

A football pitch in Rio

In my newsletter of April this year I told you the story of our visit to Penha Favela in Rio. My wife Gill and I were taken there by our son Joe - he heads up the Brazil team of Street Child United. Joe and the team, with others, worked for months to get a much-needed football pitch for young people in the local community.



Joe Hewitt with some of the street children during the Street Child Games in Rio in March this year

While watching the Olympic Games from Rio you may even have spotted Joe hosting one or two athletes in Penha, to see the projects and to meet with some of the young people there. He took Darren Campbell and Michael Johnson. Radio 5 Live picked up on it as well.

It has been enjoyable watching the games coming from Rio and brought back memories of when we were there earlier in the year -

but we were also conscious that though the Olympics had been highly successful, Brazil struggles with various issues. The Olympics didn't really bring much hope to the favelas where there are so many poor. The violence was ongoing in the favelas, and even on one of the TV clips with Joe and Darren Campbell you could clearly hear a burst of gun fire.

Brazil, and perhaps especially the Olympics, is in many ways a picture of our world, where the richer countries could benefit and some of the poorer countries came away with so little. I was up in a favela, in March, which had a name meaning rubbish, or trash; I asked them what effect the Olympics would have and they just said, "It won't affect us." Millions were spent in our country to get the result of so many medals, but it is noticeable that a lot of poorer countries are struggling.

Meanwhile as the spotlight comes off Rio, the president Dilma Rousseff has been removed from power by 55 white men and faced an impeachment trial.

(You can read more about this [here](#))

It's a hard time for Brazil - the party of Dilma and her predecessor Lula da Silva have lifted 40 million people out of poverty, yet there are millions more in poverty. So Rio is a good picture of our world at the moment, with the huge divisions between rich and poor. Brazil has so much to offer, and the Games were fantastic but its way forward is going to be very difficult.

The Last Gardener of Aleppo

Channel 4 News came out with an extraordinary item the other day about a man called Abu Ward, who ran a flower shop in Aleppo right through all the war and bombing - freshly cut flowers in the middle of Aleppo's war seemed quite extraordinary.



Abu Ward, the Gardener of Aleppo

It was very poignant because his 13 year old son Ibrahim gave up school so he could stay close to his dad and help in the garden centre. Ibrahim talked about one customer, Abdul Aziz, who used to buy flowers in the shop, but now he's dead. And then Ibrahim said, "Whoever wants to buy flowers is welcome here... Sometimes it is people from the hospital who come here and sometimes it is fighters who come to buy flowers."

Sadly, in late May a bomb landed near the garden centre and Abu Ward was killed; the garden centre is closed and nobody comes to buy flowers any more. We follow his son Ibrahim to the graveyard. There are no flowers decorating the graves here. Ibrahim is devastated.

It was a very difficult programme to watch as it is so sad. But the news item ended with some words of his father, who described the cycle of life.



As he is talking he is cutting off an old flower and he says
"This flower is finished now, but a new one can start to grow."

Then he waxes philosophical:
"Flowers help the world and there is no greater beauty than flowers.
Those who see flowers enjoy the beauty of the world created by God. And when you smell them they nourish the heart and the soul. The essence of the world is a flower."

I found this very poetic. It seemed like a statement of William Blake seeing the beauty of the world, the beauty of God's creation, in a flower. And Abu Ward is right - he sees something so much deeper. He's a man who came from Aleppo, which had been one of the great cultural beauties of the world and one of the longest inhabited; he was living in a place that today though has been laid waste, thousands have been killed, but defiantly Abu Ward's whole existence was dedicated to the beauty of life. He didn't stop gardening. **He was a living poem that said beauty created by God is so much more significant than the destruction that people of war bring.** He said making things beautiful gives meaning to life.

Of one customer choosing some rosemary plants it was said, "Rosemary not for remembrance here as much as for resistance." This brought back to my mind a memory of a street in Baghdad that had all the bookshops - it was particularly a place where the books of poets were sold - al-Mutanabi Street where all the bookshops had been bombed. Here poets came, stood on the rubble, and recited their poems, and people sat round listening, some holding books or pieces of paper - **this is a glimpse of people unbowed and creative, refusing to give in despite the brutality and violence visited upon them.** They are an example to us.

