



**“Those who do what is true come to the light”  
(Jn 3:21)**

***Reflections for Lent from the African Jesuit AIDS Network (AJAN)***

### **The women of Kibera: witnesses of the Resurrection**

Some weeks ago, I met with some of the partners of AJAN at Guadalupe parish in Nairobi, to discuss the implementation of microfinance projects that promote the self-sufficiency of HIV-positive women from Kibera. Kibera is the biggest slum in Kenya and, some say, Africa’s too. During the meeting, the head of a parish association, Mirror of Hope, shared some fruitful experiences with us.

Chief among these was the story of Elizabeth, a divorced woman aged about 40, who is bringing up her two children as well as three orphans whom she adopted. Elizabeth had fallen prey to poverty, sickness and stigma related to her HIV status. She sold fruit and vegetables in a small alley in Kibera to meet her family’s needs, but she didn’t even earn enough to take food and water home every day, let alone to pay the rent and school fees of her children.

Elizabeth’s life was transformed when she joined an income-generating program where she learned how to make pretty baskets and bead necklaces. She excelled in putting the skills she learned to creative use. The market in Kibera is very competitive. When the sale of baskets declined, she adapted her know-how by making handbags, bracelets and necklaces to increase her income. By doing so, she was able to pay the school fees of most of the children in her care and to put nourishing meals on the table.

For me, the experience of Elizabeth and some other women in Mirror of Hope were the key to this Easter’s liturgical readings. The story of the women of Kibera testifies to the victory of good over evil with all it implies: social injustice, misery and stigma. It is a victory of life over death. The story of the women of Kibera finds an echo in the story of three women mentioned in the Gospel of Mark.

The three women went to the tomb with the firm intention of embalming the body of Jesus. In their heart of hearts, there was a niggling feeling of powerlessness: “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” (Mark 16:3) But the ardour of their love for their Master and their desire to play to the full the role reserved for them by society – to tend the bodies of those who died – prompted them to go further... right to the end.

And this is where everything turns right around: the women will find themselves bearing witness to the resurrection, they will become bearers of a message of life and hope... who would ever have imagined them playing such a part?

In the time of the earthly life of Jesus, women were not even considered as witnesses who could give credible and dependable testimonies in legal proceedings. Mark struggled to fully acknowledge their role as witnesses of the resurrection, initially shrouding them in silence and fear of speaking out about what they had seen and heard.

However all the four evangelists do agree in recognising the women’s pre-eminence in discovering the empty tomb and, consequently, in being the first witnesses of the resurrection. This tells us something

about the pedagogy of God, who St Paul describes in these terms: “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” (1 Cor. 1:27) Those whom society counts as nothing, they are the ones whom God sends to us, bearing the central message of our Christian faith:

“But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’” (Mark 16:6-7)

The announcement of the resurrection comes with an invitation to go to meet the Risen One in Galilee. At this point, we might well ask: what did Galilee represent for the disciples and what does it mean for us today? Scholars of the narrative of the resurrection have offered several explanations.

Galilee is the land where the disciples came from. It is the place where Jesus gathered the first community of apostles and disciples around him. It is the place where he generously exercised his ministry of teaching and healing and worked many miracles. From the perspective of Mark, it is certainly the place where the disciples of the risen Christ are called to take an active part in building the Kingdom of God, living from now onwards as servants of the mission of Christ.

Presenting the resurrection in a simple tableau shorn of supernatural apparitions – there are no angels, no tremors, just a young man dressed in white –, Mark is inviting us to search for signs of the resurrection of Jesus in our daily life. And it is in this context that the women of Kibera appear as true witnesses of the resurrection of our time. They lead us to discover a profound sense and signs of the resurrection in the midst of our daily life. They invite us to understand that whatever is happening in our life, it is possible to start over. Hope is allowed, especially where charity and love abound. Celebrating Easter goes beyond the resurrection to celebrate the victory of love over hatred, of life over death, of good over evil. Celebrating Easter means celebrating Hope and renewal.

The resurrection of the Lord recalls God’s grace at work within us, reviving in us the Hope of a new life. The resurrection gives a new dynamic to our life, a dynamic marked by the power of love that, in transforming us, transforms the lives of those around us and enables them to live life to the full. This love is expressed in forgiveness, in selfless service, in attention to the weak and the poor and in doing good. By living thus, we can meet the risen Christ in our daily life and become, in our turn, joyful and credible witnesses of his resurrection.

May the risen Christ give us the grace of true Easter joy. Happy Easter.