

Hospitality away from home: Reflections on the Jungle



For eighteen months I made weekly visits to the Calais jungle. Home to ten thousand people on the move, the camp covered a couple of acres of wind-blasted wasteland at the back of the cement works by Calais' harbour.

The camp was not an official response to the so-called migrant crisis. Rather it grew over many months as people who had been moved on from other parts of the city arrived and settled. It started as a collection of tents and became a community of wooden huts with cafes, shops and other businesses springing up to meet the needs of the residents that couldn't be satisfied by the humanitarian efforts of a ragbag army of mainly British volunteers. I went because I sensed God calling me to go and offer the welcome of the gospel to people displaced by war and persecution. Yet on arrival I found welcome from some of the poorest, least settled people on the planet and I found myself asking God afresh, 'what are you saying to me?'

Here are two stories from my time in the jungle...

I found he looks a lot like Jesus

My Sudanese friend had been a model of hospitality in the jungle in Calais where he had lived for 18 months before arriving in the UK in the summer of 2016. Sitting in his bed-sit in North London, drinking tea and having a good catch-up I asked whether he had always been an organiser.

From his caravan he had worked to build community and promote peace. In particular, with the support of a number of volunteers – including me – he had pioneered community kitchens across the camp where groups of 25-30 residents would be supplied with food they could cook for themselves.

'People who cook and eat together,' he said, 'rarely come to blows.'

As I worked with him through the winter into the spring of 2015-16 I saw that, while the kingdom of God might not consist solely of eating and drinking, it certainly couldn't exist without it. I watched and supported his efforts to create community with meagre resources, sheer force of will and a rich helping of humour.

He became a man others looked to for leadership and direction, whose opinions were sought out by people with power and influence. I came to see that Paul was right when he told the Corinthians that God chose the nobodies to bring the somebodies down a peg or two. I certainly experienced that in my friend's presence!

I asked him whether he had always done this kind of thing, even back home in Sudan. He had been a political activist in the capital, Khartoum, but had learned hospitality in the village where his family originated. He'd been sent there when his mother died. As the youngest, his job was to welcome visitors and ensure they got a meal and a bed for the night. No one arriving in the village would go hungry.

He took the practice back to the city and on the university campus where he studied, he ensured that poor students got fed, were offered a place to sleep and received help with bills. As he studied and organised, he became a go-to person for anyone in need. When the authorities came for him, he fled. He had already spent two weeks in prison being tortured but had been released; he knew he would not be so lucky next time.

Arriving in Calais after a lengthy journey through Libya, across the Mediterranean, up through Italy, he settled in Calais. I first met him living in a shelter with a couple of others. We got him a caravan and from it he helped to offer a guiding hand to his section of the camp. An Afghan community leader recently described that caravan as 'the head office of the jungle'.

For many months my friend built community, resolved problems and ensured people got fed and supplied with shoes and clothes. He did what human beings were put on the planet to do: till and keep the garden, fill the earth, make it a place for everyone to live in.

As I reflect on my time with him in Calais, God holds him in front of me as an example of the kind of human being we should all aspire to be. I find that he looks a lot like Jesus.

The theology of the kettle

The kettle was the centre of the hospitality that marked every visit to the camp; hospitality in the shape of chai, offered by everyone you met in the jungle, insisting you sit with them and share a brew. Having extended an invitation someone goes to find wood, paper and a match or lighter. A fire is lit, the flame nurtured, coaxing it to life not only in the paper but in the kindling and more substantial chunks of sawn up pallet.

Your host finds and fills the kettle with clean water, having sent the youngest member of the group to the tap with an old 20 litre water bottle. The kettle is placed on the fire. It spits and burbles and finally it boils. Your host makes chai - a tea bag in each cup, cinnamon, sugar, cardamom pods, more sugar, stir, then offered with a smile.

All the time this is going on - often the best part of an hour - we talk, share stories, laugh, commiserate over bad news from home, a set-back in an asylum claim, laugh at the antics of some of the French riot police, make connections, build relationships.

Hospitality is the foundation of everything, taking time to allow God to seep in through the gaps and silences and seeing where he leads you. Hospitality cannot be rushed. It cannot be done while you are anxiously checking your phone for messages or wondering if it might be appropriate to update Facebook. Hospitality requires your full attention. It requires you care enough about everyone around the fire to give them your whole attention for as long as it takes.

It happened every day in the jungle. And it reminded me that hospitality is at the heart of the gospel, seen in the invitation of Jesus to come and rest a while with him, walk the road with him and discover where real life is found.

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