claim in. The story is invariably that they hid in a lorry and that England was the first country where they got out. Of course this is a lie and the Home Office know it which may account for the hostile stance I had encountered from presenting officers when I represented asylum seekers at tribunals in years gone by.

So there we have it. ‘Smart phone refugees’ who begin their claim for asylum by lying but its much more complicated than that. The smart phones are essential for news, planning and communication or even transfer of money and support. No one under 40, as most of them are, would consider leaving home without a smart phone any more than leaving home without shoes or a wallet. For many, the shoes and the wallet had long worn out but the smart phone endured. As for lying, if you were Syrian, would you seek asylum in Greece or Hungary in their present political and economic state? If you are from Eritrea, with a relative in Glasgow, would you seek asylum in



Spain or Southern Italy which are each said to be facing economic catastrophe for different reasons? There are other countries en route outside Europe, which of them offer a stable future for a person wanting to make a life for themselves? Egypt? Algeria? Tunisia? Libya? Southern Morocco bordering the Western Sahara? Israel has taken a significant number from Ethiopia and other countries but since May this year Israel has said "Go back to Africa or go to Prison". Perhaps the easiest thing would be for France to give them all French passports, as Hungary has threatened to do. Then they would be free to go anywhere they like in Europe, though, the Entente Cordiale with the UK might not survive such a policy which might also give Nigel Farage his best hope of becoming PM.

We took the van round the south east corner of the camp and drove up the bumpy Chemin des Dunes. The road was congested with volunteers and vehicles; African women dressed in full covering and sharing the carry handles of an incongruous Morrisons' shopping bag were contrasted by very stylish looking young ladies who would not have appeared out of place in Kensington or Montmartre. Expensively and provocatively dressed, I wondered how they might appear to the young men in the camp brought up with the dress restrictions of more conservative countries. No wonder a couple of African men had set chairs high on a bank to watch the parade as if it were some dystopian cat walk.

By the time we caught up with the French food distributors they had finished with milk and water and were now handing out bags of fresh meat which stank in the heat of the hot cloudless mid afternoon. They quickly came to our van to unload the remainder of our food and water supplies. As we opened the side door, we revealed about a dozen pairs of men shoes that we had left because we could see that they were much needed. A volunteer pointed to the shoes remarking "Non! Non! C'est dangereux!" We got the message. We were quick enough to avoid a riot but too slow to evade the scrutiny of a couple of men who gazed at the worn shoes as if they were the things they most desired in life. We promised to give them shoes but they would have to meet us a few hundred metres up the lane.

We bumped along to the north east end of the camp adjacent to a pair of gates and a compound which I recognised from video footage on the internet as the place where a morning competitive sprint for the prize of a clean shower took place. Apparently, there are many contenders in these daily races but few winners. There was nowhere safe to stop to hand out the shoes.

The track turned east behind the dunes and became ever more agricultural. The decision was made to turn round and head back the way we came. To our amazement, one of the men eyeing the shoes had followed us down the track and was standing with his back to the bocage to our right. We slowed down for Rob to hand him size 44 shoes. He took hold of them for a brief moment but was interrupted by a shout from a CRS Policeman who had suddenly appeared and made it clear that

he did not want us to give the man the shoes. The man took a moment to look at the angry Policeman and another to look at the shoes before wearily handing them back to Rob, clearly with a very heavy heart and no outward sign of protest or defiance. What had made him hand back the thing he seems to treasure so much? Were the worn shoes disappointing or were the stories of the Police raids and violent use of batons true? We pondered the question as we drove on down the track, turned right and straight on the channel port and home.

We brought home with us about a quarter of the load we had taken out still on board. Taking stock, we had done the best we could and determined that we could make better use of the remaining donations by taking them home. A large portion of them were shoes and clothing for women and children for which there was less need.

Lessons learned were that it was good that we had made the visit. we were able to make reports and offer guidance to others planning to travel to Calais to help, including Laura Janner-Klausner the senior Rabbi of the Movement for Reform Judaism of Great Britain who is travelling to Calais with an Imam from Birmingham



today. She hopes to build a Succah or tabernacle in the camp as a symbol of the need to accept ‘Ushpizin’ or guests and give them food and shelter.

What else did we learn? We learned about human nature. If law, order and civilisation are taken away from us, we can be reduced to being, once more, the aggressive competitive ‘survival machines’ which are the product of our evolution. Where there is no law, where there is no justice, morality for many is reduced to the problem of survival. Empathy and civilisation become suppressed in order to survive. There are some who despite these conditions, remain determined not give in to them and there are many who wish to help. We must each make our own efforts to give practical substance to such determination. If we

look upon the people in this camp as liability and refuse, who among us will be safe from the uncertainty of future events? If we look upon them as assets in need of relocation in our society, they will look after their own future and ours.

**Jeremy Dable**

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**SEE NEXT PAGE FOR IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

## **IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

**Preston Faith Forums 2nd Refugee Visit to Calais, France. On Friday 6th November to Sunday 8th, representatives from the Preston Faith Forum, and supported by the Light Foundation will be travelling down to Calais, France to assist the most needy in times of desperate need.**

Below are Items of what is needed and locations of drop off points

1) Revelations Islamic book Shop  
226 Newhall Lane, PR1 4ST  
Monday-Saturday: 10am to 6pm

2) Iqra Islamic Education Centre  
33-39 Garstang Road, PR1 1LA  
Monday-Friday: 4pm to 7pm

3) Aqsa Mosque  
101 Fishwick Parade, PR1 4XR  
Monday-Friday: 4pm to 7pm

4) Sikh Gurdwara  
2-10 Tunbridge Street, PR1 3YN  
Monday-Friday: 4pm to 7pm

5) Heritage Church  
Lancaster Road, PR1 2SQ  
Saturday: 10.30am-1pm. Sunday: 9am-1pm  
Wednesday: 10am-1pm and 6.15pm-7.45pm  
Thursday: 10am-1pm.

6) Central Methodist Church  
Lune Street, PR2 1NL

**\*\*\* ITEMS NEEDED & CASH DONATIONS \*\*\***

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO:**

1. We need your help to raise cash donations and the following items which are needed the most.

*(Please note we will not be collecting anything else):*

Tents  
Ground sheets,  
Tarpaulins for overhead shelter  
Seasoned firewood and kindling  
Bottled water

Energy drinks  
Men's cotton underpants (NEW ONLY)  
Socks  
Roll on underarm deodorants  
Hand sanitiser  
Sleeping bags  
Fleece blankets  
Men's outdoor shoes  
Food in tins or packages  
Cooking pots and utensils  
Brand-new cardboard boxes  
Gas stoves  
Butane gas cylinders

2. Donate money so we can purchase and distribute the most needed aid effectively on the ground.

***You can send your donations to Preston Faith Forum, a registered UK charity (No: 10481345)***

Royal Bank of Scotland  
Name: Preston Faith Forum  
Account number: 16403931  
Sort code: 83-04-25

Please contact the following for further information:

Arfan Iqbal: 07930 557828  
Nadeem Ashfaq: 07794 949217  
Jeremy Dable: 07973 310450

Thank you  
Preston Faith Forum