

Christian Aid Week 15th May 2011 Bulwell 6pm

I've worked for CA for nearly 26 years covering various parts of the East Midlands and trying to share the essence of what the organisation does around the world with the money that you and communities like yours generously entrust to us.

I've had some very rewarding and some very challenging experiences in that time, both in the UK and on trips overseas to see CA's partner organisations in action. I think I've learnt a great deal both about human beings and the structures they create to govern their lives and I know I've learnt a great deal about myself in the process.

One of the dangers in my line of work is that you can start to romanticise the poor, even sanctify them a little. It is important to remember that rich or poor, human beings are essentially the same.

There are stupid rich people and stupid poor people; reckless poor people and feckless rich people. There are poor people who live on benefits and rich people who live on trust funds with never a thought about how they themselves can create income or opportunity; There are rich people who know how to love selflessly and poor people who sacrifice themselves for those they love.

There are creative and enterprising poor people and gifted and imaginative rich people.

The poor can have low self-esteem because they have nothing and the rich surround themselves with possessions to mask their low self-esteem; both of the believing that what you own is more important than what you are.

But what does create difference between them is the degree to which they have access to material resources and this imbalance affects the eventual outcome of all the above.

If lack of income means your mother is poorly nourished when she was pregnant with you, you will be an underweight baby; if she can't feed you properly as a baby you will never grow to your full potential; underweight and underfed you will be more likely to fall sick; if health care has to be paid for choices will be made that mean you are sick more often and for longer, missing school and educational opportunities; without education your work prospects are limited and without good health your working life will be shorter and more erratic.

The poor have no insurance against disaster, little capital to invest, no surplus to save and no buffer to allow them to make mistakes or behave extravagantly or waste anything without suffering for it.

Some of the things that my encounters with those we call poor have shown me, however, is that they seem to be able to share with others in ways that are disproportionate to their available resources; they regularly build stronger communities, perhaps ironically because they realise that their need for support is greater; and they seem to grasp much more quickly the basic truth that in order for all to prosper it is necessary for individuals to put their own desire for advancement aside in the interests of eventually receiving a greater security and a more comprehensive wellbeing when the whole community does better.

On my first visit to Brazil in 1987, my host, Maria, knocked a hole through the wall of her favela home so that we could have access to her son's bathroom facilities as well as her rather basic setup.

During my last visit to Brazil in 2005 I met Junisio, a farmer, who had put the development of his own farm to one side while he inspired and organised six other poor farmers living around him to form a co-operative, working together they were able to experiment with new and different crops, testing them on the soil that suited them best regardless of whose land it was. They pooled their small amounts of savings and could access cheap government loans together to buy two polytunnels in which they grow tomatoes and salad crops that they then market locally.

It was clear who had the most initiative and capacity, but for the good of all, Junisio put his skills at the service of the others and helped them all grow together in ability and knowledge, with the result being more and better food and economic security.

I know we are often generous with our money, putting in to collections or regularly giving what we can spare; we are generous with our time (collecting for CAW) but we also do it sometimes from a sense of obligation - to our friend, the CA rep, to our church and its reputation in ecumenical circles; from our sense that there is something in our faith that tells us that we have to care for those less fortunate - or worse still from a sense of guilt.

How can we be more like Junisio and Maria? Where is our inspiration to do all this and much more with confidence and even a sort of joy and anticipation because we feel part of a community which in its flourishing will make our lives richer and more secure? And how can we pass this on to others?

In the Acts of the Apostles the followers of Jesus expressed their communion by praying together, sharing their resources and eating together. I find the emphasis on eating together the most intriguing thing.

Because you can pray alongside someone without really having to encounter them, you can share resources with others without losing the sense that you are the benefactor and these others are merely recipients, but you can't eat with others without exposing yourself in a kind of vulnerability and experiencing at table a basic equality.

That is at the heart of our celebration of the eucharist where no-one can claim pre-eminence through worldly status or wealth and everyone gets only one piece of bread.

It is also crucial for us as people who pray "Give us this day our daily bread"; we are people of the bread and it should matter to us that all have enough to eat in our communities, both local and international.

What Christian Aid knows well and we are charged with communicating is that those we call 'the poor' have dreams and goals for their lives and that they do not merely wait for us to deliver their development, but are already active on their own account.

I have witnessed the poor spinning life out of nothing, but when enterprising people get access to capital, enjoy a measure of security and get a sense that someone believes that just because they live in inadequate environments it does not make them inadequate people, then they are as capable as any rich business magnate at creating economic ventures and opportunities that bring with them the promise of a very different future.

We have heard that tonight in the stories from Nicaragua, a beautiful country where so many live in poverty and yet work backbreakingly hard while others continue to take the profits and enjoy the resources.

We see the sense of community and the capacity for sacrifice in Gustavo's determination to deliver educational possibilities for his children and for others and we start to understand that for the poor to really be able to compete in international markets with those of us who have more capital and longer experience and more influence they need to control more of the stages that add value to the raw materials they so often are restricted to producing; the processing and the marketing.

To know this is to understand better not just how we can respond to need and suffering, but how we should.

Our giving a gracious response to our own blessings, surrendered with joy because we know that we have so much and it is all a gift.

Our prayers less about what God should be and do for the poor, and more about what we should be and do for the poor as believers in a God who wills life and life in abundance for all his children.

And our choices and actions freed from the control of our own interests and advancement and more often in line with what will redress the injustice and remedy the arbitrariness of the way our world is organised.

The invitation is to partnership on so many levels and promises to be the only way of delivering our own well-being and security. Peace is the fruit of justice.

I remember standing on a hillside on the edge of Sao Paulo during that very first overseas trip looking with concern at a motley group of refugees from the countryside. They carried all they possessed in a couple of carrier bags; they had been driven from their land and had come to the city in the hope of finding a place to live and jobs. They had spent the previous

night sleeping on a pavement under one of Sao Paulo's flyovers. They were a mixture of young and old, men and women.

With me on that hillside stood Salange, one of Maria's friends from the favela where we were staying and one of her co-workers in the women's group that CA supported there.

Salange had taken me to visit this land occupation and we had encountered these people. "What a lot we have to do here," she said to me and by 'we' she meant not CA, but her group, her community. She talked to the organisers of the occupation and negotiated a shelter for the homeless group, with a promise of a piece of land allocated the next day. She mobilised our children to search their belongings for clothes they could give and scurried round asking for gifts of food. These gifts from the poor to the even poorer were collected and delivered before nightfall. No-one was waiting for me or the organisation I represented to inspire the action or resource it.

I was merely privileged to witness it and to learn that whatever I may be asked to give, it is additional to and not more than what is already generated from amongst those in need.

And finally the poor have taught me about hope. I once asked the leader of a poor besieged community in the Brazilian countryside why they hung on in the face of assault from the powerful local landowner who wanted to add their meagre holdings to his own and in the face of the corrupt local police force who imprisoned and beat them for resisting him and Rosario got his wife to show me their tiny twin daughters.

These are our hope, he explained, they are the witness to our belief that the future can be, will be different.

And it struck me that the world will be the poorer if people from any rank in society ever stop believing that change can come, that human beings have the capacity to care for each other more than they care for themselves and that life can be had by all and had in abundance.