

'Brother Suns And Sister Moons'

Engaging A New Dark Age

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- Lately I have been having a recurring nightmare - that the world is moving slowly but surely into a new dark age.

Now...

- You may well be sitting there thinking that this superannuated hippie must have taken too many psychedelic drugs when he was young and developed a paranoid psychosis from which he has never recovered - even in his old age.
- But let me make three points in my defense...
 1. During my youth I was involved doing drug rehab - not drugs!
 2. I'm not psychotic. I'm neurotic. And just because I'm paranoid, doesn't necessarily make me - automatically - always wrong.
 3. There are some sensible people who actually agree with me!
- Jacques Attali was a professor of economics at the Polytechnique in Paris, and was appointed as the president of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development based in London. He is, as you might imagine, a very sane and sensible man. The *Economist* says he is 'brilliant'. *Time* magazine calls him a 'one-man think tank.' And Alvin Toffler says - 'He has things to teach us all.'
- And Attali says: '*By 2050, 8 billion people will populate the earth. More than two-thirds will live in the poorest countries. Seeking to escape their desperate fate, millions will attempt to leave behind their misery to seek a decent life elsewhere. But neither the Pacific nor the European spheres will accept the majority of poor nomads. They will close their borders to immigrants. Quotas will be erected and restrictions imposed. (Renewed) social norms will ostracize foreigners. Like the fortified cities of the Middle Ages, the centres of privilege will construct barriers of all kinds, trying to protect their wealth.*'
Millennium Random House New York 1991 pp 74-78
- And, when I wake up every morning, I see every reason to believe that the nightmare that Jacques Attali and I both share is becoming a terrible reality.
- As I look around, I can see signs **the New Dark Age has begun.**
- Some of the features of emerging neo-feudalism that I observe include:
 1. The emergence of powerful, unelected and/or unaccountable leaders.
 2. These 'lords' offer protection in return for subservience and services.
 3. People are given a choice - they are either 'for' or 'against' these 'lords'.
 4. Those people who are 'for' these 'lords' live their lives as their 'vassals'.
 5. 'Vassals' wait on the 'lords', live off the crumbs that fall from their lords' 'tables', and find refuge - in times of danger - inside their lords' 'castles'.
 6. Those people who are 'against' these 'lords' are branded as 'infidels'.

7. The 'lords' wipe out 'infidels' either by leaving them to starve 'outside their gates'- in times of hunger - or by slaughtering them in 'crusades'.
 8. There are no universal basic human rights. The only 'right' is 'might'.
 9. 'Civilisation' is the private preserve of these 'lords' and their 'vassals'.
 10. And they justify this iniquitous 'civilisation' in the name of religion!
- Zbigniew Brzezinski, who served as the National Security Advisor in the Carter administration, supervised the beginning of the Afghan war and credits himself for having brought down the Soviet system, in the true spirit of the son of a Polish aristocrat that he is, says: 'The three imperatives of geopolitical strategy are to maintain security depend-ence among the vassals, keep tributaries pliant, and keep the barbarians from coming together.'" [*The Grand Chessboard*, New York, Basic Books, 1997]
 - Australian sociologist Ghassan Hage says 'Not so long ago the state was committed to the welfare of everyone within its borders. (We even called it 'the welfare state'.) That is no longer so.' p20
 - 'We seem to be reverting to neo-feudal times, when the boundaries of civilisation no longer coincide with the boundaries of the nation, but the boundaries of upper class society...' p18 'There are no universal rights - only the privilege of the elite.' p20
 - 'We are increasingly witnessing the rise of a culture that combines a siege (castle) and warring (crusade) mentality; by necessity it emphasizes the exclusion (and/or) eradication of the potentially threatening other.'p140
 - 'In each country now - there are first world elites and third-world threats to the elites. In this neo-feudal age the challenge is not how to integrate the marginalised, but how to rid ourselves of these third-world (threats – the refugees and refugee claimants - that we have on our doorstep.)' p20 *Against Paranoid Nationalism* Pluto Press Annandale 2003
 - We are beginning to build more and more of what we euphemistically call 'gated communities'. Citadels guarded by walls, infra-red cameras, heat-sensitive alarms and private security companies. Purpose-built - as the developer of Sanctuary Cove - put it: 'to keep the cockroaches out!'
 - There is some evidence to indicate that the present government is trying to turn the whole of the continent in Australia into a 'gated community' like Sanctuary Cove. Millions of dollars of government funds - dedicated to foreign aid - is being spent on what the government calls the 'Pacific Solution' - a flotilla of heavily-armed patrols dedicated to preventing asylum seekers from ever setting foot upon our shore. It is a policy that is neither 'pacific', nor a 'solution'. It's simply meant 'to keep the cockroaches out!'

