

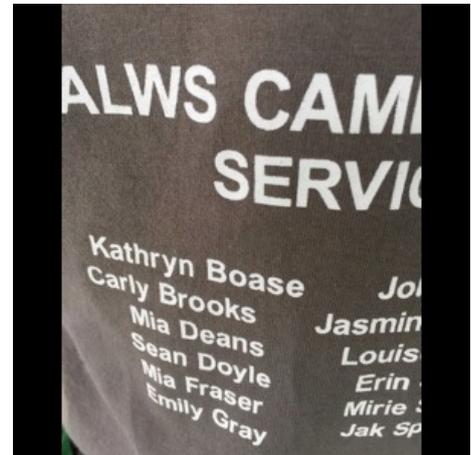
Life with Dignity

Isaiah 58:9b-14

There I was, in a newly established village rising out of the scrubby bush in remote, rural Cambodia, when I saw someone wearing a T-shirt with the name of one of my son Tom's school friends, Sean Doyle, who also worships here at St Paul's. I had to look again. Then I noticed the names of some Luther students that I recognised. And then I saw the ALWS logo on the front.



The man wearing the shirt was called Khom. Khom works for LWD, Life with Dignity. LWD used to stand for Lutheran World Development, but in 2011 was transferred to Cambodian ownership, taking the name of Life with Dignity. Australian Lutheran World Service, together with Aus-Aid, contribute over one-third of LWD's annual budget.



As an aside, it's interesting that in Cambodia, life with dignity focuses on keeping people alive through alleviating poverty, whereas here in Australia, the concept of dignity is more likely to be connected with death and the push to legalised assisted suicide, or euthanasia. Curious indeed.

At first, Khom thought that I was Sean's father. Eventually we worked out the connection. Last year a number of Luther students joined an ALWS trip to Cambodia. That's where Sean met Khom. And now my meeting with him closed the circle.



Jodi and I were at Soksenchey Land Concession, deep in Kampong Chnang province, to see what a difference Life with Dignity made to people who literally had nothing but the clothes on their back. Five years ago nobody lived here. The land was too poor and there was no reliable water supply. But a government initiative meant that the Cambodian government offered homeless rural poor a plot of land in which to build a home, and a larger plot to farm.



This was a generous offer and those who had previously owned no land nor home were happy to take it up. But the initiative was doomed to fail without the support of Khom and fellow staff from LWD. We sat on the ground in the village meeting shed as the village leader told us about life in Soksenchey. It was by no means easy. Malaria was endemic, at which point we Westerners rustled through our backpacks and rubbed on an extra layer of mossie repellent. Agriculture was difficult because the water supply was not yet secure, and it was difficult to get their products to market. And the government had yet to build a school for the community. But as one of the community said, "We used to feel worse than cats and dogs. Now we feel like people."



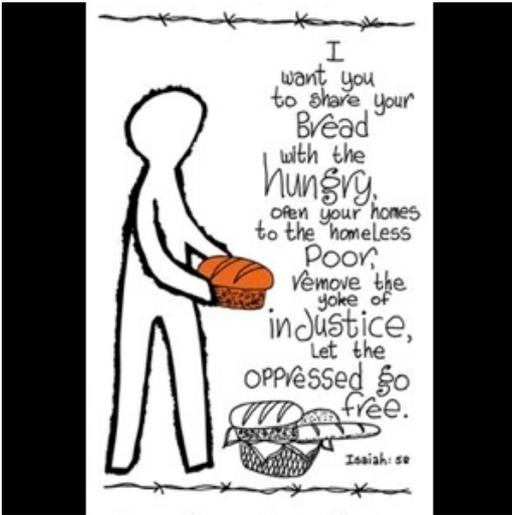
These are the people Khom and his fellow staff worked with. We went for a walk around this brand new village. In one home, LWD were trialling a methane plant to generate electricity for a home. This required collecting 20kg of cattle dung each day, quite a task. This enabled the residents to run some lights at night. A child or an adult would be able to study at night, and therefore better themselves. These people desperately wanted to look after themselves, produce enough to provide for their families, and have their children educated. The Cambodian government had yet to build a school.

I was excited to meet Khom. Two degrees of separation and all that. But actually something much more meaningful occurred as we sat and listened to the story of this community. Their leader was an intelligent man who spoke clearly about the challenges of this new life, and of their thankfulness for this opportunity. The same thing occurred in the next village of Takeo, where we were told the story of how LWD provided the funding for the construction of a weir to divert water into the fields for irrigation. The project was planned, constructed and completed by the community itself. Their pride in what they had achieved was self-evident, as was their ingenuity. All they needed was some seed funding, and now their future is now much more assured.



I learnt something profound that day about the solidarity of human community. I saw people who were just like me, but who had the misfortune to have experienced the aftermath of genocide: poverty, a country littered with land mines, and ongoing corruption. I grew up in a wealthy, prosperous and peaceful country. But we were the same. Each one of us were created in the image of God. Each of these people were redeemed by the sacrifice of Jesus' life on the cross. Their lives have a dignity and value the same as mine.

