

Messages from Iraq: Karbala

from Cathy Breen, Karbala, Iraq, April 23, 2015

Dear Friends,

As I attempt a first writing for this trip to Iraq, Kurdistan and Turkey, I ask myself if there is a salient theme, or themes, emerging. Perhaps they would be: family, war and refugees.



I am presently in Karbala which is housing approximately 70,000 refugees, the majority from Nineveh (Mosel) and Anbar. As I traveled by car two days ago from Najaf to Karbala, the road was lined with makeshift tent-like structures, pieces of cloth to provide some privacy and shelter

Last night I attended a local home-meeting of volunteers who are trying to attend to the needs of the refugees. I was allowed to sit in to hear about the work they are coordinating. The group had been informed that I was from the U.S. and involved in humanitarian work. I introduced myself, trying to be brief. I also mentioned that I was trying to get a certain medicine for an Iraqi refugee child with cerebral palsy in Turkey. Could they help me?

"The case you just presented is just a drop in the bucket," was the reply of the first gentleman to speak. *"I have a mosque with seven families, 40 people. One of their children*

died of thirst on the way because the Kurds would give them no water. It took them seven days to get here from Erbil." Another said *"We have a family of orphans. The father, a soldier, was killed in Fallujah defending Sunnis. He did not receive any salary."*

I have written before how I often feel my presence in Iraq, as someone from the U.S., opens deep wounds. Last night was no exception. Although I am sure constrained out of respect, feelings of anger and indignation erupted throughout the room. It seemed that each person wanted to have their say. And had a right to their say to someone from the United States.

- America didn't come to Iraq to protect Iraq. They are taking money for weapons, but we still don't have weapons. We have to resort to getting weapons from Russia.
- The only good thing was the taking down of Saddam Hussein.
- The U.S. opened the way for ISIS to come in.
- We are certain that the U.S. knows what is going on.
- Does anyone speak about or care about Depleted Uranium and the increase in cancer among our people?

One man said *"I have lived in Canada and visited the U.S. The people there are simple people, controlled by the media. We are not accepted when we talk because of the way we look. You are more acceptable."*

But I too wonder if anyone will listen. How can the minds and hearts of the people in the United States be reached?

On the TV yesterday there was a funeral of a soldier in the holy shrine of Imam Hussein, venerated son of Imam Ali. The funeral was being broadcast live and afterwards the scene shifted to Imams and others going to the nearby Hussein hospital to visit the bedside of wounded soldiers. I just learned that in Tikrit it took about 3 hours to go a distance of approx. 100 yards, due to bombs placed by Daash (IS) in

doorways, trashcans, cars, under dead bodies, etc. In the space of one hour 18 soldiers were killed by such explosives!

One of the daughters in the family I am staying with is to be married in about two months. Her fiancé is in the army and stationed in Falluja.

In Najaf just a couple of days ago I was with the Dean of the College of Nursing. I met her last year and again in the U.S. when she was passing through NY city with a small delegation. She was good enough to see me on very short notice, and welcomed me graciously. When just the two of us were in conversation, I asked her how things were. *"We are a country at war"* she replied. Her nephew, she said, *"like a son to me"* is in the army in Falluja and she is worried about him. I could hear the strain in her voice. And then quite unexpectedly she asked me *"Why did you come?"* I hesitated a moment and then answered *"To see you."* She seemed, as I had been, caught unawares, but at the same time genuinely pleased by the answer.



The emotions raised in last night's meeting will be with me for some time. It seems the bonds of human friendship and solidarity have been strained almost to the breaking point. And yet the mutual gratitude and warmth in our parting last night leave no doubt that these bonds still remain.

Whenever I am able to, I assure those I meet that there are countless people who come with me on this trip to bear witness to their reality, to hear their voices and convey their words at home, and to express their deep solidarity in these desperate times.

Cathy Breen is a Catholic Worker who lives in NYC, and has

made many trips to Iraq since the first Iraq War and the imposition of draconian sanctions of Iraq in the 90s. She has been there at least twice over the last 3 years. This is the first of a series of reports she wrote during her most recent trip this spring.