

Tough love

How an Interserve Scotland Partner reached out across boundaries of shame and dishonour

In many of the poorer houses here the walls don't always reach up to the roof which is shared by several houses. There is often a gap through which sound travels from next door. Or through which, if you stood on something tall – say, a table – you could look.

I was visiting Wendy when I met Amanda in this way. She squeezed up against the top of the wall to peer over at me. I could only see a slice of her face: an eye, part of a smile, a flash of the orange scarf tied around her hair. She greeted me and chatted for a few minutes before disappearing again behind the wall.

In a scandalised whisper, Wendy told me Amanda's story. Unmarried, she had had a relationship with a local man and become pregnant. Her parents kept her hidden at home ever since. When the baby was born Amanda's mother strangled him because he was illegitimate and a shame to their family. Amanda is still imprisoned in the house; she has never been out since.

"Do you visit her, Wendy?" I asked.

"No, my husband won't allow it."

"Does anybody visit her? Does she have any friends?"

"No, nobody visits her because of what she did."

We sat in silence for a bit as I chewed over the information. I was horrified that Amanda's mother – a woman who had once held her own babies in her arms and loved and nurtured them – could have killed her own grandson. I wanted to cry for that little boy that never got to live. And I thought about Amanda, lonely and isolated, forever living out the consequences of her sin. And then I thought about the community. Steering clear. Staying away. Lest they be contaminated by her sin, or incriminated by association; tainted.

Neither her family nor her neighbours will forgive

Amanda for what she has done. And while her family will deny what has happened, others like Wendy will continue to repeat it in hushed tones. It will be revisited often, as a warning to the young women of the neighbourhood, against the follies of romantic involvement or of doing anything else which might bring shame on their families.

Yet I know that there is forgiveness available for Amanda. There is One who has already redeemed her and who is waiting to take possession of His prize. One who sees that she is precious, though at fault; beautiful though broken.

So this morning, as I write this, I am asking myself again "what would Jesus do?". And the problem is that I know the answer. I'm just not sure I'm ready to act on it. In a culture where reputation is everything, am I willing to throw mine down, to bring Jesus to this woman? And while the questions crowd in, "what would the neighbours think?" and "would they still want to know me?" or perhaps seemingly more important, "what will it do to my witness?", I know that these thoughts are foolishness. The truth is that this is incarnational living. The demonstration of God's forgiveness. The extension of His grace to all. And if it ruffles a few feathers in the neighbourhood, so be it. As John said, "He must become greater; I must become less." (Jn.3:30) After all, His reputation is my concern; my own is not.

