

The account of Ali Alsaho whose wife and seven children drowned in the sea off Western Turkey last week was unbearable. “The smugglers are traitors” he said “they said we would reach Greece in 15 minutes”, “they said the children would not need life jackets”. His whole family died, trapped under the deck of the boat when the engine failed.

During the season of Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, Christians listen to the voices of the Hebrew prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos. Yahweh’s words to a people often without refuge, enduring persecution, constantly on the move.

the approaching story of Christmas is of Mary and Joseph becoming refugees after giving birth in dangerous circumstances to a baby who grew up to change the course of world history. The real Christmas celebrates the divine in a humanity that is both messy and miraculous. And this real Christmas story is this year is being played out in front of us in family after family climbing into boats to flee from tyranny.

This Christmas in our church in central London, we are working with the war artist Arabella Dorman. We have, with the agreement of Greek authorities, shipped a dinghy from the island of Lesbos that arrived there with 62 refugees on board earlier this winter. Together with life jackets, the dinghy will be suspended in mid-air in the nave of the church for our Christmas services next week. The nave of any church is the main space, where all the people sit, and is named after the Latin word for a boat. Our Christmas congregations will pray in the presence of this dinghy, and will sing the traditional carols, knowing that the Christmas story has as much violence in it as it has love.

It is difficult to imagine human beings more powerless than children locked under the deck of a sinking boat with no life jackets. The toxic combination of the abuse of power and the pursuit of profit put those children there with no chance of escape. And for those of us who on a global scale have more money and power than many others, we’ll be reminded again by the Christmas story that our pursuit of these twin goals is as dangerous as it is aspirational. Both spiritually and practically the challenge presented to us by Christmas is to give ourselves away.

Points to discuss:

1. The author speaks of how Mary and Joseph were refugees in dangerous circumstances. When
2. In this church they are placing a boat to remind them of the Syrian refugees. What do you think we can have as a school to constantly remind us?
3. What does “abuse of power” mean? And “pursuit of profit”?