

Worship and witness

Just before the country entered into lockdown, I had the privilege at the beginning of March of going to the New Wine Leadership Conference in Harrogate. One of the keynote speakers was a church leader called Nicola Neal, and what she had to say remained with me for many weeks, so much so that when I saw today's reading from the gospel of Matthew, I knew that I wanted to share her story with you here in Cottenham and Rampton.

In 2009 Nicola and her husband Simon followed God's call to Uganda, the pearl of Africa. All they had was God's promise '*I am taking you there to teach you how to love.*' They packed up their home and, with their two children, simply went to serve the poor. Working in the slums of Kampala, they got to see life as it really is for the people living there. The slums are cramped and dangerous. There's sewerage in the streets, disease and a lack of food which leaves children vulnerable to sickness and death. They got to know some of the families, started to pray with them and help in simple practical ways. Over time, they established a Non-Government Organisation called '*Every Life International*' based on their belief that every life is born with God-given potential, God-given gifts, skills and callings. But that potential sometimes gets buried under the dirt of life, circumstances, poverty and pain. The practical support that '*Every Life International*' provides includes teaching and training sessions on health and hygiene, how to grow your own food and new skills that enable people to enter employment or start their own small businesses.

Relationships with the community are key in the slums. Listening to people's stories is so important before empowering individuals, families and then whole communities to dream, and then work together for transformation. The project looks for clever, sustainable solutions to local problems with people at the centre, and their work is always upheld by prayer and worship.

During an evening session at the conference, Nicola told us about a little boy called Saddam. Saddam was 9 years old and HIV Positive and lived in a particular slum community where Nicola and Simon were serving. He had got to the point that the medics called 'end-stage, full blown AIDS'. He had TB, pneumonia and was in heart failure. He'd been in hospital but they'd said there was nothing more they could do for him and sent him home to die. His family were told that he had days, not weeks. Nicola and her team were visiting the family as often as they could to stand with them, to be alongside them in their suffering and painful moments.

One day the team had gone to his little house and found Saddam in a particularly distressed state. His pain levels were through the roof and he was walking up and down screaming. He was so distressed that he'd go up to a wall and bang his head against it, desperate to escape the pain. His mother – a Muslim – was understandably greatly distressed herself. She grabbed a member of the team and said, *'Help us.'*

'We don't have anything to give you,' the team replied, *'except Jesus.'*

'Can I kneel with you then?' she asked, *'And can we pray to him?'*

'Sure,' the team replied, and together they knelt down in the dirt and just began to call out the name of Jesus. They didn't know what else to pray or do.

Saddam, seeing this happen, walked over wanting to join in, but he could barely talk. A team member said to him, *'Saddam, all you have to do is say his name.'* This little dying, skeleton of a boy, said *'Jesus'*.

The moment he spoke the name of Jesus, all pain left him instantly. And, to the team, it seemed as if both Saddam and the whole atmosphere in that place became flooded with a deep peace and stillness. And that was the point that Saddam's life began to turn around. He began to eat again and grew stronger. He returned to the local school and hung out with children from the street church that the project had established. A year later, he was baptised. Dunked in a huge water tank, Saddam came up out of the water preaching the gospel to the slum community, and more and more people started coming to faith.

This little boy was so bold about his faith that he went into the local bar in the slum, where the drug dealers hang out doing their business, and started preaching. When told about this, Nicola asked, *'And did anyone come to faith?'* *'Yes, most of them!'* was the reply.

Saddam is now 19 and Nicola met up with him recently because she wants to include his story in a new book she's writing. In his own words, Saddam spoke about that time when he was 9 and very ill.

'I was so sick then,' he said. *'When I passed people, they didn't want anything to do with me. I was disgusting to them. HIV, TB and pneumonia were destroying my life. As I walked down the street, people would shout and throw rocks at me. They called me a 'moving corpse'. They called me 'disgusting'. They would shout, 'Here comes the walking dead'. People never believed that I would be anything or that I'd accomplish anything. Most assumed I'd die ... but I did not die because I met Jesus.'*

'And now, as I walk around our community, people will come and look at me and they're confused. They say, 'I think I recognise you but who are you?' And I reply, 'I'm the one. The one you called the walking dead. A moving corpse. But see, I am alive. I am way more than alive, because of Jesus.'

As I said, that little boy is now 19. He's witness to the redeeming, healing power of Jesus. He has a new wife, a baby on the way and, at the end of 2019, joined the staff team of Every Life International, helping to lead a local church in the community where he was born. This 19 year old slum dweller of a man, who still lives in a one-room mud house, who has had hardly any education, with his relentless pursuit of Jesus is such an influencer in his community. Remember the end of last week's Bible passage from Acts chapter 2, verse 21? *'And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'* Saddam called on the name of the Lord, was saved from certain death and has since led many others to Jesus. What a wonderful story!

'Go and make disciples of all nations,' Jesus says in our passage from Matthew's gospel, *'baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'* Nicola and Simon Neal responded to what is regarded as Jesus' 'Great Commission', given to those first disciples two thousand years ago, but just as relevant for us today. But we so often talk ourselves out of this commission, thinking that Jesus means someone else.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 1, he says these words (from The Message translation): *'Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of the brightest and the best among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses?'* He very clearly chose little Saddam – whom society regarded as a 'nobody' - to bring light and hope into a community where there was none. But Saddam wouldn't have been able to call on the name of Jesus if Nicola and her team hadn't been there to tell him about Jesus in the first place. Very few of us are called to travel to far-off places, but we are each called to share our faith in the places where God has individually placed us. During lockdown, we've had a wonderful opportunity to connect with our neighbours in a way many of us haven't had before. I wonder what would happen if, this next week, each of us prayed this prayer each day: *'Lord, today, who do you want me to connect with?'*, and being prepared to respond to his calling or prompting, remembering that Jesus is with you, to the end of the age.