

## Sites of Refuge

Father Jason Dy, a Jesuit priest from the Philippines has been studying the Arts for the last 3 years at Liverpool Hope University. He has a special calling to somehow make the most public places an expression of the Sacred. At Christmas 2015, he worked with Mission in the Economy on a project he called Sites of Refuge. He reflected on how trees can be a refuge for all sorts of living creatures. 'Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.' (Hesse, H. (1980) *Wandering*, Wright, J. trans. London: Picador)

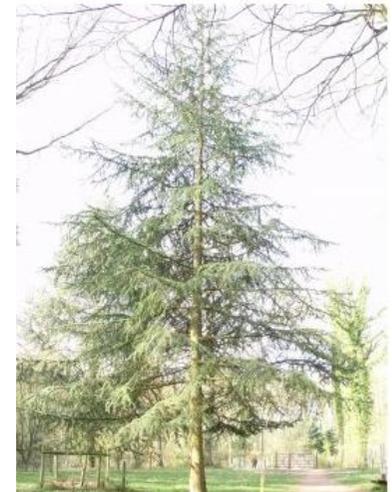
Refuge seemed a particularly poignant theme as people the world over were moved by images of desperate people taking to the sea in boats to escape the horrors of a war that here we hardly understand never mind experience. A drowned toddler, the elderly wheelchair-bound stuck in a muddy field in the middle of nowhere, despairing parents pleading – 'we are human' and even 'thank you' as their feet

touched land they believed would be their refuge. Fr Jason was also motivated by the plight of his fellow Filipinos whose homes and livelihoods were swept away by the recent flood.

The Cedar of Lebanon tree (a tree that originates in Syria) was acquired over the internet!

In its place next to the Liverpool city centre crib it proved to be, if only momentarily, a place of refuge for many who stopped to leave a prayer – prayers which expressed all human needs but especially the human need for the Other. Shortly after Christmas the prayers were burnt and their ashes placed with the tree as it was replanted in the Quaker Peace Garden in the heart of the 'City of Sanctuary' which is Liverpool. <https://liverpool.cityofsanctuary.org/>

A symbol of refuge, the tree opened its branches and received prayers on behalf of its Creator from all sorts of people, from all walks of life, from across the world and from around the corner.





The little girl who wished her grandad wasn't 'ded'.

The elderly man mourning the loss of his beloved wife and needing the strength to cope with his disabled daughter alone.

Other prayers:

'Please pray for me. My asylum claim is in process. Please pray they grant me asylum.'

"Praying for A and my dog L who have their feet up in heaven'.

'Pray for all the misplaced and broken-hearted seeking refuge this year.x'

'Please let my daddy get a new job so that I can see him every day'

'I hope B's baby comes out alright'.

'Dear God Can I live with Nannie P if I can't live with mummy?'

'Dear Holy Mary Mother of God save our children from being taken by social services'.

'Please pray for the 9 children in my care that I do what's right by God. Amen. Thank you

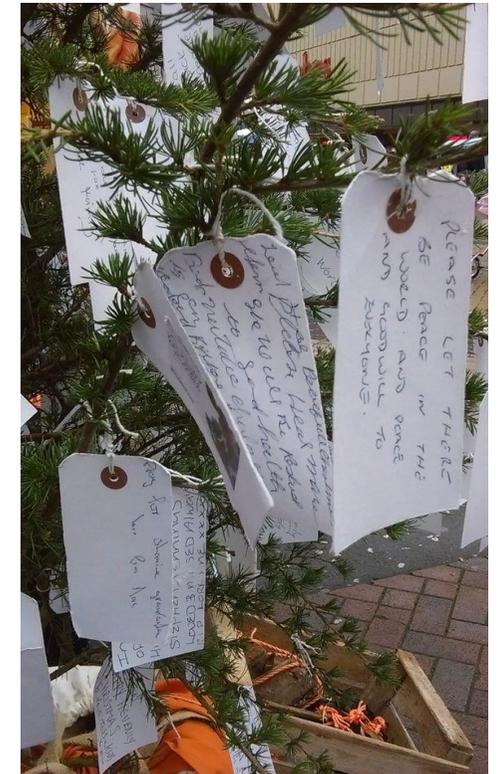
'Love your parents for all they do'.