How Can We Engage The New Dark Age?

- The two preferred options are ...
 1. Fight!
 2. Flight!

- The first option is - **Fight Against The Darkness!**
This is the crusade option favoured by the aggressive hawks among us.
- George Bush calls it a 'war against terror', against 'the enemies of freedom', originally code-named 'Infinite Justice', now known as 'Enduring Freedom'.
- Which has succeeded in overthrowing the Taliban - but at the expense of 'bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age' and - in the grand tradition of the 'great' crusades - alienating, if not antagonizing the entire Muslim world.
- Hence it is not surprising that the majority of Australians are quite critical of the proposed American crusade against Iraq. Most prefer flight to fight.
- Which brings us to our second option- **Flight From The Darkness!**
This is the retreat option favoured by the quiescent doves among us.
- Patricia Brown likens this option to the medieval 'cathedral town' - a 'full-service, 24-7, cradle-to-grave, mega-church, residential-destination centre', where people can live quiet lives protected from the scary world around it.
- The 12,000 member mega-church - the Community Church Of Joy - located in Glendale, Arizona, has already built their own sanctuary and are in the process of spending \$200 million, building their own housing estate, school, and skate park; their own hotel, convention centre, and water-slide; and even their own mortuary; so congregants never have to leave the safety of the church grounds
- Many Australians are attracted to this hermetically-sealed, hygienically-safe, American mega-church model - with or without the buildings to go with it!
- According to Robert Putnam, evangelical, charismatic and pentecostal churches are more inward-looking than outward-looking, and the people that attend them are more likely to be involved in their churches than in their communities.
- According to Peter Kaldor, *forty percent* of people in these churches said they had *real* contact with *less than two* people in the community per week - including *sixteen percent* who had *no* contact with people in the community at all!
- Also, according to Kaldor, *seventy-eight percent* of people in the church - especially in evangelical, charismatic and pentecostal churches - said they weren't involved in helping people in their communities in any way at all!
- It is clear that Christians reflect the dominant response of their society - to retreat and hide behind locked doors.
- This is not the first time in history Christians hid behind locked doors!
The first time was shortly after the crucifixion of Christ (John 20v19-20)...
'On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together, hiding behind locked doors because they were afraid. And Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you! Be not afraid!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. And again Jesus said, "Peace be with you!" And then he said to them, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you.'
- According to the scripture it would seem that (#)Jesus knows where to find us at times like these. He seeks us out wherever we are 'hiding, behind our locked doors.' (#) I don't know how he does it, but somehow or other he manages to

walk through the walls we have built around about us, and he speaks to us. (#) Saying "Be not afraid." A saying that is repeated over three hundred times in the gospels and the epistles. (#)"Be not afraid." He says to us again and again. "God is love. And being held safe in the ever-lasting, never-failing arms of the perfect love of God means you have no reason to be afraid. (#)Peace be with you. Receive my spirit. For my strength is made perfect in weakness."

- Jesus suggests there are not just two options - but three.

