

Dear Friends of St Bride's Parish,

Fr Rafal has kindly invited me to write an open letter to you that he will read on the 1st Sunday of Advent, something which I am pleased to be able to do as, through the Parish 3rd World group, you have supported the work of my community for many years and I owe you at least a word of thanks.

It is 50 years this year since I left my home in Dunblane Drive (just a short walk from the Village) and St Brides Parish to join the Salesian Sisters. I was just a wee lassie of 16 then – it would probably be unthinkable to make such a choice nowadays, given how much society has changed – but for me it was right and following the call that I experienced even at that young age has led me to spend 35 years of my life in different countries of East Africa. It has been an amazing experience for which I am profoundly grateful as I have learned so much from the people of Africa and received much, much more than I might have been able to give.

I have spent most of my years in Kenya, but have also served in different capacities in Zambia, Tanzania and Ethiopia – specifically in the Tigray region where currently the suffering is immense because of the war. In fact, I am heartbroken to think of what is happening there; to read about it in an impersonal way in the media is already disturbing, but when you can call to mind names and visualise the faces of people you have shared life with, it becomes all the more painful. Currently, three of our Sisters have remained in our community of Adwa in Tigray: one a Geordie from Newcastle who is over 80, one an Italian who is over 70 and a third Indian Sister in her 50s. They have stayed to try to give hope and provide what services they can by way of food and medical support, but I have heard that in these last days it has become impossible to get supplies to them – I ask you to join me in prayer for them and for those who have the power to resolve the situation.

Currently I live in one of the informal settlements of Nairobi called Dagoretti Market. The informal settlements are places where people have come to live in the hope of finding employment in the city - but these are areas that lack proper infrastructure such as adequate shelter, water and sanitation. We are a community of 5 Sisters, the others all young Kenyans and me as granny! Following the insights of St John Bosco, we believe that education is ultimately the best way to break the cycle of poverty that exists in such settings and so we carry out a variety of initiatives aimed at supporting young people through the system. For the younger and most vulnerable children we run an informal literacy programme through which we support those who, for one reason or another, dropped out of, or delayed to begin school. In small classes they are offered special teaching to enable them to catch up to the level appropriate for their age and we then get them back into mainstream schools. Meanwhile, we also engage a social worker to identify the challenges in the family that might have caused the problem in the first place and try to resolve them. Where the problem is mainly economic, we look for well wishers to sponsor the children so they remain in school. We currently have over a hundred children supported in this way.

Sometimes we also offer financial support to young people who succeeded well in Primary School but are financially unable to meet the costs of Secondary school education. It is in this area particularly that St Bride's 3rd World Group have really come through for us and enabled us to help these young people complete their education. We find that people are much more willing to sponsor cute small children than adolescents, so your contributions have really saved the day on many occasions. We are proud to have a number who have made it all the way to university, at which point the Government steps in with a loan system to enable them to go ahead. You too have every reason to be proud of this achievement.

We also run a small technical college offering practical skills like hairdressing, dressmaking, machine knitting, computer and craft. Training in craft work is also offered to those mums who are willing so they can supplement the small amount they can earn through casual work which might earn them just around GBP 3 a day with which to feed the children, buy clothes and pay house rent, not to mention school requirements.

There would be so much more to share about the resilience of people here, their strong sense of community and readiness to pull together when someone is going through a tough moment...but Pope Francis keeps reminding the priests that the homily shouldn't go on for more than 10 minutes so I better bring this letter to a close by wishing each of you a blessed season of Advent. I read somewhere that there is talk in some countries that Christmas might have to be 'cancelled' and I couldn't help but wonder how God can be prevented from loving us through the sending of his Son. St Paul was very convinced us that **nothing** can come between us and love of God, made visible in Jesus. (Rom.8:39)

So while I'm likely to be basking in sunshine and you shivering in the cold, we can nonetheless draw close in the celebration of one of the most amazing events the world has ever seen – God's choosing to physically come among as an assurance that He cared then and still cares now.

I hope I haven't bored you, but once again receive my very sincere thanks and those of my community and the assurance of our prayer.

Be blessed, Sr Eleanor Gibson - whose teeth once chattered with cold sitting in those very benches where you are now!!!!