

## Refugee Week

The 20<sup>th</sup> of June was designated by the United Nations in 2000 as World Refugee Day. Refugee Week, which takes place around that day, started earlier in 1998 as a direct reaction to hostility in the media and society in general towards refugees and asylum seekers. In the United Kingdom, Refugee Week is a nationwide programme of arts, cultural and educational events that celebrate the contribution of refugees to our country, and encourages a better understanding between different communities. It is thus right for us to focus on refugees and asylum seekers in our time of prayer today.

Migration in general and refugees in particular are of course a hot topic of debate – as the build up to yesterday's referendum exemplifies. If we peel away all the misinformation and prejudice there is the very real problem of people who are forced to flee their country in fear of their lives. There are of course those who seek refuge in other countries for different reasons, but can one blame those who just want better lives for themselves and their families.

Refugees and asylum seekers are of course not a new issue. There are countless examples in the course of human history, and you only have to read the Old Testament to see how God's people both had to react to refugees and were indeed refugees themselves.

The passage we just heard from St Matthew's Gospel is more generally about those in need and in today's context the strangers to which Jesus refers surely include refugees and asylum seekers. Our Lord pulls no punches and his strong words are very challenging. He makes it quite clear that it is a prime Christian duty to help those in any kind of material need. And of course the Church as a body and individual Christians have been at the forefront of charity and social care down the centuries.

The important thing is that refugees are treated as people, as individuals. So often in the media they are considered simply as statistics, as a problem. The root causes leading people to leave their homes and countries of course must be addressed. But such people have immediate needs that have to be met, needs literally of life or death. And those who help such people need support too. That was certainly a message that came out of the recent pilgrimage to Greece that I took part in.

And so we hold before God all refugees and asylum seekers and those who work so tirelessly for their welfare.

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Kingsley Boulton*