

"What you hear whispered in the dark, declare from the housetops"

About 25 years ago, a Mill Hill priest, a member of my Society, was standing on the railway station in Hyderabad, India, having just seen someone off, when a small boy of about three or four years of age came up to him and begged for money. The priest began to talk to him and asked his name and then asked him where his mother and father were. The boy answered that he did not know. The priest then asked him where he was going to sleep that night and the boy answered that he would be sleeping, where he always slept, in a corner of the station. So, the priest asked him, "Do you want to come home with me?" And the boy answered, "Yes, and can my friend come too?" pointing to another little boy of about the same age. The priest said, "Of course" – and with that began the hostel for Street Children, known as "Prema Seva Sadan", the "House of mercy".

It started merely as a place, where the boys could sleep at night, but as time passed and the work was handed on from one priest to another, it was seen that to give these lads a chance in life they had either to be given schooling or taught a trade. So, by the time I was appointed there, in 1995, there were about 100 boys, some of whom were schooling, while others were learning carpentry or tailoring. When they graduated, they were given a box of tools and/or a sewing machine and helped to start life in their home village – if it were known. I loved the work, but I was not able to stay there long, so when I returned to England and became Chaplain at Reading, I helped raise money to pay the boys' school fees and, in this way, with my friends, helped the many "graduates" from PSS have a richer and more human life.

About five or six years ago, I went back to India for a visit and Samy, one of those, who came to PSS at the age of 3, and now a married man with a little taxi business, insisted on taking me round to visit some of the other graduates, all of whom gave us a great welcome. One evening, while having a quiet meal with Samy, he asked, "Father, why do you Fathers leave your homes and families and come and live with us and help us?" I cannot remember how I answered him, but his words have remained deep in my heart.

When we think about "preaching the Gospel", our minds usually go back to how we were taught about Christianity – learning about doctrines, bible stories and rituals. And should we be asked to introduce a stranger to the faith, the temptation would be to do it in the same way – through teaching. But there is a whole layer of experience, which needs to have been gone through, before that can happen. If we are cradle Catholics, we need to remember that our first experience was of being part of a family, of knowing we were loved. We then came to discover that our family was a part of something larger, the church and when we went to Church with our parents, we came to understand that this was also my home, my family – even if we did not use the words, "home" and "family". Remembering this is important, because the teaching and instruction we received only makes sense, if understood against this background of belonging, of being wanted, of being loved - for fundamentally God is not a truth, he is Love and love is something we have to experience, not something we can be taught.

I remember once discovering, some years ago, that nearly half of the seminarians at Kuching were not cradle Catholics, but had become Catholics later. I asked them, "What attracted you to the faith?" One answered that his friend had been a Catholic, another that his uncle had been a Catholic, or a favourite teacher had been a Catholic. In each case, it had been a contact of friendship, an experience of love, which had been the starting point – not a teaching.

The telling of Bible stories, the teaching of doctrines, the preparation for the sacraments are all answers to questions – What is this family of which I am a part? What is it that makes them want me? Who is this God who reaches out to me through these friends of mine? But none of these questions will make sense unless I have first experienced the love that prompts these questions. Answers without questions do not make sense.

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This is why, when the missionaries first came here to Sarawak – or indeed arrive anywhere - they set up schools and dispensaries etc. They did not do it to make converts, although they were happy should some of those they helped ask to become Christians; they did it so show people they were loved – for we need to know we are wanted, we need to know we loved, whether we become Catholics or not. The Gospel, which the Lord tells us to proclaim from the housetops, is not the Bible; it is Jesus Christ – he about whom the Gospels are written - and to meet him, through people, is to experience love. To preach the Gospel, therefore, is, first and foremost, showing people that they are wanted, they are special, they are loved. Having experienced that love, what they are then led to become belongs to the Providence of God, the movement of the Spirit – but not to my task of preaching.

We would not let the street boys become Christians, while they were still in the hostel. Instead, we helped them, be good Hindus or Muslims and many remained such. Samy goes to Mass every Christmas and sometimes on other days too, but he was and he remains a Hindu. The reason that his question, "Why do you Fathers come here?" is so important to me is that when he asked it, I knew that he had heard the Gospel – and I also knew that I been part of the preaching of it.

Diary

On most afternoons, I go for a brisk walk in a park near the seminary, here in Kuching and I often see a guy, who half walks and half jogs, intently carrying out his exercises. He sometimes has a couple of older guys with him, guys who sometimes seem to find it difficult to keep up with him. The other day, as I watched, the two older guys slowed down to a walk, but the younger one would not let them be. He kept scurrying back to hassle them to hurry up and keep up with him, but they did not – and, looking at them, I fancy they could not. I found myself very tempted to say to the younger guy, "Let them be! Let them go at their own pace". But I kept quiet and just watched, until he gave up in disgust and hurried on. Why is it, I wonder, that we often demand that people match us in something and not let them be themselves? – And that is as true of the spiritual life as it is of jogging-cum-walking. The Greek orator Demosthenes, in order to overcome a speech impediment, put pebbles in his mouth and practised talking. It worked and he became the most famous of the Greek orators. I try a variation on this with my pupils here in Kuching. I take them to the football field and ask them to stand in the goal mouth then I take one student half way up the field, put two small limes in his mouth and ask him to read a quotation. The result is hilarious, great fun is had by the students – and by me – and I also think it helps a little with their public speaking!

Today, after Mass, a woman came up to me and introduced herself – she came from one of the kampongs that I helped look after. She told me the story of her father, who had died during Chinese New year and that she had had great difficulty in finding a priest, but that I had stepped in and performed the funeral for her father. She said that she had been so grateful to me, but that in the rush and hassle of things she had forgotten to give me an offering. She said that she was so pleased to see me today and she gave me a little red packet with a gift of money inside, then she cried a little, hugged me a couple of times, said "thank you" again and left. When did this funeral take place? Just over 30 years ago!!!

Your prayers are asked:

Please pray for Patricia Owen of Reading, UK, a lovely lady who died of cancer during the week. Pat was one of those, who, by their support, enable me to live and work in Bali. She will now be supporting others by her prayers, but please remember her husband and two children, who must be

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missing her terribly.

Please pray also for Paul, who was a married Deacon with us in Bali. He got into great difficulties and we managed to get him home to the US, hoping that there he would find the help he needs. I get short, one sentence messages about once a week from him – but he does not sound good at all.

God bless,

Terry

Ps. Who do you think I had a cheery message from when I opened my computer this morning? From Samy!! He must have been reading my thoughts.

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