

Sunday 10th May – Easter 6

Deb Blackmore, Brunswick Uniting Church

A reflection on Afghanistan and John 15:12-17

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

In January last year I headed off with your love and support to begin a journey in Afghanistan with ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross). I was there for an amazing 14 months and have such precious memories of that time. My work there in that time involved managing the health programs we ran in the country and supporting and training the health staff we had involved in our programs. The programs included;

- 1: War Wounded Assistance program
- 2: Hospital Support
- 3: Health care in Prisons
- 4: ARCS Clinics supported around the country for primary health care
- 5: ARCS First Aid training for volunteers
- 6: Awareness programs about international law regarding the protection of health workers and facilities in times of conflict.

This month, our community here at Brunswick, is focussing on Compassion hospitality and Community. So much of my time in Afghanistan I was reminded of these things in much of what I saw around me and in the people I met.

Zakarya

Many of you are familiar with Zakarya and his family. This photo was taken when I shared the Eid celebration with them last year.

Our Church community has generously supported him as he moved his family to Kabul. A quick summary for those of you not familiar with his story: He is from a village in the East of the country near Jalalabad, which is very volatile in the conflict. When I first met him, his family were staying in his village and he was travelling back and forward every weekend to see them while he was working in Kabul. This travel was on one of the most dangerous roads in the country and each time he needed to return to work, it not an understatement to say that his family were unsure if they would see him again.

His children were unable to go to school because of safety issues for the last 18 months they lived in the village. The move to Kabul allowed so much to change for them. The 2 eldest boys started school and by the end of the first year finished 1st and 2nd academically in their classes. This new school year, the 3rd son has started school and a niece from his home village has also come to Kabul to start school, an opportunity she would never have had if Zakarya were not in Kabul. Shabnam his wife continues to learn to read and write in adult classes.

Zakarya and I shared an office in Kabul. We shared tea in the morning, an essential Afghan tradition. He arrived before me, so in winter he would start our temperamental Burkari (a diesel heater we had to keep warm) and the office was warm when I got there. I shared my almonds and sultanas and since I could not go anywhere due to security he would buy the bread I need each day. We had the most amazing talks about the psychological impact of the never-ending war (he was a psychosocial counselor before he started working for ICRC), about culture in our countries and what we find hard to accept, about spirituality. He would tell me about Islam and

the Quran. I would marvel at the similarity of so many parables that exist in his sacred text and mine. We talk about his understanding of the core of his faith, about kindness and honesty, about the treatment of fellow human beings, about how culture influences faith and often takes it hostage and how the heart of faith is often lost in the dominance of culture or the Law of religion. He talked about education and knowledge and how without it faith can be hijacked. He talked about the hopes for his country and the fears that he has.

Zakarya has always maintained that doing the work he is doing is vitally important to supporting the change in his country and that if there will be change in the country it will be because individuals make changes in their own lives and take stands. He spoke of the importance of standing up against corruption and injustice and I saw him do this on many occasions often at great personal cost.

I spoke to him just recently. A large explosion has occurred in Jalalabad (his home region) resulting in the death of more than 50 innocent people, with many more injured. He told me that this incident had reinforced his commitment to serve his people. I know he means this and I know he will truly give his all if it was asked of him.

I see in Zakarya's life lived, the great commandment. I am connected to him because we both love God and are seeking to living to by the heart of our faith. What we believe and have in common far outweighs the differences there may be.

ARCS Volunteers

One of the last activities I was part of with the team, was a 5 day First Aid Training for the ARCS (Afghan Red Crescent) trainers. These men will now go back to their communities and equip more trainers to train volunteers, the everyday people who will be able to offer life saving first aid to the people of the village where they belong. This is no small task and is not without great risk. In the time I was there, some of these volunteers lost their lives as they were caring for others, something that should never happen. And yet, these people continue to volunteer to try and make a difference in the community they live in and to make a difference in their country.

Over the days of the training, I watched these men work together as a team over the week, and saw the deep respect the younger men held for the bearded older men and the way these older men negotiated misunderstanding or dissent was quite amazing. They play these very roles in their home communities, they navigate the demands of many people, including the various armed parties in the conflict. The deeply held norms of this culture, whilst certainly contributing to many of the problems I saw, also offer such strength and cohesion to the community they belong to. In a world (and country) with so much uncertainty and upheaval, there is something profoundly comforting about surviving cultural traditions that have been here for so long.

Seeing this group of men pray together, brought together by the lilting tones of those elders calling them to prayer. Seeing them share a heritage in the beards and the clothes and the hats they wear that identify where they are from or the journeys they have had in life, has highlighted to me how important these traditions are to our sense of identity and belonging.

My time there and moments of interaction like these, gave me a painfully deep glimpse of how hard it has been for the Afghans who have fled from the struggles of this country and sought refuge on our shores, to leave behind their community and people. It is not something most do without having reached the limits of their endurance or hope. What they find here at the other end of their journey leaves me deeply ashamed and dismayed. I feel we as a nation have not fulfilled that great command to "love one another". I am however, incredibly grateful to be part of a faith community that speaks out to ensure that people hear the stories and the voices of those who flee and those who are left behind, to allow their humanity to be seen. That struggle must continue if we are to fulfill Jesus's command for us. Are we prepared to lay our life down in

some way for our brothers and sisters in need? Are we prepared to give the greatest gift?

Henna and female Police

I share this photo because it reminds a group of female police officers I did first aid training with in the South of Afghanistan. It reminds me of the beautiful hospitality and generosity they shared. The henna on my hands was a gift and was done over morning tea on the last day.

