




link



 An urban refugee from Syria, living in Lebanon. Photo by Andy Ash.

Director's Letter: The other in our midst

Aloysius Mowe SJ

*You don't ask
a drowning
person her
religion before
rescuing her.*

A woman goes up to Jesus to plead for her daughter's life. Jesus won't even look at her: she's not Jewish; worse, she's a Canaanite, from a despised people long regarded as an enemy of the Jewish people. When she continues to beg for his help, he says, dismissively, "I am here to help only people of the Jewish faith, my own people. Helping you would be like taking food away from children and tossing it to a dog." The Canaanite woman retorts, "Call me a dog if you want, but if there are crumbs that fall off the children's table, surely even you wouldn't mind this dog from licking the crumbs up." Her wit and her tenacity, born of love and desperation, wins Jesus over: her daughter is saved.

The Australian government's announcement last September that it would permanently resettle 12,000 refugees from Syria, in addition to the 13,750 humanitarian intake quota that current policy already allows for, justifiably received universal praise and welcome. It is unfortunate that this important step forward, in a political environment that has not been generally sympathetic to people overseas seeking safety from conflict and persecution, has encountered prejudice and self-interest in the form of voices calling for the 12,000 places to be given predominantly, and even exclusively, to Christians.

cont on p3

Reath Kawang nyak

When he was 8 years old Reath Kawang nyak fled his village in Southern Sudan because of the encroaching war. Reath accepted JRS's invitation to recount his remarkable story of survival to Year 11 students of De La Salle College, Revesby.

When my mother took me from our village, I didn't know what war was. I had never seen a television so I never knew how serious it was. Until the war came to my village and we were forced to run.

At first I thought it was a game. I was 8 years old, running with my boys from the village, we were having fun together. We are playing games trying to guess the type of guns and bombs from the sounds of the explosions. During one of the attacks, my mother was holding my hand while we were running but we were separated during the confusion. Now I was alone.

After running for a few days, we were forced to keep walking even though the bombs had stopped dropping. It took several weeks to walk to the refugee camp in Ethiopia but I don't know exactly how long because there was no calendar.

During the walk there was no water. No food. We lived under trees. We had no guns but we had to protect ourselves. There were wild animals. We depended on the elders hunting for our food. They did what they could to help us survive.

A refugee doesn't have a choice when he leaves home. There is no plan. There is no chance to close the door when you leave your house. No chance to close the window. You feel a need to go back to close your door, to make sure your house is okay but you have to keep moving away from your home.

I was in three different camps in Ethiopia for eight years. In the third one, I was still dreaming that I wanted to go back and fight in the war, the same war that killed my father. I thought I was old enough and I am learning to clean guns. I was small and skinny, and guns were taller than me, so the men in the camp wouldn't let me go. As a refugee you don't get to choose many things.

Now I am glad that I couldn't choose to go to war.

The UN went through the refugee camp and selected a group of boys to go to Denmark. We were lucky refugees – we had resident privileges before we



📷 Reath Kawang nyak speaking to students

got there. We had a house waiting, and support to learn Danish, and go to school.

When I am arriving in Denmark everything was new for me. I didn't know how to turn on a light switch because there were no lights in the camp. I had come from a place where it was strange to see a white man. And now I am in a country where it is so strange to see a black man that kids at school are coming up to me to touch my skin.

When I arrived in Denmark I was 14 years old. I still had to find myself. I became a rapper. Like a 'gangsta' rapper. I have G unit shoes. I wear earrings, bling bling. I wanted to get away from my African story. I thought my story was not worth it. I wanted to get popularity in my school.

But the war was still in me. I was still angry. I am blaming everyone. I am blaming the Muslims for the war. I am blaming the Europeans for bringing Christianity to Sudan. I am blaming the Chinese for wanting the oil in South Sudan. I am blaming my mother for leaving me behind.

After 16 years of blaming my mother and thinking that she is dead, I find out that she is alive. That she is living in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. When I speak to her on the telephone, the first time we talk in 16 years, I get to hear her story. I hear that she didn't leave me behind on purpose. That she has been thinking I am dead for 16 years. I forgive my mother. And I start to forgive myself.

When you forgive you begin to release yourself. I begin to think that there must be a reason I am still alive. There must be a reason that I didn't get shot. I feel a responsibility to tell my story that is much bigger than myself. Give voice to those who can't get to speak because they are dead, or they are still in refugee camps.

You can read his full story on <http://www.jrs.org.au>

A refugee doesn't have a choice when he leaves home.

There is no plan. There is no chance to close the door when you leave your house.



📷 De La Salle students raise hands in support

Project Update

The work of the volunteers and the staff at Arrupe Place, has been recognised with the 2015 Community Wellbeing Award given by the Australian Psychological Society (APS).