As we have already seen, there is:

- 1. Fight Against The Forces Of Darkness!**
- 2. Flight From The Forces Of Darkness!**

But there is a third option:

- 3. Being Light In The Midst Of Darkness!**

This is the creative option advocated by Christ.

- Christ claimed to be 'the light of the world', and called on his disciples to reflect his light in the darkness. He said to them, "Do not try to overcome evil with evil, but seek to overcome evil with good. You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine in the darkness that people will see the good that you do and recognise that it is from God. As the Father sent me, so send I you."

How Can We Be Light In The Midst Of Darkness?

- In my view the only hope for a world entering A New Dark Age would be the emergence of new Brother Suns and Sister Moons.

❖ The story of 'Brother Sun and Sister Moon' began in 12th century Italy.

Francis was born to a French mother and Italian father in 1182, and his father called him Francesco - or Francis - after a trip to France. The 'little Frenchman' was brought up on romantic French ballads sung by traveling troubadours. The son of a wealthy merchant, Francis led a cavalier life in his youth, and was considered 'the life of the party' by his contemporaries.

Francis grew up with the dream that one day he would become a knight. So, in his early twenties, Francis took to the opportunity to fight for Assisi against a neighbouring town. However, his haughty military career came to an abrupt halt, when the young Francis was captured and incarcerated.

This time was to prove a turning point for Francis. For, during the year in prison and the year in convalescence following his release, Francis thought long and hard about his life. His dream of becoming a knight seemed ridiculous in the light of the harsh reality of war that had confronted him.

One day, when Francis was riding along a road, he simply stopped dead in his tracks. It was as if he could not carry on any more as he was. He dismounted, undressed, then - bit by bit - took all his knightly regalia - including his horse, and his sword and his armor - and gave it all away.

His father became exasperated with Francis, over his prodigality with the family's property, and organised a meeting with the local bishop to pull him into line. But it backfired big time. Francis responded to his father's complaints by renouncing his family, and his family's property, altogether.

Right there and then he gave back everything his family had given him. Including the clothes that he was wearing at the time. So that Francis stood there naked as the day that he was born. Then he turned to his father and said: 'Until now I have called you father, but from now on I can say without reserve, "Our Father who is in Heaven" - He is all my wealth - I place my confidence in Him.'

In order to consider his future, Francis decided to spend some time living as a hermit beside an old church in San Damiano. While there Francis heard a voice calling him, saying, 'Rebuild my church.' Francis responded to the call by repairing the ruins of the church in San Damiano, then set about the task of reforming the life of the church throughout Italy.

Francis approached the task of renewal - not as a legislator - but as a juggler! He had been brought up with troubadours coming to his house, singing romantic ballads that stirred the heart; and he aspired to be like one of the jugglers who accompanied the troubadours, drawing the crowds for the musicians, so they could listen to the music of the heart that they played. As *Le Jongleur de Dieu*, a 'Juggler for God', Francis wanted to travel from town to town, like an entertainer, without a penny to his name, introducing people to *joie de vivre*, the 'true joy of living'.

Considering his views, it is quite remarkable that Francis did not rage against the pompous opulence of medieval society. Instead, ever the romantic, Francis tried to woo the people away from their preoccupation with the trappings of power, and get them to fall in love with the lovely 'Lady Poverty'. Poverty was not an end in itself. But, as far as Francis was concerned, people needed to be willing to be able to joyfully embrace poverty in order to follow the way of Jesus and joyfully embrace the poor.

In 1210 Francis obtained approval for a simple rule dedicated to 'apostolic poverty'. He called the order the 'Friars Minor'. And this band of 'Little Brothers' followed the example of their founder in caring for the poor.

Then in 1212 Clare - a wealthy friend from Assisi; who, like Francis, had been converted, and had given all her wealth to the poor - started a sister order to the brothers, that was to become known as 'the Poor Clares'.

Francis and Clare set about their task with such enthusiasm that people all over the place wanted to join them. And, as hundreds and thousands of people joined in from all over Europe, the humble movement of 'Brother Sun and Sister Moon' began to gradually engage - and eventually change - the Dark Age in which they lived - in the light of the gospel.

