

Monthly reflection, September 2012

Glorious Mud

August bank holiday weekend was The Children's Society's second at Greenbelt Christian Arts Festival, giving us an opportunity to present to the thousands of festival goers some insight into our work and especially the needs of young runaways. Hundreds signed up to our campaign encouraging local authorities to adopt The Runaways Charter. Hundreds more entered our children's art competition and took part in our talks and workshops. It was a festival to be remembered. But, it will be remembered more than anything as the wettest, muddiest festival in years.

On Saturday the heavens opened and a deluge that would make Noah wince turned the bright green grass into a sea of mud and water. The mud was everywhere and soon took on the consistency of treacle as people waded and slopped around the site.

The children loved it of course, covering themselves in mud in readiness for the festival picture that they could show their grandchildren. It didn't stop people having a good time and it was a festival with so much achieved. But, as we know, mud sticks. So, the 2012 Greenbelt Festival will be known as the year of the mud.

It is ironic given what we were saying at the festival. That young people who run away from home should be not be seen as trouble, but in trouble. That their lives shouldn't be defined by the experience of running away or even by the circumstances that prompted that action. Their lives are more than the things that challenge us or threaten them, they are full of possibility and potential, bursting with humanity and the essential need to love and be loved. But, mud sticks. Too often we come across young people who can't shed the mud that has been slung at them, the cloying, sticky burdens that they have had heaped on them or have even caused themselves. We all try to see the inner child, to see and reach beyond the problems or the hurt and anger. But the mud of their lives can obscure what is beneath.

Of all the miracles that Jesus performed, one of the strangest was his use of mud. One day his disciples pointed out a blind man and asked him whose sin had caused him to be blind, his own sin or his parents'. Someone needed to be at fault in order to explain this man's suffering. It is a trend in our culture too, to see the suffering and hurt in people's lives as caused either by the people themselves or by circumstances that we can't really change. It's the mud that sticks and it is hard to be clean of it.

Jesus' action was to make the mud himself, rub into the man's eyes in front of his disciples and all the people watching. All those who needed to see that mud is applied, it obscures, it is there only when we make it and make it stick. Jesus said to the man, go and wash it off so that we can all see and be free. We don't need to be stuck in the mud. We need to see freely the children and young people before us as God sees them.