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“Brother, Father, Mister, Doctor!” - From a Missionary Surgeon in the Philippines

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Abstract

The children’s faces lit up the darkness of the night. I had come with Bong, a Filipino, to treat a young child with a cough and high fever. The girl was sat with her 3 young sisters on a bench outside their ‘house’, a flimsy wooden shack which was their home. “Brother James”, “Father James”, “Mister James”, “Doctor James” they chimed simultaneously jumping up and down with excitement. “Just call me James” I responded in the local dialect, “much easier”. After speaking to the mother and examining the child we prescribed the appropriate antibiotics. “Keep it in the fridge” I advised the mother. Bong coughed, trying to give me a subtle hint. I looked at Bong and he smiled at me through the candlelight. The light bulb came on in my mind “of course, the candles...these houses d o n 't have electricity never mind a fridge”, I spoke to the mother once more “OK, we will come back every day to administer the medicine”. As we snaked our way back home through the coconut trees, tired but content, my steps made lighter by the gleeful voices of the children ringing in my ears, the days of ward rounds, white cell counts and chest x rays seemed but a distant memory...

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The children's faces lit up the darkness of the night. I had come with Bong, a Filipino, to treat a young child with a cough and high fever. The girl was sat with her 3 young sisters on a bench outside their 'house', a flimsy wooden shack which was their home. "Brother James", "Father James", "Mister James", "Doctor James" they chimed simultaneously jumping up and down with excitement. "Just call me James" I responded in the local dialect, "much easier". After speaking to the mother and examining the child we prescribed the appropriate antibiotics. "Keep it in the fridge" I advised the mother. Bong coughed, trying to give me a subtle hint. I looked at Bong and he smiled at me through the candlelight. The light bulb came on in my mind "of course, the candles...these houses don't have electricity never mind a fridge". I spoke to the mother once more "OK, we will come back every day to administer the medicine". As we snaked our way back home through the coconut trees, tired but content, my steps made lighter by the gleeful voices of the children ringing in my ears, the days of ward rounds, white cell counts and chest x rays seemed but a distant memory...

I had been in the beautiful and exciting Philippines for only a few months having joined the Verbum Dei Catholic Missionaries six months before. I had met them in Sydney, Australia where I had been doing a Research Fellowship in Plastic Surgery, looking at Distraction Osteogenesis, a technique to lengthen the shortened mandible. I had loved my time in Australia, the land of sand, surfing, tinnies and "No Worries Mate". I had come to the land down under to do an MD, and the game plan was to return to the UK to take up a Specialist Registrar post in Plastics and Reconstruction. I celebrated my thirtieth birthday there, a glass of Chardonnay in my hand, surrounded by some good Aussie friends, with a great career ahead, money, a house, a car - in fact all the things the world tells you will guarantee happiness, when the song by U2 came on, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for". "Is it true?" joked one of my friends. "What?" I asked. "That you still haven't found what you are looking for". I laughed, maybe ironically. I dared to have a little reflection on that question. Was there something more than all this? I was happy, fulfilled and all that but I felt there was something more. What if I never dared to take a risk, maybe in 30 years I would still be listening to the same old song on my sixtieth birthday? Do you know I didn't fancy wasting my life seeing as it is only one, it is short and you don't get to rewind it at the end. But what to do about it? I think these questions cross the mind of us all. Sometimes it is tempting not to ask them as the answers can be a bit challenging to find and sometimes the society of today does not provide ready answers. Better to go with the current, to go with the flow or better still, pour another glass of chardonnay and drown these thoughts in alcoholic bonhomie because it's back to work, time to step on life's treadmill again, it's the way it has to be isn't it?

