

## *January 2014 Newsletter*

Dear Friends,

Part of our recent trip to India involved our first ever visit to Father Eric's home city of Mangalore. For 7 years he has been telling us that Mangalore is 'Paradise on Earth'! Whilst the actual city itself was very interesting, it was the people we met who transported us to a different place entirely, a world of humility, love, service and faith. For 3 nights we stayed with friends of Father Eric, a lovely family who couldn't do enough to look after us and make us feel comfortable and at home. Eric's mother and sister with whom we stayed for just one night prepared a feast of so many delicious dishes. We felt fit to burst at the end of the evening.

Father Muller's hospital, the main hospital in Mangalore, was founded by a German Jesuit approx. 150 years ago and began as a hospital for lepers. In those days leprosy was prolific and thousands of people were affected by this disease. Father Muller's successful treatment was based on homeopathy. Although leprosy is now curable if treated early enough, we met several long term patients with quite extreme deformities. The old building that used to look after many more patients, now houses a workshop employing mentally handicapped inpatients who make cards and crafts to sell for the leprosy mission.



One of Father Eric's sisters, Sister Aileen, is in charge of all the nurses at Father Muller's hospital. Here are some of our ex-Manvi pupils who are now student nurses in their first year of a nursing degree.

Father Eric has sent many seriously ill people from Manvi and Pannur, as well as children born with deformities, to this hospital where his sister has arranged whatever treatment they need at no expense at all. These people can't afford hospital care locally, so without Father Eric and his sister, they wouldn't have had any treatment at all.

A great moment for us was when we met Samadhani, another student from Xavier school who, like the nursing students pictured above, is in her first year of a nursing degree. We met this strong minded girl back in 2009 whilst visiting her village of Umali Hosur. Father Eric asked her, very much tongue in cheek, why education should be for girls as well as boys? He told her that surely girls should just stay behind at home and wash the pots and pans! Well, Samadhani rose up to this challenge with such conviction, arguing vehemently with Father Eric about how girls should be equal to boys. We nick-named her Indira Gandhi after that and we have been following her progress ever since. To meet her this time on her final stage of education, with her group of friends whom we also knew from Manvi, was an



incredibly joyful moment.

Also in Mangalore, we felt privileged to meet the Carmelite Sisters who never leave their cloistered monastery. They are an Order of nuns who serve the local and wider community through constant prayer and devotion; people also visit them to ask for specific prayers. One Sister receives the public when they arrive, her name is Sister Jacinta. Her beaming smile and loving welcome touched me greatly. We later found out that she is suffering with terminal cancer. The other Sisters there who all know the Manvi Fathers very well, showered us with the same love and laughter. The last very elderly Sister we met, Sister Leticia, has been bed-ridden for 2 years and is very frail. As with the other Sisters, she took hold of our hands and with her face lit up with a gentle smile, she said she would pray for us, and would we pray for her. The Sisters, like all the Fathers, radiate their inner happiness and laughter to everybody they meet. They were all very inspiring.

The 13 hour over-night bus ride from Mangalore to Manvi was an interesting journey to say the least ..... Peter booked a lower bunk bed, 5ft 10" long so his size 11 feet had to stick out into the aisle. Lenka (a Slovakian friend and NGO manager) and I shared a double cabin because Peter and I had slept so badly the last time we had travelled in a double cabin, so Peter's thinking was that he would sleep much better in a single bunk this time. However, what we didn't realise when booking the tickets is that his berth was over the wheel and this particular bus had lost its suspension a long time ago. Just before we left, Peter leant out of the window and told the family who had come to see us off that he felt like he was in prison! From 6 p.m. and throughout the entire night, every time there was a bump in the road he felt like he was being kicked in the back by a donkey. To make matters worse, one of the Fathers lay above him, peacefully snoring all night. Peter lay awake cursing under his breath until 5.30 a.m. before quietly asking Lenka and me if there was any room at the inn. With that we became sardines in a can, all lying on our sides and squashed up as this was the only way to fit 3 in a berth! Thankfully Peter then managed to sleep for a couple of hours.



On reaching Manvi, our first evening was spent in Pannur celebrating an evening of dance and entertainment by the 26 hostel children who are all attending Loyola Kapepaladi school. The hostel day celebration was a great occasion. The children sang and performed dances and comedy sketches, and we shared a lovely meal of chicken biryani afterwards. These young children are all thriving in the hostel; they are being given loving care and a good routine. We also met several young Dalit men who have started their driving courses that we have helped to sponsor.

When we arrived in Pannur we had half an hour to spare before the celebrations started so I asked if we could visit the home of Nobel Raj, a Manvi sixth form student who I noticed hadn't been at school that day. It turned out that he had been off school for a couple of days in fact, helping his father to take their cotton harvest to the local market to sell. The harvest this year has been excellent; the rains came at the right time and produced excellent yields. But there is a twist sadly as this abundant supply of cotton has brought the prices right down. Nobel Raj talked about his family's financial problems following his sister's wedding 2 years ago - these same problems affect every Dalit family with older children. Marriage throughout India is a status symbol, and Dalit parents also feel honour bound to take out a loan in order to give their child a decent wedding. They don't have bank accounts so their only choice is to borrow from corrupt landlords. The landlords, well aware of the Dalit's vulnerability, charge extortionate rates of interest so the loan becomes a great mill stone around the family's neck; even the interest is a challenge to pay.

