



## DOWNSIDE SCHOOL

*Hymn Practice Speech – 20<sup>th</sup> January 2017*

*Mrs Murphy*

Last summer term I watched a television programme about a young man, not much older than some of you, who was sent away from his family in Africa, with the family savings hidden in his sock, to escape the atrocities in his country to find safety, security and work in Europe. His journey was treacherous and people died on the way. Some, including the boy, were kidnapped and tortured while their families were asked for ransom money, others died in a car journey across the desert where the driver took their money but refused to carry water. Some died crossing the sea, standing crammed in inflatable boats. He made it, but to what?

Newspapers and news programmes used to report regularly from “The Jungle” in Calais. We all got used to hearing about how dreadful conditions were, how the asylum seekers and refugees ruined the town, about tear gas being used to keep these illegal immigrants back from the ports. Emotions ran high as the world debated the “immigration issue” and the people in The Jungle were made out to be nothing more than economic scroungers who did nothing but cause trouble.

I was moved by the pictures on the television and decided to find out for myself. What I discovered was that there were nearly 9,000 desperate people living in The Jungle with more arriving every day. Many were running away from war, torture and poverty, having to leave their families to escape death, destruction, hunger and fear. I read that they had little food, no shelter, clothes or the very basic essentials that human-beings need to survive. Several non-government organisations were working to help the situation but more was needed. So, I booked a ticket on the Eurostar and turned up at a warehouse run by a charity called “Care 4 Calais”.

It was nothing like I had expected. The mornings were spent sorting donations, making up packs of basic goods for refugees, scrubbing shoes, checking tents, moving boxes around a warehouse, filling bottles with cooking oil....the list was endless and so was the work. The press often use the term “voluntourism” to describe people who go on holiday to help out but I can assure you that the people who worked for Care 4 Calais were certainly not on holiday. When I asked the volunteers what made them do this, all of them described a feeling of helplessness when listening to the news, of compassion for the pictures of refugees struggling to exist and a drive, not a want, a drive to do something positive that would make a difference.

The afternoons were spent in The Jungle. For several days I formed part of a human barrier, simply standing in a chain holding hands with other volunteers to keep a queue to the container where clothes and cooking items were given out. I questioned why we were spending hours in the baking hot sun, it seemed like a waste of time when we could be helping in better ways but it didn't take long before I realised that when people are waiting in desperation because they don't have a blanket, soap or a t-shirt, they need smiling faces and a friendly word, not metal barriers.

My time standing in line was precious. The men wanted to talk, to smile, to say "I am going to England", to tell me they were getting clothes today or just to say "How are you?" They were interested and interesting, coming from Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria and a host of other countries. They had lost everything, some had lost their families but every single one of them had hope - hope for change.

Some afternoons, we went to a makeshift café, sat on platforms and offered to teach English to anyone who came and wanted lessons. I was teaching a young man, Amir, when armoured vehicles stopped outside and armed riot police came in, searched the place and left. The government were trying to shut down anywhere in the Jungle that served food to try and force the immigrants to leave.

The reality of their situation was hard hitting when I did a "food drop" one evening. A group of volunteers distributed a carrier bag of basic provisions, including rice, potatoes, onions, tins of tomatoes and cooking oil, to some tents on the outskirts of the camp (by the way, the Jungle was situated on a disused asbestos dump). We went from tent to tent and received smiles and thanks from everyone. As I walked back to the van, 3 young boys appeared from a tent, about 17 or 18 years old, and pleaded with me for a bag of food- there was none left. I had to leave them with nothing.

I could talk about all the people I met and all the volunteers but I will just tell you about one particular volunteer, Philip. When he turned up at the warehouse and we were all a little worried. He was 80 years old and looked rather frail. Every day he stood outside the café with a board around his neck of English words, willing to teach anyone who wanted to learn. A refugee went up to him and asked him for new shoes. Philip explained that there were no shoes available at the moment but maybe in a few days.....the man was clearly upset. "But I need shoes". Philip untied his own shoes, "Here, take mine"

Philip was moved to action. He saw something that made him feel love and compassion for a fellow human being and did something about it.

In the run up to his inauguration, Donald Trump is making promises to take action about the social issues affecting the United States. In his latest speech he said "it's going to change, I promise you. It's going to change".

We will watch with interest.

It is all very well having a vision ....but a vision without any action is simply a pipe dream, however, vision with action can change the world.

I challenge you today, to take action. Instead of feeling pity and hoping somebody does something about poverty, social injustice, homelessness, lack of respect for human life – do something. Say, “this is MY problem, I will do something, I will take action, this is MY responsibility”.

You CAN make a mark on this world, YOU can be a force.

Don't stand back and hope for change, as John Pridmore told us this week,

“BE the change”.