

ABCD Silver Jubilee

St James's Piccadilly, 4 December 2010

We have so much to be grateful for at this service. Some of the most precious causes for gratitude are with us at this service: the people in the UK through whose hearts and minds and hands ABCD has grown and matured and gained strength. Our hearts overflow with gratitude for what you – Val, Georgina, Frances, Alison, Bassam, Jamil and others – have done to deepen our commitment to the community in greater Bethlehem area. And of course there are our *indispensable* partners in Bethlehem whose agonies overflow our hearts also – Edmund, Rima, and Mary and many others. And we are a charity whose patrons have always been close, and active, and sometimes crucial in that role: our hearts are full for you too.

And at the heart of our gratitude are the kids themselves, their mothers, fathers, siblings and friends, who constantly remind us that one of the greatest causes for gratitude is that grace-filled alchemy, so clearly expressed in St Francis's peace prayer, that in 'giving we receive', in opening our hands especially to the poor we are filled with riches.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to some who have gone to their rest. And some of you (Val for sure) will remember one particular man whose presence—so tall, so refined, so insightful, so very compassionate, so strong—was at the roots of what began twenty-five years ago. I remember as if today his request to me to take his place when he bowed out as a founding trustee. Donald Nicholl, who lived to see the first half of the achievement we celebrate today, and whose beloved wife Dorothy died only this year. He was a great theologian, thinker and teacher, but what he communicated was wisdom of the heart, a wisdom that just before he retired as rector of Tantur saw and encouraged the germination of the idea we now call ABCD. It crystallizes so many of Donald's experiences and wisdom; but is also a manifestation of the *crie de coeur* that regularly went up from him for the fate of all those for whom Israel-Palestine is home.

One idea he often peddled (he'd like that, to think of himself as peddling ideas) concerned children. 'What a revelation to humankind our Lord's attitude towards children proved to be', he wrote, 'has been beautifully expressed by a writer of our day.' It was an observation he often quoted among his million stories. The 20th-c Russian Andre Sinyavsky, who wrote in a letter from the Gulag to his wife:

Why were infants so important for the new era (after Christ)? Children had never been in much evidence. Now for the first time [in history], an infant became a symbolic figure ... and his Mother with him: Mother and Child. ... there we have a child who seems to be not in the past, but still in ahead of us in future prospect. The germ, not of history but of eternity, and through his birth from Mary his mother a constant reminder that in God the Child is never extinct.¹

Another author Donald loved² put it much shorter — 'Children are the best witnesses of what can be considered as the essential message of Jesus.'

As we reflect on the birth of Christ himself, and if we are going to enter the kingdom of heaven, we have to become as children. That's why we cannot turn children away, because it is from them that we have to learn what it is to live; and by our treatment of them we enter into

judgement of how we live. Can we ignore the fact that the words of the Lord are quite so categorical on this subject?

ABCD has always carried with it that symbolic image of the Mother and Child in its banner logo. It is for us—and should remain—a lode star. In using it we carry with us a guiding teaching – that in the infant Christ with his mother, in the child he sets in our midst to teach us a lesson, in the children we serve in the Bethlehem region, in the children we are called to become, we have a sure way to the kingdom of heaven. Any society that hides from its children, turns its face from their centrality and their needs; or worse, any society that hides its children away so that their needs can be marginal or ignored, is a society that does not have the image of God in it.

This then is the reason why we heard those two passages from St John's gospel. There are not many points in the Gospel where Mary is present with Jesus in his adult life – but here are two, the first sign at Cana in Galilee, and the last sign at Golgotha outside Jerusalem. The image of the Mother and the Child remains throughout the earthly life of Christ; they are never imagined without one another.

Each time she is present in an hour of need. Each time the encounter is clearly much bigger than the circumstances at play. Each time her presence alongside him prompts him to a great sign, to show his glory. In Cana she is alongside him, and alongside the disciples whom she tells to 'do whatever he says'. From the shadow of the cross she is given as a mother to those whom Jesus calls his brothers, so that she can accompany them too. This is, I believe, the lesson for ABCD at this moment of celebration.

The land in which we serve is not lacking in ideologies and theories readily attached to rights and claims. But those involved with ABCD must have in their hearts the scriptural testimony that we've just been reflecting on. And the acid test of how deep that scriptural testimony is in our hearts is felt in our relation to the *poor*, so that between the poor person and me there should be no intervening agency but only God. The cause of the poor is my responsibility, and such love will teach me the skills necessary to serve.

Now the poor appear in many places: on the streets and doorways under bridges, yes; but also in old people's homes, hospitals, prisons, schools. And finally there is no separation between poverty and war; and both are always unacceptable. The poor stare out from conflicts around the world. But the children of the poor caught in conflict are most hidden, often forgotten, off the agenda. Thus ABCD is called to show (by acts of faith and hope and love) why this is unacceptable. We are to witness to the full humanity of the child, and therefore the full dignity of the child and to work with their families and communities and schools to witness to the absolute priority of the dignity of the child.

But our charity is doubly tested, because these are not simply children disadvantaged by those twin ugly sisters poverty and conflict, they are vulnerable and needy children of vulnerable and needy families. We try to witness therefore to the dignity of those who are not only vulnerable but who are also not capable of contributing very much to the life of society in an economic way because of disability, trauma, mental ill-health, and some the prospect of early death. In an age where economic capacity and independence are made the measure of all people, we witness that for those who live with physical or mental difficulty, the solution is not first to give them access to economy or law; it is to surround them peace and justice and every kind of attention, and to develop their capacity to maintain loving, nourishing human relationship.

But our charity is triple tested, because many whom we seek to serve live among those shanty settlements which are known as ‘the camps’ – the scraps of ground where refugees from sixty years of conflicts past have gathered. We are not here to solve such problems. But by engagement we witness that these are communities whom the world need not fear, whose aspirations should not arouse our suspicions or anxieties. So we should work to find any number of ways to equip refugee families with disabled children to feel welcomed and trusted.

The Mother who accompanies us says: ‘Do whatever he tells you’, and what he tells us is ‘Only as a child will you enter the kingdom of heaven.’ And so we are trying to find our calling among the children of Bethlehem, who are not only the disabled among the poor, but the poor who suffer as a result of what Chesterton memorably called ‘all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men’ – and not only speeches, but the ideologies and social restrictions that circle round the heads of the poor but do nothing to relieve their condition.

Our Lord Jesus himself brought about a complete revolution in the world by taking a child and setting him in the midst of the disciples. No other faith and no ancient philosophy gives anything comparable to this. For the Christian the image of the child as standing for Our Lord himself in the midst of the disciples must impose on us a very powerful duty to give high priority to the need and the dignity of children, especially the vulnerable children of the poor and of conflict. Christians – but because ABCD has proved it for 25 years, I dare say any group of faithful believers – must be prepared, by means of direct relationships that constantly challenge our hearts, to resist the abuse of children, the resist indignity of the vulnerable and needy, the resist fear of the stranger and refugee. But we must recall that lode star: what we serve in ABCD is not only the disabled and traumatized children of Bethlehem made even more precious by the dire and painful conditions of their lives; it’s not even the totality of the family and community that form their homes and hopes and lifelong relationships. What we serve is the image of God in such children, the image of God in their relationships with their mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters, the image of God in each other; and the freedom of God to set us all free.

¹ *Voice from the Chorus* 276

² Simon Legasse: “Les enfants sont les meilleurs témoins de ce qu'on peut considérer comme le message essentiel de Jésus.”