



Please God, make us fearless

We've been in the press quite a bit this week, and although we are self-consciously an inclusive church, I have to confess that even I was a little surprised that we featured both on Al Jazeera Television and in the Daily Mail.

We've had almost 2000 people attending services and events this week since last Sunday. The first people to come after '*Suspended*' [[an art installation by Arabella Dorman](#)] was put up, were the traders' associations from around here - all the people who work in the shops and businesses locally. They were a predominantly young congregation, not especially familiar with church. One young woman told me that it was the first time she had been in a church since she was a child. She felt quite intimidated coming in, quite nervous, and she didn't know therefore that this ('Suspended') wasn't here all the time, although she said she thought it looked a bit odd.....

When we'd talked about what it was, she became very emotional, very connected to the story of the art, to the story of the clothes. And over her mulled wine, she became simply unable to carry on our conversation.

It was important to me as the Rector here, that I was able to say to these local workers that this is as much their church as it is anyone else's. Church is now very unfamiliar to several generations of Londoners: the threshold seems very high, the congregations seem out of reach and, in their fear, church-goers are do-gooders or at least people who will judge them if they venture in. The fact that we have been in the press this week is not a good thing for our own self-serving publicity, so we can say "St James's is cool" or "St James's is arty". It's good because it means that people can 'take a peek' at us

even while they're sitting on the tube, looking at the pictures in the Metro, or in their living room watching London Live or Al Jazeera or reading the Daily Mail. It lowers the threshold, makes it safer to engage.

Every one of these pieces of clothing has been salvaged from the beaches and the roadsides and the refugee camps of Lesvos (Lesbos) in Greece. Twenty-seven boxes of clothes were cleaned and then shipped across to us. And a team of volunteers with the artist Arabella Dorman, who we've worked with before, have been up in our Tower room and then overnight here earlier in the week, making this installation called '*Suspended*'. It was January this year that the artist and I had our first exchange of emails. It seemed to me that after we had put up the boat as we did in 2015, that we shouldn't just leave the story there, as the story had moved on – that now, it was less about people dying in flimsy boats (although they still are) but it was now that thousands of men and women and, poignantly, children, were stuck in camps, unable to work, unable to be educated, unable to go home, unable to move on. They were losing their agency over their own lives. Their lives were simply suspended.

Projects like this are costly, not just because of the enormous amount of work and persistence that makes them happen, from fund-raising, to scaffolding, to shipping, to events. They are costly because we, as a church, are staking our own desire to become witnesses to suffering on a huge scale that will, at times, feel overwhelming.

Some of our volunteers, who will have got to know these clothes intimately, have told me of their own tears as they handled these baby-grows and little shoes.

But rather than rehearse the themes of this installation, I simply invite you to invite it into your heart. Because it will be here until the Feast of Candlemas at the beginning of February. For others, they will visit and go away. For us, we will be living with these clothes and therefore the reality of these people and this lived experience, for a couple of months. So, take it easy on yourself; get to know them, be curious, but also recognise the cost. We are raising money for the Starfish Foundation in Lesvos; we are also joining with Lord Dubs, Alf Dubs (who was here on Wednesday this week) in calling for the government to take its fair share of unaccompanied child refugees under the so called 'Dubs Amendment'. So, there are four practical things you can do in direct relation to this installation:

- Give money to the Starfish Foundation through their website or by cash here
- Give money to support our breakfast for people in the asylum system – to any of us here at any time
- Write to your MP – the details of how to do that are on our interpretation boards under the section called "Safe Passage", which is part of London Citizens, which we are part of here.
- Write to your local councillors – the same details are there too.

So, all those practical things are there which are about caring for the individuals through Starfish and our breakfast but also about structural challenge to policy. Pick whatever you would like to do.

But I also want to talk today about our spiritual reality here. We are a church, not a political party or a self-help group or an art gallery. We are a church: a gathering of people, all just as muddled up as each other, learning to pray, learning to let Scripture touch us, wanting to form community as best we can. And we have at our heart, a desire to find ourselves in the life of Christ, the work of God in the world; a willingness to bear the cost of not looking away from our own suffering or from the suffering of others.

We are a church, which means we are in Advent, not Christmas...not yet...we are in Advent, and so today we listen to the challenging voice of John the Baptist, and the immense vision of the prophet Isaiah. And, today, we are baptising baby Aurelia too. At our baptism, we answer three questions that are fundamental to what we believe about living. They are not about doing good, or being right, or saying we believe in a whole lot of things that hardly anyone else believes in. These three questions are all about the direction of our lives, the direction our feet are pointed in.

These questions are asked of us and will be asked of Aurelia today: Do you turn to Christ? Do you repent of your sins? Do you renounce evil? The word repent doesn't mean "feel vaguely sorry". It means turning. Change of direction. Change of mindset. Walk in another way.

And this installation gives us a chance to make physical reality of this turning because we can choose to look at the displaced people who these clothes belonged to and see in them the image of Christ; to turn to Christ is to dare to look, to stay, to steady our gaze on this waste and sadness. To repent of our sins might mean to resolve not to collude with any demonization of refugees, however subtle, however conversational. To renounce evil might mean to face down in what we say, do, believe and proclaim, that the human instinct to exploit and traffic these very people for monetary gain is, yes, evil. That we recognise this instinct for exploitation in ourselves and that we see it writ large in this crisis.

Today we heard about John the Baptist who said that 'Yes, he baptised with water, but that there was one coming who would baptise with the Holy Spirit'.

May we be drenched in that spirit, in the grace of the love of the God we cannot see. Even while we dare not to turn away from the suffering ones among us, from the

suffering parts of ourselves. Please God, we have the courage and energy to draw alongside the displaced and saddest, stuck parts of ourselves, be gentle and drink in the water of baptism which, in those promises, won't make us good but will, please God, make us fearless.

*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