Many historians consider the rule of life that Francis and Clare advocated for lay people as one of the major factors in the demise of the feudalism that defined the Dark Age of their day. Feudalism was a pre-modern, but very sophisticated and very effective system of control, upon which our post-modern system of oppression and exploitation may well be based. It was built on the foundation of a network of castles, guarded by towering walls, and protected by heavily-armed patrols of free-lance mercenaries, hired to safeguard the wealth - and well-being - of the castle inhabitants.

Francis and Clare undermined feudalism simply by encouraging all their brothers and sisters to lay aside their weapons, unlock the gates of their castles, welcome outsiders in, and gladly share their wealth with the poor.

- ❖ A classic example of the impact of their movement was in the life of Elisabeth von Thuringia, known as the 'Elisabeth of Many Castles'.

Elisabeth was born in 1207, probably at Pressburg, in Thuringia. She was the daughter of King Andrew II and Queen Gertrude of Hungary.

King Andrew II - by all reports - was a bad king, whose misrule led his nobles to a revolt against him. They eventually managed to get the King to sign an edict called the Golden Bull - that was Hungary's Magna Carta - a charter of rights and responsibilities.

Queen Gertrude was apparently a good woman who, unfortunately, got implicated in the politics of the day, and was assassinated by the nobles in 1213. Elisabeth was just seven years old when her mother was murdered.

But before she died, Gertrude managed to do two things that were to shape the rest of her daughter's life.

The first thing was to share her faith with her daughter. Gertrude was a very devout Christian, and she encouraged Elisabeth to pray regularly from a very young age.

The second thing was to arrange her daughter's marriage. By the age of two, according to the custom of the time, Elisabeth was betrothed to the eldest son of a local Landgrave. When the eldest son - Hermann - died, she was betrothed to the second eldest - Ludwig.

Ludwig married Elisabeth in 1221. When he was twenty-one and she was fourteen. Ludwig proposed that they take 'Piety, Chastity, and Justice' as their family motto. They committed themselves as a couple to pray regularly, practice hospitality, and rule justly.

In the same year Ludwig and Elisabeth were married, the Franciscans set up their first base in Germany. And Brother Rodeger, one of the first Germans to become a Franciscan, became Elisabeth's spiritual mentor. He encouraged her to live out the Franciscan ideals - of kindness and service - as much as she could.

Elisabeth was very rich, and had brought great wealth a dowry to her marriage with Ludwig. In the early days she had so many castles she was called 'Elisabeth of Many Castles'. But as time went by this very wealthy woman became increasingly concerned for the poor. And she began to ride around the countryside, assessing the plight of the impoverished among her people.

Elisabeth couldn't see the need and not respond to it. So she began distributing alms all over kingdom. Even giving away the robes of state and the ornaments of office. Once she started giving, Elisabeth couldn't stop at charity. And she looked for ways to give herself. She built a twenty-eight-bed hospital for the poor in Wartburg, and visited the patients daily herself. And she helped feed nine hundred hungry people daily herself.

Ludwig and Elisabeth lived such exemplary lives that people started to refer to them as 'St Ludwig' and 'St Elisabeth'. However, they were not only exemplary, they were also happy. And they had three children together - Hermann, Sophia, and Gertrude.

In 1227 Elisabeth's beloved husband, Ludwig IV, died. And the twenty-year-old Elisabeth was inconsolable. 'The world and all its joys is now dead to me,' she cried. The next year Elisabeth sent her children to stay with her aunt, formally 'renounced the world', gave away her inheritance, and joined the Franciscans, as the first tertiary in Hungary.

The queen now dedicated herself to serving beggars. She provided them with clothes and shoes - and agricultural tools. She opened the first orphanage in eastern Europe for destitute children. And, at the hospice she established in Marburg, she tended to the needs of dying lepers with her own hands - washing the sick and burying the dead.

