

On Wednesday 11th May 2016, the Holyport Scholars Programme was launched. We welcomed students from both Wycombe Abbey School and Eton College to join an audience of 80 in the Dudley Room to listen to Kate McCarey and Federico Motka. Below is Greg Simond's report on the lecture 'Leaky Boats: The Challenges of Syria'.

The Human Survival Instinct "Takes Over" in a Way That is Unimaginable.

Our first scholars' lecture was about a topic that has generated much controversy over the past year. The refugee crisis. The lecture, given by Federico Motka and Kate McCarey aimed to give us a considered and balanced view of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria. And it certainly did.

Since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Syrian residents have been fleeing their homes due to the violence and dangerous living conditions in their country. These dangerous conditions are a result of the contention between the Assad government, rebel groups, ethnic groups and Islamic extremists. The conflict has caused a lot of collateral and intentional damage that directly affects the innocent citizens by killing them, injuring them and destroying their homes. A victim – as defined by the Oxford English dictionary – is *A person harmed, injured, or killed as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action.* I think this term is perfectly appropriate for these people, which is why I will be referring to them as victims from now on.

This merciless war leads its victims to flee for their safety, leaving behind their entire lives, where they had once been part of a thriving community. But where do they go? Turkey is the principal destination – having already welcomed 2.7 million Syrian refugees. But a country can only welcome so many people. The victims then start reaching further away until they are confronted by the Mediterranean Sea. They desperately want to get across so they pack themselves in vast numbers onto non-seaworthy inflatables, which aren't equipped for crossing a sea. This obviously leads to many deaths, including the death of 3 year old Aylan Kurdi who was found washed up on a beach in Turkey as a result of an unsuccessful attempt to reach Greece. A picture of him quickly became viral on social media and made the news in many countries, such as the UK, where the picture hugely contributed to the press' shift in attitude towards "immigrants", whom they rightfully started calling "refugees".

The United Nations has identified 13.5 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance. This is where Federico comes in. Federico has been an aid worker since 2006, starting with the UN development programme in Fiji. He then joined humanitarian aid in 2007 with French agency ACTED where he went to Sri Lanka to work with the internally displaced during the civil war. This is when he started specialising in emergency response programming. Since then he has been to India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Peru, South Sudan and more recently he has been working with various international agencies in Jordan, Iraq and Syria where he spent a lot of time organising refugee camps. He noticed that refugee camps weren't lacking in supplies but were, however, lacking a community. He spoke to a few of the refugees and asked them why they wouldn't go back to their homes. They told him that there was nothing to go back to, that everything was destroyed. This led Federico to take a decision that would have a huge impact. He decided to go to the Atmeh Camp, which is situated in northern Syria – east of the border with Turkey.

On March 12, 2013, after spending a day talking to community groups at the Atmeh camp, Federico, along with his colleague and friend David Haines, was kidnapped by a gang who later sold them to ISIS. Federico briefly mentioned this in the lecture but didn't elaborate, which is understandable considering the conditions he was under. He mentioned that in such circumstances, the human survival instinct "takes over" in a way that is unimaginable.

To keep themselves sane, the hostages gave each other lectures about various topics such as a sailing lesson, which was given by Federico.

I wanted to know more about this particular phase of his time in Syria so I looked him up on the Internet, where I came across a few “unpleasant” articles describing the way that he and David had been treated by the jihadists. I also found a radio interview of him and three other men who had been captured by ISIS. The interview, called “Held Hostage in Syria” was broadcasted on BBC Radio 4 on the 19th of April 2016, just under a month before Federico gave his lecture at Holyport. I strongly recommend listening to the interview, which can be found at the following link:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/bo77kkggn>

The interview gives an insight into the way that they were captured and tortured by the jihadists. I am not going to describe this in detail as it isn't the aim of this report. The interview gets quite emotional as Federico recalls the moment when he learnt he was going to be released. He mentions that “[his] life meant [David’s] loss of a certain level of hope”. David wasn't released due to his British nationality. He became one of the aid workers who ISIS used as part of their cruel propaganda, which led to a video of him being posted on the Internet where he can be seen to get cruelly beheaded by the man known as “Jihadi John”.

“Was it worth it?”, Federico asks himself, saying that he isn't sure whether his “actions had made a difference” and that he “can't step back into the life that [he] had before”. He intends to set up a way for people to support organisations and communities around the world so that people can “make a difference in their own ways”.

What we found most admirable about Federico was his humility and honesty throughout the evening. He did not turn his story into a Hollywood tale with himself as its heroic protagonist, but instead focused on the story of the refugees. It wasn't a lecture about a man taken hostage, but one that was looking to inspire young people to make a difference. This was the final message from Kate and Federico: we can all make a difference.

Greg Simond