

Sr Mambwe's story in full



Sr Mambwe's faith changes lives

Blessing is a pretty 8 year-old girl whose home is the St Anthony's orphanage in Ndola, Zambia. She and her elder brother and young sister were left orphans. Her father, a copper miner, was killed at work when part of the mine shaft collapsed.

Death leaves bereaved families without savings, support and, frequently, homeless if the mining company owns their house.

Blessing's mother tried to care for the three children single-handed, but after repeated attacks of malaria, she died, becoming one of Zambia's 50,000 annual deaths from the disease. Unsupported women, struggling to care for their children, undernourished, overworked and underpaid, are particularly susceptible to malaria and to its potentially fatal side-effect, anaemia. Blessing's mother was one victim amongst many.

Traditionally, Blessing's extended family would have taken responsibility for the three children. Sadly, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has placed such enormous pressures on families that they are no longer able to accommodate the orphaned children of other family members. Grandparents regularly find themselves with a second family of orphaned children who are too young to fend for themselves. Sadly, even grandparents reach a point at which they feel inadequate and appeal for help.

Many orphaned and homeless children become Street Kids, with all the abuses and disadvantages of a life without loving supervision, rules and boundaries, hopes and aspirations. Without help from dedicated individuals and institutions, the future is very bleak for such youngsters.

Orphaned children with some form of disability are at a particular disadvantage. Alone, any child struggles to find food, shelter, education and care. Those with a physical or a learning disability also need specialist help if they are to reach their potential. In a country such as Zambia, even within a loving and supportive family, many adults do not understand disability and do not know where to find assistance. Afraid of the social stigma which can accompany less than full health, some families are tempted to abandon a child to its fate. Others do not know how best to care for a child with special needs, so that few 'special needs' children are empowered to maximise their potential and possibly become independent adults.

St Anthony's orphanage is one of Zambia's specialised orphanages, in the care of Dominican Sisters who take disability seriously and do whatever they can for children who are both orphans and have special needs. It caters for 107 children, most of them between the ages of 2 and 6, with a number of carers, each of whom looks after 20-30 children. Some little ones are orphans as a result of HIV/AIDS, but many have the added complication of physical disability or profound learning difficulties. Often, with the right care and support, such youngsters can have a full and happy life within the limitations of their condition. Sometimes they discover new and exciting possibilities as these children are helped to push back their boundaries to unimagined horizons.

The Dominican Sisters care for most of the children's needs but do not have the physiotherapy skills which the conditions of some of them require. The 800 year-old close friendship between Dominicans and Franciscans has proved, yet again, to be a source of hope and a force for change as they found a

young Franciscan who could support their efforts to give dignity, hope and a future to youngsters whose lives might otherwise have been very different.

Sister Mambwe Mupeta is a Zambian and a Franciscan Missionary of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM). She is also a physiotherapist. She helps in the orphanage, three days each week. "A number of children are paralyzed and require a lot of physiotherapy. Through the treatment I give them, some are just beginning to move their hands, control their head against gravity etc. It is a very slow process, but with time, the small amount of response they begin to show makes a difference to their life, although in a very limited way. Physio exercises help keep their joints mobile and muscle-length maintained to avoid deformities."

Yet as Sister Mambwe cares for her patients, she finds it is a two-way process. In return for her skill and her love, the children feed her faith and her commitment as a missionary Sister. "In my work, God asks me to be a body, hands and legs for him to reach out to his own people. When God gives me the privilege of handling a patient with paralysis, and over a period of months, I see them, first, taking baby steps and eventually, walking normally, I see God at work in this. I am not working alone: I am working with God who sends me out each day to reach out in compassion. In their vulnerable state, the children in St Anthony's orphanage are drawing me closer to God. They are touching my spiritual life in a unique way. In them I am allowed to see and touch a sensitive, compassionate and caring God."

World Mission Sunday helps missionaries such as Sister Mambwe to care for those in most need, who would otherwise be forgotten. World Mission Sunday, which falls on 21 October this year, supports those who are missionaries to their own people. It is an act of faith, hope and love, when the Church across the world reaches out in solidarity to its youngest and most needy members in 1,069 dioceses across Africa, Asia and South America. World Mission Sunday proclaims that everybody is important; everybody has a right to life and love. Love and faith change everything!



www.missio.org.uk

23 Eccleston Square
London SW1V 1NU
Charity No. 1056651