On November 17th 1231, Elisabeth died. Worn out as much by the lack of support that she got from her spiritual director, as from her implacable service to the poor. But, at the age of twenty-four, Elisabeth died one of the most influential activists in thirteenth century Europe.

The political philosopher, John Ralston Saul, says of Elisabeth, 'She and Francis of Assisi were the most famous activists (of their day). To a great extent they laid out the modern democratic model of inclusion - an important step towards egalitarianism. Elisabeth used her position, as a member of the ruling class, to put the ideas into action.'

'Like many others, she created a hospice. But unlike others, she went beyond pity and charity. She washed the sick and buried the dead. It is hard to imagine now the public impact of a royal figure washing the bodies of the homeless dead. Imagine the (President, Prime Minister - or the Governor General for that matter) not visiting or holding hands with street people, but (actually) washing their bodies for burial.'

'Elisabeth ...took the elements of personal responsibility, set out tantalisingly in the New Testament, and imagined a social model which ...would change our societies.'

Developing movements to engage the coming Dark Age.

- **Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the (in)famous 20th century revolutionary, reflecting on his own life, in the light of the life of his 12th century 'comrade', wrote in his Letters On Modern Atheism : 'I made a mistake. Without doubt the oppressed multitude had to be liberated. But our method only provoked further oppression - and atrocious massacres. It is too late now to alter the past - but what was needed to save Russia were ten Francis of Assisi's'**
- **I think Lenin was right on three counts.**

One - the oppressed need to be liberated.

Two - a violent struggle only serves to provoke further violence.

Three - the way forward is best represented, not by comrade Lenin, but by brother Francis - and sister Clare!

- The past can not be altered. But the future can be. And to change the future - 'without provoking further oppression' - we need to develop movements that will engage the coming Dark Age as *faithfully* - and as *effectively* - as Francis and Clare did in their day.
- No matter how bad things are, the good news is - we can always '*repent*'.
 - ✓ We can *repent* of our idolatry of wealth.
 - ✓ We can *repent* of our apathy towards the poor.
 - ✓ We can *repent* of our support of the current status quo.
 - ✓ We can *repent* of our un-Christ-like attitude towards others.
- We still have time to *turn around* and *change the way we live our lives!*
 - ✓ We can *turn around* and - like Francis and Clare - *embrace* 'incarnation', rather than 'imperialism', as the way to go - coming alongside people as one of them, setting aside our agenda, and creating time and space in our lives to serve them. (Phil 2: 6-8)
 - ✓ We can *turn around* and - like Francis and Clare - *embrace* 'holism', rather than 'dualism', as the way to go - sharing the good news in word and deed with an integrity that seeks to do justice to people that is essentially evangelistic. (Luke 4:16-21)
 - ✓ And, we can *turn around* and - like Francis and Clare - *embrace* those who suffer as our brothers and our sisters - assisting the poor, caring for the victims of oppression, and confronting the perpetrators of oppression - in spite of opposition from both the church and the state. (Matt 5: 6-12)
- I use the verb '*embrace*' to describe the movement we need to make quite intentionally. For, as Miroslav Volf (an evangelical theologian from Croatia whose own family was displaced during the purge of 'ethnic cleansing' that took place in the former Yugoslavia) tells us, now - more than ever before - there is a desperate need for us to recover '*embrace*' as the sacrament *par excellence* of all truly Christ-like people, groups and organisations.
- Volf says that 'a refusal to *embrace* the other, in her otherness, and a desire to purge her from ones' world by ostracism or oppression, deportation or liquidation, is an exclusion of God; for our God 'is a God who loves strangers!'
- He says he knows some say 'too much blood has been shed for us to live (in peace) together.' But, he says, Christ calls us to *embrace* the other, because the 'only way to peace is through *embrace*.'
- An embrace involves
 - 'a double movement of *aperture* and *closure*. I open my arms to create space in myself for the other. The open arms are a sign of discontent at being myself only, and of a desire to include the other. They are an invitation to the other to come in and feel at home with me, to belong to me.'
 - 'In an embrace I close my arms around the other - not tightly, so as to crush her, or assimilate her forcefully into myself; but gently, so as to tell her that I do not want to be without her in her otherness'.

