For the first time in my life I was called for jury service last month. For most of my professional life, along with convicts and the insane, the clergy have been debarred from being members of a jury. But a few years ago the Government changed the rules and I found myself in court, in a manner of speaking. And pretty imposing it was too. I was intimidated by the formality of the court and the solemnity of its proceedings, and I wasn’t the one in the dock.

These days in the run-up to Christmas are frenetic. We experience excitement and panic in equal measure as we search for presents, write Christmas cards, plan esoteric menus and make arrangements to see family or the first time in my life I was called for jury service last month. For most of my professional life, along with convicts and the insane, the clergy have been debarred from being members of a jury. But a few years ago the Government changed the rules and I found myself in court, in a manner of speaking. And pretty imposing it was too. I was intimidated by the formality of the court and the solemnity of its proceedings, and I wasn’t the one in the dock.

These days in the run-up to Christmas are frenetic. We experience excitement and panic in equal measure as we search for presents, write Christmas cards, plan esoteric menus and make arrangements to see family and friends. But underneath the glitz and glitter of December are echoes of a more sombre season during which Christians have contemplated the so-called ‘four last things’: death, judgement, heaven and hell. The readings and prayers of Advent are full of courtroom imagery and the language of judgement.

Years ago I remember visiting an exhibition of Russian icons. The last icon was of the Last Judgement. The face of Jesus Christ looked out at me, almost into me, holding my attention with a deep penetrating gaze. In his left hand was an open Bible on which was inscribed a text of scripture in Old Slavonic which the little notice beside the icon informed me was Matthew 11.28. I would like to say that I immediately knew what the text was, but I am ashamed to say I had to look it up in my Bible when I got home later that day. The choice of text took me by surprise: ‘Come to me all you who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.’

We picture the Last Judgement as being in the dock with God like a High Court judge calling us to account and then sentencing us. But perhaps that Russian Orthodox icon is closer to the truth. God is the compassionate one who reaches out to us exhausted souls and invites us to find our rest in Him.

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Across the world, more than 63 million people are displaced and living as refugees; one person in every 113 has had to flee their homes due to fighting, persecution or climate change. This is four times higher than in 2005. This rise has led some communities in Devon to reach out and welcome refugees.

The TARKA Community Refugee Sponsorship project in the Bideford, Landcross, Littleham, Monkleigh and Wear Giffard Mission Community was awarded £10,000 by the diocesan Mission and Growth Fund towards the cost of supporting a Syrian family relocating to the UK. The support team has seen over 2,000 people; has found the family a new home; and now will be helping them to speak fluent English, find schools, jobs, new friends…

Bishop Sarah said: “When Jesus was asked ‘Who is my neighbour?’ he replied with the tale of a Samaritan and his donkey helping a stranger left for dead. Jesus ended saying, ‘Go and do likewise.’ “We think especially of refugees at Christmas time. At the heart of the bible is the call for us to help those in trouble: ‘Feed the hungry, and help those in need. The Rt Rev Robert Atwell Bishop of Exeter

As we celebrate the birth of our saviour this month, some of our church communities are reaching out to welcome refugees.

A Syrian refugee family. Photo by Russell Watkins/OXFAM

You will find TARKA Community Refugee Sponsors at https://www.facebook.com/groups/TARKArefugees/

The image of a light shining in the darkness is very powerful at this time of the year and no more needed than with those who are seeking refuge from violence, oppression and poverty. When Jesus called us to be light he called us not only to welcome those who are like us but also the stranger, he calls us not only to love our neighbour but also those not known to us. Welcoming those who are refugees is a light which shines in the darkness.”

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The Growing the Rural Church Project has had an exciting and inspiring first year. As we have got to know rural Mission Communities, we have seen how local people have their fingers on the pulse of their community. They are there when a lift to hospital is needed, when the cakes need baking or the grass cutting, to welcome people in to Messy Church, and when an offer of prayer makes all the difference.

In this context, the Growing the Rural Church Project is providing opportunities for our rural churches to reflect on their relationships with their communities and consider how they are praying, enabling people to learn more about our faith, and meeting the needs of those around them. We are supporting congregations both to bless their communities and to draw them in to the life of the church community. Through our pilot projects, we are seeing churches developing ideas for community shops, retreat spaces and business centres. Some are now even offering church camping through the Churches Conservation Trusts’ Champing™ partnership.

None of these activities are without challenge and, as we learn and develop, we are sharing our resources on our webpages at http://exeter.anglican.org/resources/growing-rural-church. Please do take a look.

As Christmas approaches, we will be celebrating what our wonderful rural churches are up to by making a video we can share on our website. But – we need your help! Using your smart phone, make a maximum 20 second video telling us how your rural church, youth group, Messy Church, local school or community are celebrating and sharing the good news of Christmas in 2017. For every video we receive, we will donate £1 to the Farming Community Network and as many of your clips as possible will be included in our final video. For instructions on how to send your video to us, please visit exeter.anglican.org/resources/growing-rural-church/christmas-video

Dean Jonathan Greener comes to Exeter with a track record in leading and looking after Cathedrals; at Wakefield Cathedral, of which he was Dean for ten years, he carried out the biggest makeover of any Cathedral in recent times, raising millions of pounds to do so.

He felt called from an early age, as a child growing up in Reigate, Surrey. “It was Evensong in my parish church which stole my heart” he says, though religious life does run in the family, as his grandmother was a Roman Catholic nun who ran away from her convent in Malta to marry his grandfather.

After graduating from university he went to work in his father’s hearing aid factory. It was his mother’s diagnosis with Alzheimers that made him think seriously about whether he was called to ministry and within months of beginning to explore this, he had been recommended for ordination.

Most of his life he felt called to be a monk, he said. After serving as a bishop’s chaplain in Truro he went to be a vicar in Brighton and was determined afterwards to leave for a monastery. When he was asked to be Archdeacon of Pontefract he at first said no – until a friend advised him the Church needed people to serve in the world.

It was at a Bishops Council meeting in the diocese of Wakefield that he met his wife, Pamela. She has risen to fame thanks to her ‘VAT’ ditty which forced the then Chancellor George Osborne to change his mind over imposing VAT on church repairs.

The Greeners come to Exeter with a determination to build up the Christian community of the Cathedral and to build on the Cathedral’s ministry of welcome to visitors and worshippers.

“I want people in all Devon’s parish churches to feel they have a relationship with the Cathedral”

“We are not here for us, but for the whole of Devon and we need to ensure people want to come here. And I want people in all Devon’s parish churches to feel they have a relationship with the Cathedral,” he said.