

Carol service 2015

Harry Smith is 92 years old. He has recently been recalling his experience on active service in post-war Europe.

Seventy years on, I can recall with vivid clarity how the crisis flowed across Europe like a tidal surge of despair. I caught my first sight of the refugees from the back of an army truck: hundreds of civilians with cardboard suitcases, walking wearily beside the road. Some had fled the Soviet or German armies. Others were former slave labourers – desperately thin and wearing tattered prison uniforms and workers' clogs – traipsing back towards the land of their birth or to a displaced persons' camp. All were homeless, many were stateless, and each face I glimpsed seemed to carry an expression of terror.

A few weeks ago he crossed the English Channel again to visit the refugee camp in Calais known as the Jungle.

People in the Jungle live mainly in tents, or shanties made with discarded rubbish and donated lumber. Everything looks temporary, forlorn and hopeless – like a settlement built in a poor country after a natural disaster. There are few amenities and little water, making it hard for people to keep clean, despite their best efforts. Yet they have tried to build a community: there is a school, a library and places of worship for Christians and Muslims.

Amid this squalor, a wooden structure that can seat more than 30 people is a remarkable sight. The Ethiopian Coptic church that my volunteer guide showed me was constructed from plywood and resembled one of the many churches built on the American prairie during the 19th century by European settlers who were desperate for a better life. Even to me, an old man with little faith, it looked reassuring.

The world has changed since I was young. It has not grown harder: just more foolish and selfish. I have seen camps like the Jungle before – at the end of the war. But back then, there was a desire among ordinary citizens and their leaders to alleviate the plight of refugees. Today, it is different. The common will to do good, or at least maintain a decent society for all, has vanished. Our politicians – and we, the ordinary people – are ignoring our moral, political and human responsibility to be our brothers' keepers.

Even to a man of little faith the presence of the wood and plastic sheeting church was reassuring. It seems to say something, it is a presence of something significant, something that matters, something eternal in the midst of that tented community of refugees.

It reminds me of the verse we have just heard from St John's gospel, 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'. The word for 'dwelt' means more literally 'pitched his tent'. The message of Christmas is that God is with us: in Christ he has come among us, and in particular he came, and still comes, to the disadvantaged, the poor, the hungry, the refugee.

A report from the United Nations a week or so ago tells us that a record 60 million people around the world have been driven from their homes this year, mainly because of war and conflict. 1 in 122 of the world's population are now refugees. What hope for our world? What hope for them? The good news is that there is light beyond shadow, joy beyond tears. There is a love and there is a peace that can be found even in the Jungle – and perhaps especially in the Jungle, because God has pitched his tent there

– there the Christ born in a stable is still to be found making his home with those the rest of us have not got room for.