

Homily Sunday 33A (Re: Ghana visit)

Like most of the parables, the parable of the talents can be read at many levels. Central to the parable, however, is the importance of grasping the opportunities that present themselves to us. Primarily, that means plunging with hope and trust through every door that the Lord opens for us, and it seemed a good occasion for me to share with you something of our recent trip to Ghana, and to tell you about the ways in which Afrikids is making the most of the opportunities it has - some of those opportunities which have come about because of the generosity of members of this congregation. Of course, I can only give you a taste of what we saw and heard and experienced, but perhaps there will be other occasions to tell you some more.

The first thing to mention, I think, is the fact that so much seems the same as home, but then so much is different. There are houses, and shops, and roads, and schools and animals which are much the same as those we have here - pigs, and goats, and dogs and donkeys, and the people laugh and smile and talk with their friends, just as we do, and the children kick a football around just as ours do, but then suddenly things bring you up short. Suddenly you realise that life here is very different indeed. You just begin to relax, almost to imagine that you are in familiar surroundings, and something shakes you up and makes you realise that the life that many people are leading is nothing like ours at all. For example, one day we saw a big funeral taking place at the Cathedral next to the Afrikids headquarters, and we asked who had died; we were told it was a man in his forties who had cut himself one day but been too busy to do much about the injury for a day or two, so that when he went to the medical centre for treatment it was too late, and he died of tetanus - something we in the UK would just never see; life is fragile. Then again, there were the women who were crushing rocks at a gold mine, looking for tiny specks of gold, covered in dust and carrying their babies on their backs so that the babies, too, were covered in a layer of grey dust. Can you imagine being in a situation where to get food and shelter you had to take your baby mining with you? Then there was the evening when I sat to read to the children the letters written by our parish children; the children loved to listen, and to look at the pictures that had been sent them; they were fascinated to talk about the animals, and they asked lots of questions about them, but when the letters mentioned parents

they had nothing to say. Living with parents was something outside their experience. Then there were the schools, heaving with children, all in smart (-ish) uniforms. The teachers would show us around the buildings, and show us with great pride the libraries: little rooms with a handful of books, each of which had been bound and rebound in sticky backed plastic to make them last as long as possible because there were so few of them, and because the children and the adults both realise that education is the key to overcoming poverty. On one level everything is the same as it is here, but then suddenly you see the differences.

It was very touching to see the physical things that are evidence of the link between Petworth and Bolgatanga: when Mama Laadi first came here to talk to the young people, her new home was ready to occupy, but at the last minute the people who were going to fund the bore hole for fresh water had pulled out; it looked as if the home would have to stay empty for a while. But one of our parishioners stepped in to help, the bore hole was built, and you can see outside a photo of a young lad drinking from the water tank it feeds. The building is decorated with a list of the names of donors who helped fund it, and our parish is on the list. In the dining room where the children eat is a photo of Talli, who had been at that first meeting with Georgie. The last time I saw Mama Laadi was at mass here in Petworth - dressed up in a hat and gloves, so it was wonderful to be able to say mass for her children outside her home in Ghana, in a very different climate. It was a great privilege to feel so strongly the links between us here and these wonderful people in Ghana.

So, what is there to say about the people who work for Afrikids in Ghana? It is tempting to think that Africa is all the same, riddled with corruption and incompetence that makes all hope of actually achieving anything worthwhile futile. Well, I can't speak for anywhere else, but wherever Afrikids is working things are not like that at all. There is a great joy and enthusiasm in their staff, a passionate belief that they can actually make people's lives better combined with a very professional approach to all they do. The projects they support have all sprung from needs which have been identified by the people themselves. They have not arrived with a plan from outside, but have listened to the people most in need. On top of this there are two key words which underpin all their planning and all their activity: sustainability

and accountability. It is the intention that Afrikids Ghana will be self-supporting within ten or fifteen years, that is to say that it will no longer need to rely on funds from the UK. Every one of its projects is looking at ways to fund itself. At one extreme is the thriving medical centre, where the doctor sees up to 200 patients a day, and which generates income because many of the patients are registered with national health insurance so that the government pays for their care. On the much smaller scale are the little projects where orphaned children are placed with a family and given school uniforms and books; normally this would be difficult to do as the family would find it hard to feed another child, but they are sent with two goats which can produce enough income to pay for food, as well as paying back the cost of the original animals and uniforms. Where children are in danger because of family hostility, or because they are on the streets, or because they have been working in the terrifyingly dangerous gold mine, they are taken out and given education and vocational training that will help them find a job.

If sustainability is a vital part of what they are doing, so is accountability. At one of the projects that we visited we saw the big pile of files where every invoice is kept, every penny spent is accounted for against the objective it is spent in achieving. No wonder Afrikids has won awards for its openness.

There is so much more we could tell you about. There was the wonder and disbelief as the children looked at photos of our dogs and Cathy told them that every six weeks they are taken to have a hair cut. There was our meeting with the wonderful Sister Jane, the first person Afrikids worked with in 1997 who had come to the awards ceremony in Bolgatanga by a 7 hour bus journey. There was the slightly hairy cab ride in Bolga in a car with virtually no insides, whose instruments were all broken, which reeked of petrol, and whose windscreen was a spiders web of cracks and chips. There was the rather more comfortable car ride in Accra where the driver declined to let a woman sit beside him in the front seat because they tended to panic and grab the driver if there was any sign of danger. There was the shopping trip to a market, where one of our party said she wanted to buy a wooden duck, upon which a dozen or so people disappeared, running through the market and each coming back with a duck; when she said she really wanted a black duck they all disappeared again only to

reappear frantically rubbing black polish into wooden ducks. There was the stretch of road where someone had just been killed by a speeding lorry, at which the local community simply came out by night with pickaxes and dug trenches a foot or so deep across the road at hundred yard intervals. And so the stories go on.

We met so many people; we saw so many projects; we heard so many stories. Everything made us think how awesome it is that sheer determination, dedication and professionalism have driven so much achievement in so short a time. The children, their parents, and the local community all speak so highly of Afrikids; they recognise that this charity has really changed their world. For some of them it has given them their first real chance in life, and they were pretty keen not to let the opportunity slip. It was very touching to think that, in some part, our church has made that happen. Perhaps the most touching thing of all was talking to some of the youngsters who had once had nothing, no hope and no future, and hearing them talk about their ambitions. One of them wrote to us 'when I am a doctor or a nurse I will remember that you made it possible'. Because of the help that we at this parish - and lots of others - have given, these children can have hope, and can have ambition. That must be a talent well used.