



message from a refugee boy

It's such a pleasure to welcome you all here, those of you who have been before and an especial welcome to those here for the first time. And a shout-out too, to all of you out in the courtyard. We can see you through the windows!

Christmas is only five days away and, like many vicars, I've been looking for my Christmas joke.

You know, we're not afraid of a little politics here at St James's but I did think that I wouldn't use the jokes that I was told when I asked for one. I decided not to tell the one about why Donald Trump doesn't want to go to church this Christmas ... Fake Pews.

And I also decided not to tell the one about why Jeremy Corbyn messed up his Advent Calendar this year ... He kept trying to open the door to number 10.

So, no jokes then. We're only 5 days away....

And we know that, often, Christmas each year is the most evocative way that we measure the passing of time. This might be the first Christmas you've had in a new house or the last Christmas in an old flat. Or the first Christmas without someone you love, or the last Christmas your children will be at home. We measure the passing of the years by what kind of Christmas it is.

Here at St James's, in recent years, we've wanted to celebrate Christmas, yes, by singing all the old familiar carols. That's important, but also by reminding ourselves of the real themes of Christmas. Two years ago, at Christmas 2015, we salvaged a boat from Greece that had carried 62 refugees on their perilous journey across the Aegean Sea. Following the ancient tradition of hanging boats in the nave of churches, we hung the boat here, as what one journalist called 'a cry

out against the unthinkable cruelty of our times'.

Two years on, we know, because we watch the news like everyone else, that the story has moved on but not gone away.

There are still far too many people (adults and children) dying in boats trying to cross the sea to Greece. But also, now, there are thousands of people who are living in refugee camps, in the mud, cramped together. This installation is about that story.

It's called 'Suspended' [[an art installation by Arabella Dorman](#)].

All of these clothes had been discarded by refugees on the beaches or by the roadsides of the island of Lesbos (Lesbos) in Greece. We have worked with an artist Arabella Dorman and the small NGO* on Lesbos, the Starfish Foundation. They collected these clothes from the dirt and the mud, cleaned them, and sent them to us. We have installed them in this way to make the point that for these refugees, their lives are stuck, or to use the title of the piece, they are 'suspended'. They are unable to go home, unable to move on. They are unable to work, to be educated. And this is happening today to thousands of people in our continent of Europe.

At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ whom Christians believe shows us who God is, what God is like in a remarkable way. We remember the circumstances of his birth; he was born into danger; born in an outhouse in an animal feeding trough because his parents couldn't find a room in the crowded town of Bethlehem. It's a story of a family pulling together in very hard times, a story of a perilous journey and an uncertain future. We often make Christmas

seem too safe, too cosy. But it's real meaning jolts us out of our comfort zones and gives us a new depth. We're asked to live fully, to love as very best we can, to forgive, to live in as open-hearted a way as possible. We only have one life and so, today, we can choose to live it in this way.

This time last year, we started a project here at St James's and it is one year old this week. We started hosting a breakfast every Saturday morning for people with no recourse to public funds; people in the asylum process, people who are refugees. Week by week, we have got to know each other, shared stories over coffee, toast and scrambled egg. They are in the main, very keen to get a job, to contribute, to help themselves. But they are not permitted to work. And so, they too are stuck; unable to work, unable to go home, unable to move on. Some become, after a while, stateless. Their home country disowns them, and the UK won't give them papers. This installation is also for them. It is something of a frozen explosion; frozen in time, wasting their potential.

Alf Dubs, who is a member of the House of Lords, was an unaccompanied child refugee during the Second World War. He came to the UK on what was called the *Kindertransport* in 1939, a young Jewish boy escaping Nazi Germany. He was here in church this week helping us call on the UK government to fulfil its promise to welcome unaccompanied child refugees under what's called the 'Dubs Amendment'. This would only be a matter of 280 children before Christmas.

It's our way of trying to put together our prayers and our life; our faith and our action. We are trying to express what we believe about people; what we believe about you and who you are; what we believe about God.

Christmas carols tell the story of Jesus being born and what a seismic event that was. When we sing them in the presence of those

discarded refugee clothes, the songs become too a protest at the waste of life that we say was made sacred at Christmas, the waste of potential of the thousands of precious human beings who live in limbo in the camps of our continent. Forced migration across our continent is one of the defining features of our time, and Christmas is theologically a good time to raise it.

Final thought for this Christmas:

Some of the clothes that are hung here are unbearably evocative of the people who threw them away. One of the little T-shirts says *My first Christmas ever*. Please God there was a second and a third. Another T-shirt says *Mummy's super cool dude*.

And one of the tiniest pieces of clothing is a baby-grow covered in teddy bears, without doubt, belonging to an anonymous little boy brought across on one of those flimsy boats to an uncertain future.

'We hope he's safe,' we thought as we unpacked the clothes sent from Greece. But, of course, we can't know. At Christmas, one of the things Christians say about Jesus is that he is the Prince of Peace. The echoes of the Christmas story are almost too much to bear as we imagine this anonymous boy and the danger he has been born into. As we read the words on his hood, it was almost as if his parents were sending a message directly to us far away; something they knew about their baby son, hoped for him, dreamed he would become. We don't know where he is, but we know what someone thought of him because on his hood are the words: *Prince Charming*.

I think that when we planned this installation and the associated events, we didn't really know that it would, amongst the futility and suffering it represents, also be beautiful. But it is. The colours are arresting and, lit from the centre, the light shines in the darkness, even though, as John's gospel says; the darkness couldn't comprehend it. And so, I end with a poem that speaks of the resilience of the human spirit and of the hope and

beauty that is in you, each one of you,
whoever you are and whatever your own
circumstances this Christmas. As you listen to
the poem, please do feel free to close your
eyes or to look at one of these pieces of
clothing with its story, and hear these words
which are ... for you.

*Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.*

*Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where*

*in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith
in stubborn hope
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.*

Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light by Jan
Richardson

*NGO = non-governmental organisation



sjp.org.uk