- 'An embrace', Volf says, 'is a *sacrament* of a catholic personality. It is 'a microcosm of the new creation' - a ray of light in cruel, dark times.
- The key issue for us to consider in this movement is *conversion*. Not the conversion of *others*. But the conversion of *ourselves*. For it's *only as we are converted to the spirit of Christ, we can hope that others may be converted through our witness*
 - The test of the authenticity of our conversion will be seen in terms of how we treat the victims of our political economy - how we treat the ones that most of humanity considers least.
 - The test for us today is the same as it was for Francis and Clare in Assisi those many centuries ago.
 - How we treat displaced people in our own country
 - indigenous people
 - and asylum seekers
 - And how we treat impoverished people in other countries
 - children at risk
 - and destitute communities
 - Jesus - the displaced child and the impoverished man - says 'whatever you do for one of the least of these, you do for me!' (Matthew 25v45)

Servants – an example of a movement engaging the Dark Age

- I am an elder with Servants to Asia's Urban Poor. As many of you know, Servants is a network of faith-mission communities committed to living and working holistically with the poor 'outside the gate' in Asia's urban slums.
- Servants have been going for twenty years, and they have developed faith communities in India, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines. They seek to do whatever they can to help the poorest of the poor - everything from developing informal networks of supportive relationships through to developing formal organisations delivering professional community services.
- Servants are a humble but important model of a movement that seeks to flesh out the spirit of Christ in contemporary terms. If you get a chance to talk with them, grab the opportunity to chat with a cup of tea in one hand and a notebook in the other. As their stories are inspiring and instructive.
- Let me tell you a couple of stories that I found particularly helpful myself.
 - ❖ The first story is of '*Mike and Karen and the Kahawaha Slum*'.

A few years ago Mike and Karen are an Aussie couple who decided it was time for them to respond to the needs of the world's poor more personally, more practically. So they decided to go with Servants to India. Upon their arrival in New Delhi they began to look around town for a slum to live in. In 1999 Mike and Karen and their young son moved into the Kahawaha slum, built on government land along the bank of a drainage canal. They found a little hut and settled in alongside 900 hundred other families. Over the next couple of years Mike and Karen immersed themselves in the life of the slum, living alongside the slum-dwellers, learning their language and culture, and developing heaps of reciprocal trey relationships with people in the slums.

During this time they got to know Amir and Shruti. Amir was born and raised as a Muslim. He became a Christian as a result of reading Christian literature he confiscated at a check point when the O.M. driver refused to pay a bribe. Amir's wife, Shruti was born and raised as a Hindu. After becoming a Christian, she met and married Amir and they went together to study at the Bible College. When Amir and Shruti returned home, they met with angry reactions, particularly from the local Muslim community of which Amir used to be a part. A *fatwah* or order to kill was issued against Amir as an *infidel*. Amir and Shruti had to flee. So they made their way to New Delhi. They arrived with nothing, and spent the first month living on the platform of the New Delhi Railway Station. After that Amir and Shruti moved into a *basti* in a nearby slum. In the slum they found many other Urdu speaking migrants and refugees. And they felt a call to work in slums where there was a significant number of 'their people'. So Amir and Shruti began working in one of the largest slum colonies in Delhi.