Whilst on call for Plastics, it became 'normal' to see one or two cut wrists every so often, from young people who were unhappy. I began to question a few things around me. How come that in the land of milk and honey, where the young have "everything" they often lack the most important - the desire to really live life to the full? I remember one boy who came in who had tried to end his life after a bust-up with his girlfriend. He had severed his wrist so severely that he needed 8 hours of reconstructive surgery to try to fix all the cut tendons and nerves. After the long operation through the night we went to visit him. I noticed the unhappiness in his eyes. Maybe he was a bit confused post-op and hadn't realized his operation was finished. "We fixed your hand" I said hopefully. He started to cry. "You should be happy" I said trying to cheer him up "We fixed your hand". He looked straight at me with a piercing gaze that cut

right into me "You fixed my hand, but you didn't fix my life!" he cried. I was a bit taken aback. I was thinking what an ungrateful person he was after I had stayed up the whole night. What could I do? I had done everything I possibly could hadn't I? What more was I expected to do? Get him a new girlfriend? Well I figured it was just not my problem but you know, something that day changed in me. It was like a voice calling me to give more of myself. Not just my surgical skills or talents but to give my whole life to help. I had always felt up until then that the best way for me to help this world was as a Plastic surgeon but maybe it was to do something else? At this moment of my life I started to do something that I had never really done much of before, I started to pray. I had listened to many people before about what to do in life but I realised I needed to listen to God.

I had been brought up a Catholic and had gone to Church when I was younger. I had stopped going when I was a medical student because after dancing the Saturday night away into the early hours, I usually only came back to life by Monday, thus missing the Sunday services. I had actually had moments of intense prayer in my life. You know like praying for a new girlfriend, praying for an extension to the overdraft or praying to pass my first year anatomy exams. But now I felt like I needed some slightly deeper guidance. I started to ask God what I should be doing with my life because maybe it was not to be a surgeon. I was thinking of that young man and it was clear to me that it was not only his wrist which was wounded but his heart. But how to heal that? At that time I met some Sisters from the Verbum Dei Catholic Missionaries who were working in Sydney. I was very attracted to the simplicity of their lifestyle and the joy they transmitted to all. Their life was one of prayer, charity and sharing the Gospel. I started to learn more about prayer, to stop for a while, to get off the treadmill, to recharge, in fact to be still in the presence of the Lord.

I don't know if you have ever been in a darkened cinema for a few hours. When you leave and enter daylight it is hard to see but little by little you become accustomed to the light. I started to see more clearly. I asked Jesus what He wanted to do with my life. I assumed He could see things much better than me. How come I was still searching for something? What was the missing piece of the jigsaw? How could I help these young people around me who seemed to have lost their way a bit in life? I realised that the voice asking me to give my whole life was Jesus. He didn't want just my talents or surgical skills to help others but He wanted me, all of me. To heal Him, to help many wounded people. There is a moment when Jesus is dying on the cross and He says "I am thirsty". The soldiers at the foot of the cross gave him a bit of vinegar to drink. I heard the cry of Jesus today, alive, rising up from the hearts of many people, thirsty for love, for more meaning in life, thirsty for peace, thirsty for a brighter and better world. I began to believe. I realised that I could help to quench His thirst, even with the little vinegar of my life. So I did something crazy. I mean I had done crazy things before in my life, like investing my whole student grant in the College bar, cycling my bike inside Trinity college fountain, writing graffiti on the Berlin wall and all that but I mean something really crazy. Only love can make you do something so crazy. I said "Yes" to Jesus. I said "Yes" to His calling (the only previous callings I had been interested in were for last orders on a Friday night in the student bar). I said "Yes" to his crazy plan to follow Him, wherever, to do whatever He was telling me, to try to be His presence in this world.

I finished my research project, published it and presented it at the Australasian Surgeons Conference in 1999, where I won the Plastic surgery prize, and presented it for the final time at the British Association of Plastic Surgeons meeting in Dublin later the same year. I felt I was bowing out of the world of surgery on a high note, waving au-revoir to a career in Plastic surgery to answer the call of God. I had loved surgery so much but was sure that in answering this calling I was doing the right thing. Not even the pretty Paula could deter me as she inquired "Is there *no-one* who could make you change your mind?" fluttering her eyelashes wildly at me. But I was convinced and so I waved au-revoir to her too and began life as a missionary.

