

Julie Edwards CEO
Jesuit Social Services Annual Dinner
24th May 2008

During our 30th year we committed ourselves to a process of reflection, imagination and discernment.

Reflection on what we needed to stay true to, to take with us into the future; imagination about that future - what would a truly just society look like – what would we look like if we're to help build that; and ultimately a process of discernment as we sifted through the many good things that were possible for us to do, to choose, with freedom and desire, the direction for Jesuit Social Services into the future.

A few things stood out.

First – and it's the lifeblood of the organisation - a commitment, no, a determination to be faithful to those most in need. We'll never compromise on this.

Second – to go for the gap, un met need. And what is often the un popular need...discerning how and where we can make a difference and committing to that.

We don't have to be large, we don't have to be everywhere. In fact those things can get in the way, making the organization cumbersome. We need to remain fleet footed – because we want to be strategic.

Third – continue to be passionate and courageous: standing up boldly for people's rights and advocating for the kind of society that puts the most disadvantaged - and their needs - at the centre of our concerns.

This combination of non-negotiable core beliefs with a willingness to embrace change has already taken us in new directions: to Alice Springs a few weeks ago – to listen to what the Arrernte people are saying about their hopes for their children, their families and communities. To Western Sydney – where this week, for the first time, we're appointing a new manager.

Last year, like other years, we had our struggles – the toll of daily rubbing up against the chaos and the pain of people's lives; and, at times, the racism, the violence and exclusion they experience. The relentless work of seeking funding to keep alive programs that really make a difference and gives people hope and opportunities.

And then, towards the end of last, year we were given a gift. One afternoon, out of the blue, Aaron turned up – just to say thanks.

Aaron was one of the first young people we'd helped 30 years earlier.

Aaron had been abandoned by his father, in the first years of his life; then by his mother - who abused him physically and emotionally. So that, at age 8, Aaron and his brother were sent to a children's home. He started offending and then at 17 he got locked up for 18 months. And in that whole time he didn't have one visitor.

When he got out Aaron went to Four Flats, the precursor to the Brosnan Centre and Jesuit Social Services.

Since Aaron turned up late last year we've stayed in touch with him. He knew about the dinner tonight and couldn't be here, but he took it upon himself to record this message.

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The particular gift Aaron gave us when he came back to say thanks is this.

We do what we do - we reach out, we form relationships, we love – without necessarily seeing the direct outcomes of our work.

We know we're effective – our experience tells us that and there's plenty of evidence to back that up.

But it's rare to get to see someone 30 years down the track and to witness the full flourishing of their life.

And, in truth, we don't do what we do simply because of some anticipated outcome.

We do it because it's the right thing to do, the just thing to do.

At Jesuit Social Services we follow in the footsteps of the one who said "Love one another as I have loved you".

And Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuits, who saidwe should not help our neighbour coldly or in slow motion – rather he urged us to "run fervently" to do this.

We follow proudly in those footsteps. This is our heritage.

So when Aaron turned up after 30 years the gift he gave us was the affirmation that when we sow the seed we do so as an act of faith ...the seed goes into the dark, we no longer see it – but we believe.

You might have been wondering about the packet of seeds on your table. I invite you to take them home and plant the seeds.

They are a tangible reminder of the faith - your faith – that it takes to sow seeds – the implicit belief that they will grow.

Aaron talked tonight about the discipline HE had to show to learn the guitar – he talked about ‘discipline as freedom’....or that hard work bears fruit.

For us to build a just world – you and I – it takes discipline, hard work. Fundamentally it’s the discipline of being faithful – of not giving up.

Last year Jesuit Social Services celebrated 30 years. THIS year we’re saying we’re in this for the long haul – the next 30 years and beyond. And we want you to be there with us.

Together we’ll continue to plant the seeds. But, you and I, we may not be there to see the seed prosper, the plant flourish.

But we’ll do it in faith, believing that life is stronger than death and that love is stronger than hatred and division.

It’s up to us to believe AND to act – and to be faithful and disciplined in that. Therein lies our freedom.

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