Abu Ward, seeing the world in a flower, is an example to us.

You can see the Channel 4 news item [here](#)

Prayer

Loving God

The destruction of Syria is quite overwhelming

Where do we start to pray

Can we ever see a glimpse of hope

Picture after picture of bomb damage

And then we see Abu Ward and his son Ibrahim growing flowers

Because "flowers help the world

And there is no greater beauty than flowers."

Those who see flowers enjoy the beauty of the world created by God

O God, we thank you for Abu Ward

For his extraordinary example in the face of violence and bombing

He had a bigger vision - the vision of a flower

We particularly pray for Ibrahim, bereft without his father.

May the vision of hope that his father had

In turn come to give him hope.

May we recognise that God is to be found

Not in the madness of bombing,

But in the beauty of nature -

May we see eternity in a flower

Of Things Not Seen

Photographer Jim Grover has produced an exhibition and a book of black and white photos capturing a year in the life of a London priest. The priest is Kit Gunasekera, Vicar of St James' Church in Clapham. The exhibition was first at the Oxo Tower and I missed it, but fortunately Kit's wife Jill works with us at Amos Trust and she and Kit have provided me with a copy of the book of the photos. I had been prompted to ask to see it because I had seen a few of the photos from the exhibition and I found they spoke very powerfully.

At the front of the book there is a verse from Hebrews 11:1, which says "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." I've actually struggled with understanding that verse through the years, my father used to quote it but for some reason my mind couldn't really compute what was being said!

But this book really is the evidence of things not seen. The photos make visible the pastoral work of a South London vicar, a humble man going about his work.

And you see symbols of spirituality and faith, a photo of Kit at prayer, a photo of holy oils to anoint people, a photo of the bread and wine at Easter Communion - and most moving, Kit kneeling and praying by the bedside of a sick person. To me it's a powerful visual and spiritual journey: the Pastoral made visible in gritty South London, the power of faith in action transforming the mundane, holiness simply breaking through in a photo of a food bank collection, by the altar perhaps at Easter because the words on the altar cloth say "The Lord is risen". **The Lord is risen indeed, when you see the actions of a loving community for those who need support.**



Rev Kit Gunasekera

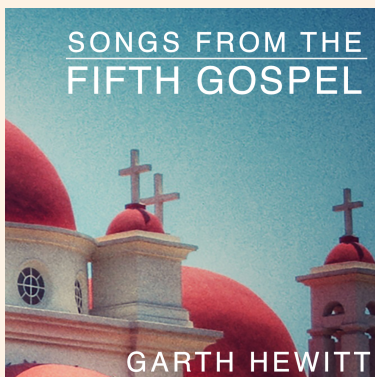
This book is an encounter with every day holiness, it's a book of hope, always pointing to things that are not seen. It restores faith.

The photos are to be exhibited at Southwark Cathedral and I will try to let you know when that is coming up because these are photos of the beauty of down to earth pastoral ministry where faith in action certainly gives me a deep hope.

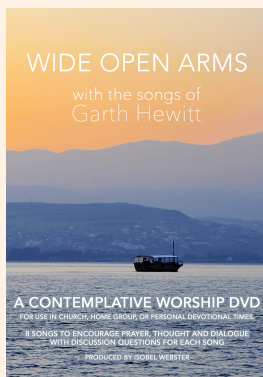
The last photo in the book is of somebody, perhaps an older person, touching the face of Kit the vicar, with underneath these words, "And now these three remain, faith hope and love, but the greatest of these is love." I don't know how Jim Grover, the photographer, has done it, but these are photos of faith, hope and love.

This book to me says something utterly meaningful about a good pastor.

The book Garth talks about, Of Things Not Seen, is available by emailing [here](#) and costs £14.14 which includes postage and packing payment will be by cheque made payable to Jim Grover Photography



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