I was sent to the hot, beautiful, exotic, challenging and lively Philippines, to the island of Cebu. There I met 16 other missionaries, from all over the world, teachers, engineers, lawyers, army officers, bankers, from all walks of life. It is reassuring to see so many other young people answering the same calling. Life at first was exciting but challenging. I will never quite forget the shock of seeing rice for breakfast on my first day. I was searching for the crunchy nut cornflakes or at least some sugar puffs but to no avail. Of course I didn't say anything because I wanted to show that I was tough enough for this life in Asia. Then the rice came again at lunch and again at dinner, and then again for breakfast, wave after wave of it. Maybe something in my face gave the game away as my Filipino brothers asked "Do you eat rice in England?", "Yes, of course, but not for every meal" I replied curtly. My initial fears that I would die of malnutrition proved to be unfounded and little by little my stomach and my heart became more and more Filipino.

The Verbum Dei community was founded in 1963 by Reverend Father Jaime Bonet, and now has 500 missionaries in over 33 countries. We take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Poverty is a way of trying to live a more simple life which is necessary for everyone. If you just spend your life chasing after material things then you will always be chasing! It is a bit like the greyhounds that chase after the plastic rabbit, running round and round, but never quite getting their teeth into it. I have found that the less I have the more content I am. It really struck me that in my 5 years in the Philippines, the most generous people were the poor ones. I think the Filipino people would win a gold medal for hospitality if it were an Olympic sport. The only times I remember not receiving a warm welcome were in some of the richer houses! The chastity is to try to live with a pure heart, one that tries not to be selfish. I remember when we all started to go down with diarrhoea and vomiting. We thought it might have been the food until someone mentioned the water tank. When we looked inside we found some dead frogs! When the source was not clean everyone suffered. When we cleaned it up it was able once more to provide life giving water to many people. The obedience is to learn how to be really free. It sounds a bit challenging and it is at times. Like the song by Coldplay when they sing "Nobody said it was easy". But anything precious in this life is worth fighting for. For example relationships, friendships, our family, a marriage.

On the medical side, I found the tropical diseases quite challenging. I was trying to take care of the health of the missionaries there and I gradually came to know the gamut of 'tropical' diseases – dengue fever, amoebiasis, typhoid fever etc. Most of these I had only read about vaguely at medical school, thinking that I would never need to know about these strange sounding ailments! Occasionally I had to run the gauntlet with the local charlatans, the "mananambal" (local witch doctors). When our neighbour's son lapsed into a coma I had to convince them that it was not because he had offended the tree spirit by throwing stones at it but it was more likely due to meningitis. On another occasion I became angry at the local healer who had suggested the sacrifice of a pig and a chicken for a man with aplastic anaemia. Of course, in describing these situations I don't want you to think that the health care system is backward or basic, in fact quite the opposite. The Philippines have a good healthcare system, with well trained, highly professional doctors and nurses who can hold their own on any ward around the world, and many hospitals have state of the art equipment. The healthcare is excellent. Excellent that is when you can afford it. The problem is the widespread poverty which means that many lack basic healthcare. At this moment, I would like to ask you a question. Am I allowed? If you are a young medical student, aspiring to help the world, what do you think we can do about this? That over two



thirds of the world lacks basic healthcare. What a challenge! One day I saw a Doctor prescribing antibiotics to a very old man. After the consultation, the old man was crying. He could not afford the antibiotics. I wondered if the doctor had realised this that despite his years of hard studying and dedication to help others, and in the end he hadn't. I have met many doctors, who at the end of the day, are more interested in the health of their bank balance than the health of their patients. There are so many people waiting to be helped in our world of today. I think one life can do so much. Look at Mother Theresa of Calcutta. Everyone, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians alike can see what one life moved by love can do for others.

The five years I spent in the Philippines up until July 2004 were really a great adventure. One thing you find is that as a doctor (or even as a medical student) people will ask for your diagnosis or opinion about anything vaguely medical. This is a great privilege and also a great risk. I remember that I was expected to be an expert in all areas from ENT, to Obstetrics and Gynaecology to dentistry. One day when I was in the chapel praying I heard some of the missionaries shouting. "James!", "James!" "Quick there is blood everywhere!" I ran out of the chapel and was shocked to see a trail of blood drops on the ground. I started to go through the ABC of management of penetrating trauma, imagining a brother had been knifed...airway, breathing, circulation...remembering all the emergency techniques I had learnt in America during my month long trauma elective in Washington DC... "James! Quick he needs an operation!"...I ran up the stairs at full speed onto the landing to find "Boogie" our dog, being cradled in the hands of one of the missionaries. Boogie, a notorious fighter, had cut the bridge of his nose and it was bleeding profusely. "James do something, you are the doctor". Various suggestions were coming forth from my colleagues such as "Put him to sleep and operate on him" but seeing that Boogie had already tried to bite 2 missionaries including myself, I felt that he was not really interested in any TLC (tender loving care) we could offer. "Well Doctor, what do you think?" asked my brother. "I am a doctor not a vet" I reminded him before advising him that all would be well and Boogie would live. Sure enough the bleeding gradually stopped and Boogie bounded off, ready to fight another day.