It is no use trying to tell a poor farmer that he shouldn't be paying all this money for a wedding as these families are illiterate and feel that they must keep their honour by following the family and community tradition. The costs of Nobel Raj's sister's wedding (£400), is tiny in relation to the cost of a normal Indian wedding, but to a Dalit family earning between 200 and 300 rupees per day (£2 - £3), assuming both parents are still working, there isn't much left over after buying food. Debts like this bring about bonded labour where parents and their children end up having to work for the landlord to help repay a loan. The suicide rate is very high in North Karnataka, especially amongst the small farming community. Sometimes parents are so desperate that they take their young children's lives before taking their own. Many students in Manvi and Pannur have lost a parent through either illness or suicide.

Families that are lucky enough to own an acre or two of their own land, are reliant each year on the natural elements giving them a harvest that will sustain them throughout the year. Irrigation in times of drought is impossible as Dalit families' land is the cheapest and therefore the furthest away from any local water source. Many times we have seen withering cotton crops in the fields; such a pitiful and painful sight as a poor crop leaves a family destitute and in search of additional work. Some farming families have no choice other than to leave their village, taking their children with them, in search of construction work in either Bangalore or Hyderabad. Students in Manvi or Pannur then have to leave school, sometimes for 6 months or so which badly disrupts their education. Life is so difficult for these people.

Whilst visiting Nobel Raj's house, we asked Father Vinod who has recently joined the Manvi Mission, whether he had felt any doubts about joining the priesthood before his ordination. (Father Vinod is on the right; the new Father Maxim who is also new to the Mission is on the left.) This question to Father Vinod was pertinent as Nobel Raj himself is thinking of joining the Jesuit formation having been so inspired by Father Eric over the years. Father Vinod told us that he had experienced a great conflict in his heart whilst nearing the end of his formation, as his mother was bed-ridden and unlikely to ever walk again. By becoming a priest he knew he wouldn't be able to help his parents financially or practically, or even visit them frequently. It was his mother who told him to 'trust in God and he will provide'. Feeling her great love for him, Father Vinod was then able to take the great leap of faith necessary for a Jesuit to give his life totally to God, and at that moment he knew very strongly that God would not let him down. One month after his ordination, a girl that his mother had been teaching before she retired due to ill health, heard that she was bed-ridden and went to visit her. She expressed her desire to help her in the house, doing any jobs that needed to be done, without wanting any payment.



On our last day in Manvi we were invited to the inauguration of a drinking water plant in the village of Umali Hosur. This plant has been funded by Lenka's Slovakian NGO. A year ago Supporting Dalit Children funded a new water plant in Pannur, and the Sisters who run the hospital there have told us that the health problems for this community have reduced dramatically since the plant was installed. 1 rupee pays for 10 litres of water, an affordable charge for every family and enough to pay for the maintenance and ongoing charges of the plant, such as electricity to run the pump and the monthly filters. Of course the Indian government should be providing this basic essential, but they don't and they won't,

not in this back and beyond part of rural India. The people of Umali Hosur had to use the same muddy water source as the buffaloes to collect their drinking water right up until the 23<sup>rd</sup> January when this new plant was officially opened. I am often asked why we help people in India when there is so much wealth in this country, but it is impossible to wait for the Government to act whilst there are so many helpless people denied even the basic of human rights and who are suffering from illness and diseases. In my Newsletter of this time last year, I reported on the number of children we met whilst visiting the villages that had fever due to the contaminated water. It is the most wonderful feeling to know that the health problems in these remote villages are reducing with every water plant that is installed. Now, when the Manvi and Pannur students return home for the summer holidays, the likelihood of them becoming ill due to the water is greatly reduced. To be present at this water plant inauguration in Umali Hosur and see the first 1 rupee coin being put in the coin slot to release the first 10 litres of pure water, was a heart leaping moment for me.

The following evening in Manvi, the annual hostel day celebration was eagerly awaited by all 400 children that stay there. Many students had prepared speeches and also their personal reflections on staying at the hostel. The dancers performed a variety of different dances, all to a superb standard. Afterwards the Fathers and us danced on stage with the children which caused great amusement!



The children at both Xavier school and Loyola Kapepaladi school are full of enthusiasm, joy and they study very hard, all getting up at 5 a.m. every day except Sunday. End of year public exams at Xavier school take place in February and March so students in these year groups are working particularly hard. They ask us every time they see us when their sponsor parents will come to India!

It is impossible to visit all their villages, but this time we visited Chikalparvi Camp where many students at Loyola Kapepaladi school live. Their parents were mostly at work in the fields but this didn't matter to the children who were so keen to show us their homes, some with cotton piled high in one corner of the room. One boy called Shikshavali took off his shoes before he went into his house, and when I saw his shoes I was shocked as they were almost completely in tatters. This didn't worry him in the slightest, he had probably never given the state of his shoes a single thought, he was just thrilled that we had visited his home and met his father.



The incredible humility, love and constant desire to serve the poor that we saw in all the Fathers and Sisters, together with the warmth we received from all those we stayed with in Mangalore, will stay with us forever. Even as we left to catch a train 5 hours' drive from Manvi, two of the Fathers insisted on coming with us and waiting with us right up until the moment the train pulled out at midnight. They then had the same 5 hour drive back to Manvi, whilst we were able to sleep. There wasn't any question of them not coming even though we tried very hard to persuade them otherwise. The light of Father Eric still shines in Manvi and I think always will do. Even though he is no longer there, the Fathers regularly talk about him with great warmth and affection and he visits from time to time whenever he can. And he may be back at some point, you never know.

I know I've said this before, but a visit to the Mission really is life changing. Our next visit will hopefully be in November and you are all invited to join us. With love, Dinah and Peter

p.s. if you think that any friends or relatives might like to see this letter, please forward it to them. We are also posting regular updates and photos on Facebook so do follow us – Supporting Dalit Children