

# Blessed, broken and given



Ora Duffley

giving



Hello, my name is Ora. Being Irish, my parents raised me as a cradle Catholic. They taught me to embrace my faith as the centre of my life, not just something that I do on a Sunday. I always find inspiration in Jesus' beautiful messages in the Bible.

*'Love one another as I have loved you.'* (John 15:12)

Over the past few years, through my work with *Rosies*, *Friends on the Street* and the refugee community in Logan, I've met people from all over the world – particularly from the Middle East. Hearing their stories over a cup of tea on a Friday night deepened my interest in their heritage. I have always been interested in the Middle East – Jesus was born there. Long before Christianity came to Europe or Australia, there were Christians living peacefully in the Middle East.

So I was shocked to learn what has been happening to Christians especially in Iraq and Syria since 2014. The Christian families there are just trying to live their faith like we are here and yet they are being brutally persecuted and my heart really went out to them. While their ancient Christian heritage is a wonderful blessing their churches and communities are suffering terrible oppression and suffering. As a teacher, I started to pray with my school children and together we sent Christmas gifts and messages of love to the children in Erbil, in Kurdistan, where the Christian population had fled to.

Then through a mutual friend I heard about the French Catholic mission *SOS Chrétiens d'Orient* and how they were supporting Christian families in Iraq. I felt an urge to go, and to help them. But it's a scary thing to travel for the first time into a danger zone to help people I've never met. And so I prayed. A lot! I kept thinking about these communities in Iraq who have been contributing peacefully to society for centuries. They are ordinary Christians just like me and now they are being terrorised and driven out of their homes. I could not sit in my home and do nothing. I kept thinking of the Gospel of St Matthew:

*'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me'*  
(Matthew 25:40).

So I decided that I must try to help our brothers and sisters in the Middle East. I had to trust in Jesus. I had to let go and let God.

Arriving in Iraq the first thing that struck me was the destruction. It was shocking! I had already read articles and watched news reports about the ongoing war against ISIS, but nothing could truly prepare me for what I witnessed. The cities in the Nineveh Plains - Qaraqosh, Karemles, Teleskuf, Bartella – all in ruins, ravaged by war. Buildings were abandoned and beautiful churches were desecrated. Even statues had been beheaded.

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It was absolutely horrific. Families had been forced from their homes and were living in makeshift tents, too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter. I witnessed children too sick to move, whose families have lost everything and were now sleeping together on the floor.

But in these dismal living conditions I saw the true goodness of our Church. Families were surviving through the charity of our Church. SOSCO works hand in hand with local people on the ground, combining prayer with hands on support. We assist in whatever way we can providing emergency aid, educational resources, construction tools, washing machines, cookers, furniture, water filters, medical and hygiene packs, toys and food. For one of our projects we were able to provide clean, safe water. Up until that point there had not been any in the village of Teleskuf. It was another step forward, another sign of hope that life can get back to normal.

Above all, I was amazed by the warmth, resourcefulness and resilience of the Iraqi people. Despite the harsh existence cast upon them through no fault of their own, they make the best of what they have. They continue to find ways to smile, to laugh and play. Their hospitality is like none I've ever experienced before. I loved visiting the families, sitting down, having a cup of tea and hearing their stories. Their situation is traumatising but their faith is so strong. It touched my heart praying with them. I was also moved by how much my companionship meant to them. They couldn't believe that I had come all the way from Australia to be with them. I loved playing with the children. We worked in many camps where the children didn't have many toys. In the volunteer house we had to come up with lots of ideas of what we would do that day, like face-painting and hopscotch on the ground. But this is no way for a child to grow up, without a decent education, without a proper home, without loved ones, many of whom have been killed or have simply disappeared since Daesh (ISIS) destroyed their peaceful existence and its soldiers overran the Nineveh Plains in 2014. Again and again, I listened through tears, as old women relived the horror of living with ISIS who took their village.

I met a priest near Mosul who was trying to encourage his parishioners to return home to their village. I joined a team of volunteers and we travelled to the once-thriving Christian town of Qaraqosh. Their church had once been the pride of the town, the heart of the parish where people had gone to worship, a place they loved. When we arrived, we discovered that the church had been bombed and burnt out. I will never forget standing there on the ground, tears flowing from my eyes, overwhelmed by the hateful destruction. On Palm Sunday, I attended the first Mass held in the church's ruins since Qaraqosh was abandoned in 2014. Returning families filled the church, including women dressed in colourful traditional clothing, flanked by a special unit of Christian soldiers. I offered a prayer that one day this city, its people and its churches will once again flourish.

SOSCO volunteers continue helping the Iraqi communities to rebuild their parishes, step by step: repainting the churches, cleaning them out, rebuilding, and getting rid of all the graffiti by ISIS. I plan to return to northern Iraq to continue volunteering with SOSCO. But more volunteers are needed – especially carpenters, plumbers, electricians and other skilled tradespeople who can assist the massive rebuilding underway and train young Iraqis to rebuild their villages. Recently in the town of Qaraqosh, the local bishop and priests, in conjunction with SOSCO, laid the foundation stone for the rebuilding of the first 50 houses in the town.

Thank you for listening to my story about my new Christian friends in Iraq. Please join me in praying for our brothers and sisters in the Middle East, and please consider how you might give your assistance to them in these most difficult days. Light can always prevail over darkness, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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