'Oh my God, I will take the SQA exam for Chief Mates on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of this month. God, please help me to pass this time in the exam'.

'For W and children, her husband and father has left. Having an affair. Broken hearts'.

'Happy Christmas L, bro. Hope you have a good one mate RIP from A'.

'Christ our Lord Just think! God making his home with the poor. Let's pray that our poor find a home'.



At the Sites of Refuge thanksgiving ceremony we thanked all those who had volunteered to help others to write their prayers, to tie them to the tree, to listen to their story, to pray with them. They each, if only for a moment in time, became a site of refuge, a place of sanctuary.

We also thanked others who work hard across the city to create sites of refuge for refugees, asylum seekers, the homeless and the destitute – Hope+ Food Bank, Asylum Link, Whitechapel Centre, City of Sanctuary, St John’s Market Refugee Stall, Liverpool Friends.

It is ironic that Jesus, the ultimate, eternal ‘site of refuge’ peace and sanctuary for us all, found his place of refuge in his sacrificial completion of his Father’s task on a tree – a tree at the heart of holiness. We have much to learn from trees!

It is a delight to experience the diversity of humanity drawn to Liverpool city centre – and why wouldn’t they be?! As a passionate scouser I am entranced by those I meet there.



Then there was the man with a little dog dressed as Father Christmas – the dog not the man – who photographed Cleo, ‘the best

dog in Liverpool’ in several different outfits with the nativity as a backdrop!



A group of girls from Nottingham

were collecting for children with cancer. They had to prove they had made it to Liverpool. They thought the best way would be to film us singing a Beatles song in our scouse accents along with some ladies visiting the crib who joined in!

Football fans all the way from Bordeaux who dressed our nativity figures in their hats and scarves.

A dad explaining the nativity to his daughter ‘It’s only a story but it’s a good story about redemption and hope’.



The young lad collecting for Alder Hey hospital. Naked except for a pair of shorts and trainers. This in spite of driving rain and the freezing cold which meant that he

couldn't 'feel anything anymore'!

Lots of people enjoyed 'getting in the picture' even though many



weren't certain who the characters even were!

We are always amazed by the generosity of scousers and the many visitors to Liverpool – they brought tons of offerings including bags of shopping, thousands of pounds, clothes, shoes, toys, chocolates, wellies and a table top ironing board! This generosity even extended to an invitation to Christmas lunch for my volunteering husband from a kindly church lady who thought he looked in need of a decent meal. Que new clothes for him for Christmas!



The project extended to the Baltic Creative area of our hospitable city. Here Fr Jason and Revd Laura Pasterfield

from Baltic Blessings created a shack from building detritus – corrugated iron, bits of wood etc. as would anybody without a home seeking refuge from the storms battering their walls.

The bewilderment of humanity in despair was echoed in the words of Psalm 77 written on the walls of the hut.



'Has God forgotten to be merciful?' But after much anguish and longing:

'Everything you do, O God, is holy.

No god is as great as you.

You are the God who works miracles;

You showed your might among the nations'.

Many stories touched our hearts and many different groups shared the task of highlighting the real meaning of Christmas to people from Halifax, Shrewsbury, Stoke, Nottingham and Lyon – and that was on only one of the Saturdays. Singers from 2 local primary schools moved hearts. Young 'stags' on their night out in Beatles wigs made us smile. The travellers surrounding us selling 'lucky lavender' drove us to call the B.I.D. police. Worshippers from the Blessed Sacrament shrine shared the rosary with us. The Sisters of Mercy fought a losing battle with huge umbrellas as they sang carols in the persistent pouring rain and howling wind.

The wonderful puppets from 'In Another Place' fascinated so many including the Rector of Liverpool our MitE Chaplains.



Vocal Infinity out did the myriads of buskers who target Liverpool at Christmas providing a sound like no other except that in the midst of the mayhem we could still hear the still small voice that signals the greatest gift .

Christmas a story of Love.

Gallant helpers from Primark helped us move our Tree of Refuge to  
its new home.

Prayers here.