

## A Helping Hand...

Shortly after the tsunami struck shores around the Indian Ocean killing over 200,000 people and leaving many millions homeless I received an email from Tamil Nadu in South India. It was a request for assistance from the “Helping Hands Trust” a local charity, started by a group of Tamil churches, providing aid to hundreds of victims of the tsunami. At Epiphany Trust we had already launched our appeal and were providing funds for our long-established partners in Sri Lanka. I wrote back to “Helping Hands” for more information and entered into a lot of correspondence with their secretary Juliet Simson who, despite the British name, is Tamil. We sent £1000.00 and following reports and photographs on the work sent another similar donation. The churches wrote back to me and asked if I would go to speak at their annual conference. At first I declined, put off by the session titles of ‘Purpose Driven Christianity’ and ‘Dynamic Christian Living’, which I guessed (wrongly as it turned out) had been influenced by one of the televangelist’s organisation. The next few months were, to say the least, a bit un-nerving. Firstly I was informed that the conference had been postponed pending my giving them a date when I could be there, and then regular emails and calls telling me how many people were praying for me to go.

Many have read about and contributed to the work we have been successfully involved in post-tsunami in Sri Lanka, and once it became clear I would be travelling back to the sub-continent (and how cheap the flights from Colombo to Chennai were) I wrote to the “Helping Hands Trust” agreeing to go. It was one of my better decisions.

I left home not knowing what I would speak about, just knowing I had two one hour sessions to do. The passages that kept coming to me made me quite nervous. They were all about poverty and the poor. How could I go to India to talk to them about the poor?

From Chennai I travelled to Madurai where I was greeted like the prodigal returning; a large reception party who hung flowers around my neck and then bundled me into a car for a two-hour journey to another town I’d never heard of Rajapaliyam.

Juliet and her nephew Edwin were the best English speakers and told me I was booked into the only hotel in the area that had air conditioning. Although it was very hot, air conditioning was much further down my list of priorities than buying some clean drinking water – something I managed to do only once in five days. There is only so much Coke and Fanta you can drink! They showed me to my room at the Bombay Hotel, Rajapaliyam.

I was so moved by the kindness and hospitality of my hosts, who were clearly going to a lot of trouble for me. I assured them the room would be fine for me, and I knew it would be once I'd given it a good clean up. As ever the bathroom needed the most work. I'd noticed that the hand basin had no plug, but I hadn't noticed it didn't have a waste pipe either, until I went to wash my hands and got my feet washed at the same time. The air-conditioner made a dreadful racket but there were sufficient power cuts during the night to give time to drop off to sleep. I made that room very comfortable and was so grateful for it as it became my retreat as each day my mind and my emotions were "wrung out" in ways I'd never before experienced.

My first night was disturbed by a tremendous thunderstorm which washed away a part of the road to Watrap where the conference was to take place. No worries, the programme was just delayed 2 hours whilst folks came the long way round. I was told there wasn't time now for me to do two one-hour sessions, "just speak once for an hour and a half". This was not quite as big a deal as it sounded as half the time was taken up by the translator.

One of the most exciting things about the bible is that you can read a passage ninety-nine times and on the one hundredth it will say something that you never noticed before. Mark 14 contains the story of a woman who broke a jar of perfume and poured the entire contents over Jesus' head. It was a most extravagant thing to do and Jesus' disciples were annoyed at the waste and told her off in no uncertain terms. "Leave her alone" Jesus told them "she's done a beautiful thing" and then he went on to say: "the poor you always have with you and you can help them whenever you want, but you won't always have me". How often in our culture do we interpret this verse (in our minds at least) as "the poor will always be there, that's a fact and it doesn't matter what we do – we can't change it"? As I studied the text I realised that this interpretation was the farthest thing from Jesus' mind. In saying what he said he was making an assumption about the future social location of his disciples. He was in effect saying, you will always have the poor with you because you are my disciples, you know who we spend our time with, focus attention on, who we have our meals with. How often do we read that Jesus was dining with a leper, and it doesn't sink in that Jesus and his disciples were in the home of one of the most disadvantaged, looked down upon, and poorest members of the community. So Jesus was telling them they could help the poor whenever they chose to, tomorrow, the day after, next week... whenever. Because as Jesus' disciples that's what they did and that's where they went, it was as simple as that.

This passage from St Mark's gospel was the basis for much of what with some trepidation I shared in Tamil Nadu. Long before I finished, the

congregation were on their feet. As far as they were concerned, I had travelled from England just to confirm what they were doing already.

Over the next four days I visited church after church. I lost count. All seemed to have children and old people's homes attached. In one congregation of over 150, more than 50% were widows and orphans. These were, without doubt, the poorest people I have ever met. In another church around 80% of the congregation were what are referred to as "daily wage people". Hired by the day, they work in the fields for 40 rupees (50 pence) a day, or half that much for women. Twenty pence buys one meal of rice and a thin vegetable curry which they have once a day. At other times they munch on a plant which is a kind of cross between a cucumber and a melon and "monkey" nuts which grow in the fields.

Before the trip I was unaware that India had tribal peoples, but even poorer than the "daily waged" are the "Tribals". Going up into the mountains for 3 or 4 days at a time these people follow bees, sleeping in caves whilst they collect enough honey to sell in the towns, where they buy food and head off back up the mountains again. The Christian "Tribals" from the mountains around Watrap and Rajapaliyam meet for worship under a large tree which was specially decorated with a banner for my visit. The minister of the church has built a hut where he and his wife and young son Sam live. Gracie his 6-year-old daughter lives in one of the church children's homes as they can't afford to look after her at home. Where Gracie lives there are two-dozen children aged 4 to 12 who eat, sleep and play in the same room.

In a nearby village the church are building a couple of houses for the homeless, and although when I arrive its mid afternoon and extremely hot, the church is packed with people waiting for me to come and speak and pray with them. Some, I'm told, have already awaited our arrival for a couple of hours. I have never seen so many sick and disabled people and after speaking for 15 minutes I prayed with as many as I could. There are many with a mental handicap, many are limbless and one lady has leprosy that has eaten away her mouth so she can no longer speak.

In a village where all the property is owned by the local Hindu temple, another church rents a third floor room for its services. They are a young lively congregation who love to sing, but unlike our churches. Where we tend to have our praise time first and our prayers and ministry later, they do things the opposite way around. There is a very good reason for this. Their neighbours, who are all Hindu, don't like their singing and knowing that there is a big crack in the chimney at third floor level light straw fires below so that the room above will fill with smoke and after a while will stop the singing. It does.

The whole trip was one of the most emotionally and spiritually exhausting I have ever undertaken.

On the way to the airport I was told that the “Helping Hands Trust” have had dozens of calls saying how encouraged they have been by my talks, especially my conference address, and that many taped copies are now in circulation. Three pastors who previously would not work with “tribals” have now volunteered to join an outreach team on account of what I said. One lady who had sores on her hands and arms has been healed, but I don’t hear about so many others I have prayed for.

I left money to buy medicines for a lady with cancer, for Sam’s mum and dad, and for a few of the pastor’s families. Wherever we went “Helping Hands” always pointed out to me how much money was needed for this and that. They clearly expected me and the Epiphany Trust to be their financial answer to prayer. A daunting situation but one I feel surprisingly ok about. After all, even though we only met for a few days, God’s hand has clearly been on this relationship for a long time.