On the 3 days we were together, I heard their stories. We talked about the husbands they have lost in conflict, of the hardship they face as widows in the country. They shared their sorrow that conflict and uncertainty had taken away precious parts of their culture.

They talked about the risk of inviting people into their home and how hospitality was so hard to offer due to security concerns. And yet they find a way around it...henna in first aid for example!

They go to work each day fearing that they may not come home. Often police are targeted at checkpoints by opposition forces and many die in their work. Many police are simply doing this job to support their family and these women know that in order to give their children an opportunity in life, they risk their lives. It was a surreal experience, drinking tea, sharing lunch, painting hands and chatting as I would with friends at home and yet the reality of their life stood out in complete contrast to life at home.

Orthopaedic program: Photo #4

Soon after I arrived in Kabul, I visited the ICRC rehabilitation facility where they have the most amazing project. The person who has been instrumental in this is Alberto Cairo, an Italian physiotherapist who has lived and worked in Kabul for 24 years with ICRC!!! What started as simply a prosthetic limb making facility has become a comprehensive program helping people with disability live full lives with dignity and hope. It has been Alberto's own journey and willingness to love the most vulnerable and lay his life on the line for them that has been central to this program evolving.

The photo you see is of the nationwide wheelchair basketball competition that took place in January. This sporting program for people with disability started through the ICRC program. There are now teams from all over the country, including for women. In a country where disability leaves people on the margins, in this basketball stadium on this day, these men were conquerors and heroes, men focused only on their ability and able to leave behind them for a moment in time the hardship of life outside the stadium.

The national para-olympic team was chosen and the aspiration and hope of those who follow cannot be understated. It was amazing to see. Kabul were beaten by Maimana in the final, if you were wondering!

The beginning of this expanding journey for the rehab program started not long after Alberto arrived in Kabul. The terrible conflict and fighting worsened soon after he arrived and the rehabilitation program was closed for security reasons. It was felt to be too dangerous for staff to be there. Humanitarian activity was focused on the immediate needs of those affected rather than long-term projects. Alberto was "redeployed" to looking after programs for the displaced in Kabul. On the way home one day, from a distribution to a camp of internally displaced people who were in terrible circumstances, Alberto describes what happened;

"A bomb fell not far from my car -- well, far enough, but a big noise. And everybody disappeared from the street. The cars disappeared as well. I ducked. And only one figure remained in the middle of the road. It was a man in a wheelchair desperately trying to move away.

Well I'm not a particularly brave person, I have to confess it, but I could not just ignore him. So I

stopped the car and I went to help. The man was without legs and only with one arm. Behind him there was a child, his son, red in the face in an effort to push the father. So I took him into a safe place." ...unquote

This man was called Mahmoud and his son was Rafi. They had been begging in the area at the time as this was the only form of income there was for someone with his disability. From this random contact, and with the persistent encouragement of his trusted Afghan staff, the rehabilitation program restarted, helping many in desperate need.

This was as the conflict raged around the centre and with significant risk to all involved, mostly Afghan staff wanting to help their countrymen and women. The centre has not been closed since this time, even when the conflict has worsened.

PLAY VIDEO: http://www.ted.com/talks/alberto_cairo_there_are_no_scraps_of_men

About a year after this day, Mahmoud returned for review of his prosthetic limbs and it was obvious he was troubled. After some time he spoke to Alberto and said:

"You have taught me to walk. Thank you very much. Now help me not to be a beggar anymore." ... "My children are growing. I feel ashamed. I don't want them to be teased at school by the other students." I said, "Okay." I thought, how much money do I have in my pocket? Just to give him some money. It was the easiest way. He read my mind, and he said, "I ask for a job." And then he added something I will never forget for the rest of my life. He said, "I am a scrap of a man, but if you help me, I'm ready to do anything, even if I have to crawl on the ground." And then he sat down. I sat down too with goosebumps everywhere."

In a quick summary a trial job in the carpentry shop making wooden feet was found, and with some modifications to equipment, Mahmoud proved to be exceptionally good. Production in the workshop increased by 20% and more importantly he found dignity. He paved the way for a new approach in the centre and started an amazing process of giving hope to the more than 7000 new clients of the clinic each year. Hope that says "there are no scraps of men"

This centre is now almost fully staffed by people who have disability: many are double amputees: they now make prosthesis, are therapists themselves, cook or clean or do office work, or make the machines that make the prosthesis.... it is simply the most inspiring place I have had the privilege to visit. Many of these people have worked with the ICRC for the last 20 years and speak very plainly of the hope they gained when they came to this centre. And its not just land mine or war victims now but children with Cerebral Palsy, people with spinal injuries, children with club feet, people who have had a stroke... people who would have been completely lost in that chaotic society who have now been given hope and a future.

I still get teary when I think of think of what I saw... it was so beautiful. Little tiny toddlers walking with 2 lower leg prosthesis, therapists gently and kindly working with small children with severe Cerebral palsy, young men walking up and down with their bilateral above knee prosthesis almost to the hips... all so hopeful in a country and city often seen as having no hope.

I leave you with these stories of my time in Afghanistan as for me they are a picture of the great commandment to love one another. I saw people laying down their lives for their brothers and sisters and was deeply humbled. Every time one of our unarmed guards walked out of the compound ahead of us, allowing us only to move when they were happy things were safe, I had a visual reminder of what it means to lay your life down for a friend.

I saw the Vine connecting beautiful branches, and saw the lasting fruit that was borne of the works of these amazing and selfless people and I am deeply changed by it.