

Bideford, Landcross, Littleham, Monkleigh & Weare Giffard

Mission Community

TARKA Community Refugee Sponsors

Together Aiding Refugees, Kindly, Abidingly

When I first arrived at the so-called Calais 'Jungle' earlier last year, I really didn't know what to expect. The Revd Ben Luck had gone before me, but nothing prepares you for the experience to come. True, I had spent time in the Amputee Camp, Freetown, Sierra Leone, as their rebel war was coming to a close. But, that was full of the laughter of happy children and friends, even when the rain came down in stair-rod! No, here in Calais, life was much more sombre; largely young men, tense, anxious. And yet, when I spent my days listening to their life stories, even they were full of hope. Indeed, '*Never forget your dreams*' was their strap-line. But would life ever return to 'normal'? Or, was it just the dream of Utopia?

Then, one Sunday in October, something amazing happened. It was announced in the national media, that Great Torrington was hosting the first group of teenage boy refugees from Calais. Devon County Council had received a couple of days notice; the local authorities and services, even less. There was concern amongst some locals about what was happening, but far, far more was the goodwill. Indeed, the Mayor of Great Torrington stood out as a beacon of welcome and hope for these children.

The youngsters actually stayed just outside the town; within our Mission Community, only two miles down the road from where I write. During their stay many, many people worked to make them feel welcome and safe. North Devon Refugee Solidarity (NDRS), one of our partners, helped to provide clothing – particularly trainers. Which boy does not want trainers – especially when they have travelled alone across the European continent in a pair of flip-flops! The Plough theatre provided a drop-off for gifts in-kind, and a meeting place for us to co-ordinate the response. The police provided security, with the (unnecessary, in hindsight,) concern that boys might run for it to reach their families before all health and safeguarding checks were complete. The police ended up playing football with them and, reportedly, were thrashed! A doctor, on crutches after an operation, arrived daily to deal with health issues; whilst social workers attended their other needs. The boys were actually in the charge of Home Office representative charity Catch 22. They were brilliant. The Mayor and NDRS organised a peaceful vigil of welcome and support. The Plough welcomed them to a film show. And, so a month went by. By then the youngsters had been taken to join family elsewhere in the UK, or to Home Office approved foster parents – six to private homes, here in Devon. They went with bags containing new clothes, books, art & writing materials. Some had Exeter FC shirts, others guitars...

We had a washup meeting to share experiences. Devon CC & Torrington Town councillors were there; along with professional health and social carers and communications experts; the police; NDRS and our Mission Community TARKA Community Refugee Sponsors. The spirit was infectious, we learnt a lot together, and when I sought views on our initiative, overseen by Landcross Parish Church, for encouraging people of all faiths and none to participate in welcoming and supporting Syrian refugee families, the response was, "Get on with it!".

That led me back to '*Never Forget Your Dreams*'; to reflecting; and praying. And, I recalled that a lawyer once stood up to test Jesus, saying, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said, 'What is written in the law?' The lawyer answered, 'You shall

love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' Jesus said , 'Do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, 'Who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. By chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, whilst travelling, came near; and when he saw him, was moved with pity. He bandaged his wounds; he put him on his donkey, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' The lawyer said, 'The one who showed mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

'Do likewise...'

Well, with the backing of our Archdeacon we, the five churches of our Mission Community, are doing likewise. We are coming to the aid of a Syrian refugee family, who have been *stripped* of their home; *beaten* with bombs and terror; and *left half dead*. We will welcome them and settle them in a safe home, here in North Devon. Moreover, we will tell our family, our friends, our neighbours; people of all faiths and none, that 'this is what we do'. Then, we'll do it all again, to help a second family...

Our initiative, TARKA Community Refugee Sponsors, is open to all who wish to help refugees and who live in, work in, or simply love '*the country of the two rivers*' immortalised in *Tarka the Otter*, the tale of a 'refugee' family of otters, written by Henry Williamson, who was married here, in Landcross church. TARKA Community is open to people of all faiths and none. So, please, please support TARKA Community; ABIDE, in Ottery St Mary, or any community setting out to welcome and resettle Syrian refugees.

Thanks to the diocesan Mission and Growth fund we already have enough to welcome our first family. We are now searching for two 3/4 bedroom houses in the area surrounding the rivers Taw and Torridge. The Syrian families will pay the local market rental for a lease of two years, with us helping when necessary. We need furniture, appliances, household goods...and more, for two family homes. NDRS is leading our giving in-kind campaign. We also need your donations to help our second Syrian family. So, please help. We are a charity regulated by the Charity Commission.