Of course as doctors we face situations where you cannot win. Where there seems to be no hope, where you have to fight for someone's life often in the face of difficulties. I used to hate these situations because it can be seen as a failure when the person dies. I think God taught me to see it differently when I was there. One day a young man came to our house bleeding from his nose. He had been diagnosed with aplastic anaemia 3 months earlier but had no money for further medical follow up. His bone marrow was not working and thus was not producing platelets making bleeding likely. At the hospital his haemoglobin was 5g/dL with a platelet count of 15,000. He needed a 5 unit blood transfusion immediately. There was no free blood bank. If you want blood you need to pay for it (for a manual worker one unit is about 15 days' wages) or find donors. We gathered 5 others from 5 different countries to donate and told the 'patient' that his blood would be the united colours of Benetton. We repeated this process every 3 months. The hospital staff asked why we were helping this man as we were not getting paid, he was not a relative and for most of us not even from our own country. I suppose I saw this person as my brother and it moved me to want to help him. I think all of us from Japan, France, Philippines, and Vietnam saw this person as a brother, someone in need, and were trying to be a Good Samaritan in little ways.

His aplastic anaemia proved to be untreatable and he was finally admitted to hospital with platelets of 6,000 and brain haemorrhaging. In his final hours, I really saw how much a person can suffer and I tasted the misery of not feeling able to help, of being overcome by despair, of misery as it seems there is nothing you can do. Even his final medicines, phenytoin to stop him fitting in front of his family, an oxygen mask proved too expensive for us to buy. We had to borrow the money from the doctors. When he was dying I saw the face of Jesus again, a suffering face, "I thirst". A Jesus who suffers but a Jesus who encourages us to keep going, to keep doing good, to not give up. *"Whatever you do to the least of these brothers you do to me"*. Many times I think we feel little in front of the challenges of the world of today but I would encourage you all to not give up, keep going. As Mother Theresa said *"It is not how successful I am but how faithful"*.

I think one thing I enjoyed was being with the people there. We tried to reach out to many people and share their every day lives. Being with families, students, couples, teenagers. Organizing trips to local orphanages with teenagers, listening to prisoners in the jails, trying to find sponsors for the local children to go to school. For me it was an honour and a privilege to share with the Filipino people and also to live with others who wanted to help others too. I suppose I was lucky growing up in a happy family because many people have not experienced this. I remember one day being at a funeral and seeing a 2 year old child, completely dirty and covered in rags, standing on a table. I recalled the film title *"Angels with dirty faces"*. In one instant he slipped and fell, hitting his head off a wall. Soon his face was covered with blood. I approached rapidly and was relieved to find only a small scalp wound. I appealed for some betadine and cotton wool from the enlarging crowd. After initial treatment I asked for his parents. "Where is his mother?" I enquired. "No mother" responded a voice from the crowd. "Where is his father?" I shouted. "No



father!" responded another voice. How sad that this child had no one to care for him, no one to love him. "You are the father!" shouted a small voice from the crowd but to their amusement. Do you know in that moment I realized it was true. That our mission it is not to be a priest, or a doctor or a missionary, as if it is to have a title, or a profession but it is more than that. It is to be like a father I suppose, or a mother to many people.

I hope and pray that each one of us can work hard to help others, to be Good Samaritans in the privileged position of doctors, and also to be doctors with big hearts not just salaries. I am now continuing my missionary life in Rome, doing theological studies. I give thanks to God for the gift of being a missionary and the privilege of being able to take care, in a small way, of the physical and spiritual health of many people.

If you would like to write to me or find out a bit more about our work email me at jamesmctavishfmd@yahoo.co.uk