



Abbey Gate College

EASTER ASSEMBLY

2022

Our Easter assembly is a story. And it's a true story.

It happened about three years ago, when my family and I were living in the Far East, at a time when the concept of a virus outbreak that would paralyse every country in the world, create deserted city streets, and make everyone afraid of their neighbour was the stuff of fiction novels and films.

We took the opportunity to travel. It does broaden the mind. You learn so much more about what life on Earth can be about and how richly diverse our human species is.

We spent a few days in Cambodia. Next to Thailand and Vietnam, near the Equator. Older ones among you may wish to look into the country's history of the last 50 years – but I would advise more for our older pupils, since some terrible things happened, there was a lot of suffering, and many lessons were learned. A starting point may be the Oscar-winning film, *The Killing Fields*.

Anyway, Cambodia is now a tourist destination, a textile exporter, and very much a developing country. And by “developing country”, I mean: people living in corrugated iron huts, with no running water, no electricity, no cables, and only snake-infested bushes for toilets. Not everyone in Cambodia lives like this, but some do – so imagine that as a lifestyle when I talk about ‘poverty’.

My family and I supported the local economy by hiring a guide with a car, who took us one day to a water town. Now, a water town is a settlement of very basic, but very brightly painted huts around a main river. What is particularly unique is that the huts are on huge, wooden stilts. During the rainy season, the waters would rise and flood, but people's homes would remain above the water level.

At the time of our visit, it was absolutely not the rainy season. The stilts were very clearly visible and the river was a relatively shallow and narrow stretch of muddy water. In fact, if you have seen Tim Burton's engaging version of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, imagine the chocolate river in that as a caramel river instead. That is what we found ourselves on, in a little motor boat being driven by a local, with a propeller at the back that sent an endless fountain of caramel spray into the air as it churned through the

thirsty river. As other boats passed, the propeller had to be turned off; otherwise the hapless tourists in their nice linen clothes and designer sunglasses would get completely covered in muddy brown, dirty, and polluted river water.



As we sailed, we marvelled at these incredible homes on stilts, admired the brightly painted fishing boats, waved to smiling and friendly locals on the banks, and had moments of quiet: as we saw small groups of children, barely clothed, playing with the only toys they had – pebbles and stones from the riverbank.

We were taken to a floating café in the middle of a vast lake. The expectation was that we would spend more money for the local economy, so we did; and one of the purchases was a tube of Pringles crisps for my daughter. She ate a handful, and her responsible parents then told her to save the rest.

We were transported back along the river to our guide, who was waiting on dry land with his car. We were just getting in, to drive away from the water town and back to the hotel. My daughter was carrying her tube of Pringles.

At that moment, a small child approached her, barefoot and in rags, and held out her hand. My daughter opened the Pringles and gave the child a handful of crisps. It seemed

to take only a second, and then 6 small children, barefoot, in rags, were holding out their hands. My daughter hesitated, then shared out some more Pringles.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, about 20 children were now surrounding the car. The Pringles were almost finished. Even more children were running towards us.

“I haven’t got enough”, said my daughter. “I can’t help them all.”

“No, you can’t”, I replied. “Give what’s left to the nearest child here, then we need to leave. Keep smiling and wave goodbye. Show that the tube is empty.”

My daughter was quiet as we drove back to the hotel. I could tell that she was struggling a bit with what had just happened. And it reminded me of the tale of the starfish, which goes like this:

Two friends were walking along the beach when they saw that dozens of starfish had been washed ashore and were stranded on land. Immediately, one of the friends bent down, picked up a starfish, and threw it back into the sea. Then a second. Then a third.

The other friend laughed. “What are you doing?” they asked. “There’s no point. Look at how many starfish are stranded. You can’t possibly save them all. Just leave them. You can’t make any difference here.”

On hearing this, the friend bent down again, picked up another starfish, and threw it back in the sea. “You may be right, but I made a difference to that one.”

It’s Easter. It’s a time of hope. It’s a time to celebrate new life. You have got several days away from school now, in a troubled world that is still struggling, at headline level, with a viral pandemic and an unwelcome war in middle Europe. You may think that there is nothing you can do. That there is no difference you can make. That all of this is far too big, far too overwhelming, far too much other people’s problems.

No. These are all our problems, and they are our problems, for us to make a difference, however we can.

Every single act of kindness, giving, and caring will make an enormous difference to the person who benefits from it.

So, this Easter, take the time to make a positive difference to the lives of others, however small it may appear in the moment – the impact may be significant.