

Heart for the Poor – Peace in the Slums March 23 2010

I was surprised recently when I did not get a response from a text message sent to a friend in Bali. The following day I sent it again, the reply was full of profuse apologies as the previous day had been a public holiday called the “Day of Silence”. It celebrates the start of the Hindu New Year. My friend’s phone was switched off; nobody was working, radios and TV’s silent, cars left on the footpath. Everyone stays quietly in their homes which have been cleaned and tidied for the New Year. The whole idea sounds great to me. I will probably get little sympathy from those who live south of the Bombay hills but according to a recent study the Auckland where I live in is [growing by 50 people a day](#) who need extra 21 houses and 35 more cars on our congested roads. Yes every day! That is a lot of buzz and activity.

Auckland’s woes are insignificant compared to the chronic overcrowding in the slums of Delhi. Fresh memories remain after my last visit meeting rural poor driven off their arid fields living in small shacks built to within millimeters of passing trains. Not once did I experience anything approaching silence in my time there. Not only do residents have to deal with a lack of water, sanitation, power and footpaths; they are charged high rents by unscrupulous slum lords who will bulldoze their shacks at the slightest provocation.

Organising access to water, sanitation and health services has been a focus of TEAR Fund’s Christian partner in Delhi, Asha. Dealing with the slum lords is harder as they work outside the law bribing police and local government officials in order to maximise their profits. Asha encourages residents to form self help groups. Once these groups are functioning training programmes are designed to match the needs of their community. The sessions might include tenant’s rights, negotiating with your local government office and accessing government services. The great thing is that when whole communities unite, they are able to stand up to violence, intimidation and extortion from the bully boys hired by the slum lords.

Asha’s Christian staff take seriously God’s command in Leviticus 19:33-34, *“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress them. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love them as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”* Its true, we were all aliens once bringing our customs and celebrations to new lands. How well do we look after the migrants amongst us?

I don’t know how the Balinese manage to celebrate the “Day of Silence”, maybe they sleep all day, sounds great! The residents of Delhi’s slums do not have ghetto blasters, phones and TV’s, but their sheer numbers the hammering of local vehicle dismantling businesses, the roar of traffic and rumbling trains creates an incessant wall of noise.

However today because of the work of Asha migrant families sleep in peace knowing they are safe from the alienation they experienced when they arrived from their villages seeking a better life.

Prayer: Break our hearts over what breaks yours, Lord. For the rural poor driven to cities, who endure hostility and marginalisation simply on the basis of their religion or caste, we ask your strength. And for those of us, who call ourselves followers of the welcoming Christ, grant us the strength to stand with those who are equal in your eyes, even if they are not equals before the law or equals in the eyes of some. Amen.