Mike and Karen offered to help Amir and Shruti develop their work. And they were given the task of documenting the basic needs of the people in the slum. In the slum there was a total population of 135,000 destitute people in 13,200 *basti* shacks. There was no government water supply to the area, so all the water for the slum comes from hand pumps. Diarrhoea and dysentery were common. Residents also regularly suffered from malaria as they lived so close to the river. A government survey in 1997 suggested that the male literacy rate in the area was five per cent and the female literacy area was two per cent

Amir and Shruti then asked Mike and Karen to help them develop a project proposal which *Himmat* - their emerging local community organisation - could submit to for funding. The proposal was approved, and the project began. Over time *Himmat* has helped the people in the colony rebuild their houses after fires, then floods, then fires again, swept through the slums. They have trained 12 community health workers; started 16 kids classes; 32 adult classes; organized 80 micro-finance co-ops; and commenced 16 house churches.

On October 19th 2001, someone pointed out to Mike a notice that had been pasted onto the communal toilet block. It said that the council was going to clear the slum and relocate the people 25 kilometres away in 6 days time! Understandably, the people were in an distraught! Mike called several community meetings to discuss the eviction. After hearing anyone who wanted to contribute, the people decided they needed to get 1) a stay order until winter was over, which would give them time to raise the deposit to buy new land in the relocation area; 2) legal title to the new land before the relocation took place, and 3) legal entitlement to new land for all people in the slum who owned huts.

Mike, who is a lawyer by training, had identified a group of local lawyers who could take the case to the Delhi High Court. He liaised between the representatives of the slum and the lawyers and, eventually, together they got the backing of the court for the slum-dwellers basic demands. During the hearings, a judge asked for a list of the families in the slum, and the council refused to make their list available. So Mike and his friends in the slum had to embark on the huge logistical task of making another list of all the families in the slum.

Chotu was one of Mike's friends in the slum who'd offered to help. And the two of them, with the help of their friends, set about the task of collecting all the information. Chotu's hut became the centre of operations, documenting everyone's name, ration card, hut number, and entitlement. After weeks of hard work, Chotu and Mike eventually got an up-to-date list together that helped ensure the

entitlement of a dozen or more families who were eligible but would have otherwise missed out in the allotment.

One day Mike was dropping his son off at school, when he saw literally hundreds of armed police in riot gear getting ready to forcefully clear the slum. Mike borrowed a friend's mobile phone and contacted everyone he knew in order to stop the provocation, and the inevitable violence that would result from the fighting that would follow the police action. Fortunately, at the last minute, the police force was recalled to barracks and the relocation was deferred.

Subsequently Mike and his friends were able to negotiate the peaceful relocation of the people, in the end getting land entitlements for more than eighty per cent of the slum-dwellers - some seven hundred and fifty families.

However, the people discovered there was no water, no electricity, next-to-no transport, and their new land was three to five feet lower than the road, so when it rained, it flooded, and became a dirty great big swamp! Mike and his friends had to go back to court with the lawyers time and time again to make sure that the level of the land was built up, drinking water was provided, and electricity was put on. There are still not enough buses. So the struggle goes on. In the meantime, Mike and Karen and Chotu are working together with Amir and Shruti and *Himmat* and a range of other local agencies to provide small loans to help the people start some small businesses. Mike is also writing a pamphlet in Urdu on a protocol for relocating slum-dwellers, in the hope of it being used to inform people of their rights in future forced relocations in the city.

But not all of us will be able to pack up our bags and join a team in Manila Calcutta, Bangkok or Phnom Penh. In which case my next story is for you.

❖ The second story is of *'Peter Norton and the Cabramatta Gardens'*.

Peter, and his wife Adrienne, wanted to go to work in Vietnam. But, as often happens, things didn't work out the way they had hoped they would. So, instead of moving to Hanoi, this Kiwi couple decided that they would move to Sydney and work with the Vietnamese community in Cabramatta.

When they arrived in Cabramatta, Peter and Adrienne joined Urban Concern, a faith-community that was supportive of Servants work - not only overseas, but also back home, in our own backyard. Through Urban Concern Peter and Adrienne were introduced to Cabramatta and soon got to know not only the Vietnamese but also the Cambodians - and refugees from Former Yugoslavia as well. The whole world was on their doorstep!