In giving the award, the APS praised the involvement of the volunteers, and the “valuable contribution to the wellbeing of those in their local community”.

Parramatta City Council nominated Arrupe Place for the award which was presented to Maeve Brown, The Shelter Project Coordinator, in a ceremony at NSW Parliament House.

Ms Brown said the award was a fitting tribute to the Shelter Project team, both volunteers and staff, for their dedication, compassion, and hard work.

“Many people seeking asylum are isolated in the community, and providing them with a secure place to go for assistance makes a significant difference to their physical and mental well-being.”

“Our goal at Arrupe Place is to ensure these people can live independently and with dignity while feeling connected to the local community.”

Ms Brown acknowledged and thanked the support of JRS partners in Arrupe Place including The Australian Red Cross, The Refugee Advice and Casework Service (RACS) and The Sisters of Mercy Parramatta, as well as the sisters of Charity and Sisters of the Good Samaritan.



Maeve Brown with the Award

cont from p1 There are claims that Christians are under-represented in the Syrian refugee camps, because the camps are dominated by Muslims and therefore unsafe for Christians. Further, it is claimed that it is only in the camps that the UNHCR, tasked with identifying those most in need of resettlement, registers refugees. This is patently not the truth. There are 1.3 million Syrian refugees registered with the UNHCR in Lebanon: all of them live in the Lebanese community, as there are no Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon. How are Christians being excluded from resettlement for not being in camps in Lebanon, when in fact no Syrian refugee - Muslim, Christian, or otherwise - is in a camp?

Of the 633,000 refugees registered by

the UNHCR in Jordan as of November this year, only 20 percent live in the two refugee camps in that country. It is clear that the UNHCR registration is not limited to camp refugees even in a country such as Jordan, where two camps do in fact exist.

Let us be clear: lurking under all the justifications for privileging Christians is a toxic fear and dislike of Muslims. The UNHCR guidelines for resettlement are there for a reason: those who need resettlement, when this option is available, are the most vulnerable and weak in a refugee population, namely children and teenagers; women at risk; people with urgent medical needs; the elderly; victims of torture and trauma; split families; et al. None of these should be subject to a religious test.

As several Muslim commentators have said in the Australian media, you do not ask a drowning person her religion before rescuing her.

The Christian church is not placed on earth to preserve itself, or to promote its own wellbeing. It is a sacramental presence, a sign of God’s loving purposes for all of His creation. If we celebrate anything at all at Christmas, it is the supreme sign of God’s love for humanity: the coming of Jesus, the Eternal Son made flesh. It is that same Jesus who was so challenged by the desperation and love of a mother that he moved beyond the prejudices and anxieties that good and pious Jews felt towards non-Jews. Let us who call ourselves Christians do likewise with the Other in our midst.



Make a difference. **Please act now.**

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Donations of \$2 or more are tax deductible

Please return to:

Jesuit Refugee Service

PO Box 522, Kings Cross NSW 1340

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Christmas Appeal

The increasing number of people seeking asylum living in the community on bridging visas, rather than in detention centres, has led to a growing demand for support services to help them live independently and with dignity.

The JRS Shelter Project provides casework support, emergency financial relief, temporary accommodation, home visits, free legal assistance, foodbank, and English classes.

The increase in demand for services has led to the opening of a second community centre adjacent to Arrupe Place in Parramatta.

This Christmas marks a turning point in the development of our programmes for people seeking asylum. There is an opportunity to build on Arrupe Place's reputation as a safe haven, and increase our provision of day-to-day essentials for those living in the community.

JRS receives no government funding. Our work is completely dependent on donations made by people like you.

If you'd like to help support our work this Christmas please go to:

www.jrs.org.au/donate-now/

\$40 for an Opal Card for train / bus costs help asylum seekers travel to appointments with lawyers, doctors, and potential employers.

\$50 provides a family with a supermarket voucher for essentials such as rice, flour, tea, and fresh vegetables for the week.

\$150 is the fortnightly allowance for the food, travel, and medical needs of asylum seekers living in the JRS Blaiket Shelter.

\$450 assists a family seeking asylum with their basic weekly living expenses including rent, food, travel, and medical needs.

social media

Follow JRS: Facebook or Twitter

We track and highlight the latest in policies and attitudes for people seeking asylum, not just in Australia but around the world. Let us know what you think at:

 www.facebook.com/JRSAustralia

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donate

How your donation will help

General donations to Arrupe Place will directly fund:

Emergency assistance, food vouchers, casework services, home visiting services, legal advice, social support.

link online

Would you like to receive Link online?

Sign up for our electronic newsletter at www.jrs.org.au

Jesuit Refugee Service Australia • ph: 02 9356 3888 • fax: 02 9356 3021 • email: info@jrs.org.au • web: www.jrs.org.au

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Jesuit Refugee Service Australia
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Kings Cross NSW 1340

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