This is a truth that we would consider is self-evident. Certainly, the concept of international human rights, that all people have the right to food, shelter, clothing, freedom of religion, is derived from a Christian foundation. And yet, in the last two decades especially, Australian culture has become a lot more closed-hearted, more resistant to those who come from another place, and much harder-edged. The individual is king, but on the other hand, if you sick, or you're poor, you must be a deficient individual. We have become suspicious of one another, and especially of those who are different, those who have come here seeking freedom from oppression.



It's not a vote winner to do what Isaiah calls for: "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, if you offer you food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday."

Isaiah's words are even more far reaching than they read in this translation. If you spend yourselves, your *nephesh*, your life and soul, on behalf of the hungry, is the call of God to his covenant people. A life of faith isn't just going through certain religious rituals, even going to worship and fasting, as essential as these habits are. Faith is spiritual and physical practice. In fact, faith is love in action. Jesus' faithfulness to his Father was expressed

both in prayer and in acts of healing and mercy-of which the cross is the most profound example.

Earlier in this chapter Isaiah says:

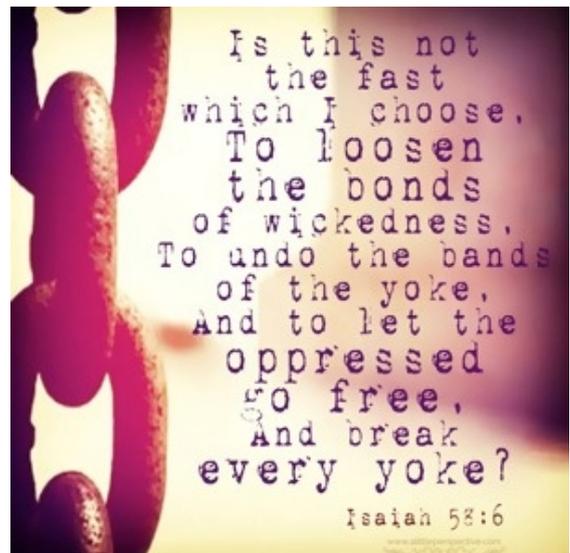
"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free,

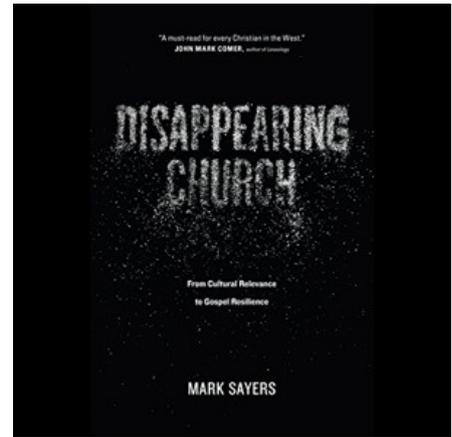
and to break every yoke?"

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

Isaiah was writing to a people who had come back from a period of exile into their shattered homeland. Jerusalem had been destroyed, its walls turn down and the whole nation had to be rebuilt. There's a lot of tension and dissent. People wanted to get ahead, and there was no spare cash to care for the poor, for the victims of exile, or the displaced people in the land. We need to spend money on ourselves and renewing our infrastructure. The poor can look after themselves. We see the same pressure points in Australia today.



I'm currently reading a challenging and hope-filled book by Mark Sayers, called *Disappearing Church*. Sayers calls the church not to ape the culture by trying to become more relevant or more cool, but to become a creative minority. He writes: "We as followers of the Messiah Jesus, living within the time of his kingdom rule, now must take up the mantle of being rebuilders. We face a cultural landscape, inner private worlds, devastated and depleted by the pursuit of individual autonomy... We acknowledge that authority does not lie with us ... to admit that we are broken ... that Christ is ruler. To abandon our rule and to collapse into his arms of grace. To dig roots deep into his love."



One of the ways we act as a community of justice and grace, of life and hope, is to give away that which we have been given. I am so heartened that against the backdrop of cuts to foreign aid, our congregation, and the wider Lutherans community have increased support of Australian Lutheran World Service. Why have we bucked the trend? Because we believe in a different story to that of our culture. We know that our lives have been transformed through Jesus, "the mediator of a new covenant, whose sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." We believe that since we "are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe."

We believe that thanks and praise is expressed both in our worship, as we're doing today, and in the sacrifice of a life of worship. Thankfulness means seeing all of our lives and possessions as God's gift, flowing out of the new start of forgiveness that we have received through Jesus. Witnessing to this good news means spending ourselves in love for the sake of friend and neighbour, and even enemy and adversary. In this way we show that God is the deepest reality in our lives, and to follow his will is the thing we desire most. Then, Isaiah promises, "your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom will be like the noonday."

Standing at this weir that brought new opportunity to the village of Takeo, it was clear to see that money given by people in Australia makes a difference. But what struck me even more powerfully was the simple joy that the children of the community felt when swimming at the weir. It wasn't designed for this, but what a beautiful byproduct, and to me, a symbol of what life with dignity looks like, through the support of people like you and me, and the wonderful work of our overseas aid agency, ALWS.



How is God calling you to live a life with dignity, for the sake of the dignity of the hungry and the poor? Amen.