In late 1999 Peter and his friends began to discuss the idea of 'doing something together' in the community. By January 2000 the idea of 'doing something together' in the community had resolved itself into the idea of 'a community garden'. In February 2000 the Hughes Street Playground had been identified as the preferred site. And in April 2000 a formal proposal was submitted to lease a portion of Hughes Street Playground as the site.

Now the Hughes Street Playground was a notorious place. It had been taken over by the 'smack squad' a long time ago. But Peter and his friend Jeremy thought it was the perfect place for local people to begin to take back some of their space and put it to good sustainable community use.

They not only got permission to use Hughes Street, but also a grant from the Fairfield City Council of \$10,000 to fund the initial set-up of the garden. And they got together with a group of local representatives over a twelve-month period to work out the details as to how to proceed with the project.

The group came up the idea of having an 'Open Day', to share the dream of the garden with the community, and to invite people of various ethnic backgrounds - especially those people on the 'margins' - to join in and work on the project together.

Invitations were given out in seven different languages through community radio and a letter-box drop, and about two hundred people turned up for the 'Open Day' in March 2001. Ninety filled in forms with their suggestions.

In June there was an excursion to other community gardens round town. In August there was a training day on 'organic gardening'. And in October there was the first on-site work-day. So by December 2001 the first eight plots were planted - and by January 2002 the first crops were harvested. And by July 2002 all twenty-three plots had been completed and allocated.

The construction of the garden has been dependent on the people in the project who are prepared to work for benefit of the whole garden, not just their own patch. And a committee of three people has been elected from each of the three language groups represented to manage the project.

The garden has been a great success on a number of significant levels. It has restored the park. The play area that had fallen into disuse is now being used again by families. The plots are fully subscribed and well maintained and people can gather fresh herbs and vegetables on a daily basis.

Moreover, the garden provides a productive therapeutic occupation for a group of retired, unemployed or underemployed Cabramatta migrants and refugees. And it also provides a safe place for people to forge reciprocal relationships of acceptance and respect across the cross-cultural divide - a symbol of what many of us believe is the 'kingdom of heaven on earth'.

Being A Light In The Darkness.

- We may be in A New Dark Age, but we need to remember that Jesus calls us - not to fight, or take flight, but be the light in the darkness.
- We need to re-connect with the words of Christ to his disciples 'hiding behind locked doors.' We need to re-mind one another that (#)Jesus claimed to be 'the light of the world', and he called on his disciples to reflect his light in the darkness. (#)That he says to us, "As the Father sent me, so send I you." He says to us "Do not try to overcome evil with evil, but seek to over-come evil with good." (#)He says to us, "You are the light of the world." (#)And he says to us, "Let your light so shine in the darkness that people will see the good you do and recognise that it is from God!"
- Francis and Clare show us that we can reflect the light of God's love by
 1. laying aside our weapons,
 2. unlocking the gates to our castles,
 3. welcoming outsiders in, and
 4. sharing our wealth with the poor.

- Elisabeth shows us that we can reflect the light of God's love in our lives by
 1. using our position to help people to start with,
 2. and then moving beyond pity to serve the poor
 3. slowly but surely and more faithfully over time.
- Mike and Karen and Peter show us that we don't need to be stars in order to be light, all we need to do is to reflect the light of God's love in our lives.
- You and I simply need to think of the 'good things' we can do that bring some 'light into the darkness', and keep on doing them come what may.
- It doesn't matter whether the 'good things' we think of are big or small, what matters is that we do them. Lighting a candle is better than cursing the dark!
- *Exercise:* Let's spend a bit of time thinking about one 'good thing' we can do to bring some 'light into the darkness'. Then let's talk with the person next to us about the thing we would like to do. Consider the excuses we have used to 'hide our light' in the past, and discuss how we can overcome the temptation to do it again in the future. Then let's pray for God to help us to 'shine our light'.

Sources.

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