

Inspiring Australian Saints / Irene Gleeson

Introduction

A couple of weeks ago Matt introduced us to the idea that we are all saints. The word saint means 'holy one'. We are designated holy ones not because of what we do but because that's who God declares and defines us to be.

During our Inspiring Australian Saints series we are looking at the lives of ordinary Australian Christians people who were ordinary saints just like you and me.

Today, we are going to hear about Irene Gleeson. She's been described as Australia's Mother Teresa with attitude.

Irene Gleeson was born in December 1944 in Sydney. Conceived out of wedlock, her father, an American serviceman, disappeared as soon as he discovered Irene's mum was expecting. In those days, it was considered a disgrace to be an unmarried mother and additionally shameful for an Australian girl to fall pregnant to an overseas serviceman.

After Irene was born and brought to the family home, her grandfather picked her up to smash her on the ground but in the process had a stroke. The neighbours would spit at her pram when she was taken for a walk.

Irene grew up in great poverty and difficult circumstances. Her mother who struggled with mental health issues married twice. Irene's first stepfather was an adulterous alcoholic. The second was a dreadfully sadistic man who regularly sexually abused Irene. Between the two marriages Irene's mother had seven more children.

Her mum died when she was 15, leaving Irene to care for her seven siblings. Her second stepfather planned on taking Irene as his new wife. So to escape the horror of her situation she ran away, met a young man, fell in love and fell pregnant and was married at the age of 16. By the time she was 21 she had three children.

Despite her difficult upbringing Irene was highly intelligent and had been Dux of her school but she was forced to leave after her mother had died. So in her mid-twenties she re-engaged in education and went to teachers

training college. It was there she met a man 20 years her senior, she entered into a relationship with this guy and walked out on her husband and abandoned her three kids before returning to them two years later.

Irene was deeply troubled and unsettled. She began a desperate search for truth exploring Buddhism, ancestral worship, transcendental meditation and she spent time trekking through the Himalayas seeking peace. Her marriage of twenty years finally fell apart. She was diagnosed as manic-depressive and became in her words 'a geriatric disco queen' trawling the pubs and clubs of Sydney trying to pick up men.

In her autobiography *'Heart of a Lioness'* Irene writes, *"I remember looking in the mirror late one night and thinking how much I had aged. I was tired and haggard. Time was running out and even alcohol could do nothing to numb the senses or block the pain. I was 35 years old and my life had crumbled around me. I felt as though I had failed; I believed I had no future, only a shameful past. I counted my losses: my marriage to Brian, who was a good man, had fallen apart; my family home had been sold; and my disillusioned children were a mess... My only therapy was*

to take long walks on the beach. “

“It was during one of these twilight walks... that I glanced up at a brightly lit surf club where a church service was taking place – the same church I had been invited to by a colleague of mine weeks earlier. I had shared my ongoing struggle with depression and she had suggested I join her one Sunday...”

“It was 28 November 1982. The youth band were singing “Jesus, Your Love Has Melted My Hearted.” As the music continued, I felt a surge of peace wash over me.

Unbidden tears welled up from my soul and rolled down my cheeks. I lifted up my arms and found myself lost in an intimate embrace with a mystery lover. Years of excruciating pain and inner turmoil were instantly lifted. All my searching had brought me to this moment and for the first time in my life I felt connected to my Creator.”

“Towards the end of the service the pastor... invited people to ask Jesus into their hearts. I thought, I’ve had a mess of my life. I know You died for me Jesus. I’ve never before thought of asking You to take control of my life, but I do right now.

“Right there in the hall, I gave my life to Jesus. That’s when I heard God’s still, small voice say to me, “Irene, everything is going to be alright from now on.”

In the weeks, months and years that followed, Irene immersed herself in the Bible and devoted her self to prayer. Her life was totally transformed, her relationship with her kids and grandchildren was restored and she had married a Christian man by the name of Jeff. They were incredibly entrepreneurial and they quickly became successful in business and as a result quite wealthy.

In 1988, Irene & Jeff took a trip to Ethiopia to meet some of their thirty-five World Vision sponsor children. It was on that trip they felt a distinct call to relocate to Africa. After much discussion they decided upon Uganda, which was a country that had been decimated by the madness of President Idi Amin's dictatorship. Amin had killed all the country's intellectuals, burnt all the books and destroyed entire towns and villages. Thousands upon thousands of innocent people had been executed and many animals had been shot to extinction. AIDS was now killing the new generation of Ugandans and in the north of the country another madman had emerged: Joseph Kony, who led the Lord's Resistance Army, Kony and his cohorts were massacring and maiming innocent people, kidnapping children and turning them into child soldiers and sex slaves.

Jeff & Irene sold all their possessions – their beachside house on Sydney’s northern beaches and their investments and used the proceeds to fund their mission to African. In 1991 Irene left her four children and fifteen grandchildren and arrived in Uganda to tow their caravan 500 km’s from the capital Kampala to war torn Kitgum in the north – about 50 km’s from the Sudan border. They wanted to go where no one else would go. It was the toughest, most neglected and isolated part of the country. There was no electricity or running water and food was scarce.

Arriving in Kitgum, Irene sat under a mango tree and 50 very perplexed children gathered around to see this strange white woman. She couldn’t speak their language but she began by teaching these traumatized orphans to sing, then Mama Irene as the kids called her, eventually added reading and writing to her repertoire, teaching English by writing in the dust on the ground.

Despite being given 18 acres of land by the Council on which to build an orphanage, the opposition to her work was immense and the early years in Kitgum were incredibly difficult. The authorities and locals were

suspicious of what was being done and her property was destroyed or stolen. She was the target of several rebel attacks – men wielding machetes or AK 47s surrounded Irene on a number of occasions threatening her life. Each time she would claim God’s protection and quote Scripture and remarkably she was delivered from what appeared to be certain death.

Irene’s body also didn’t cope very well with the oppressive heat and the harsh physical conditions. She experienced waves of sickness – leg ulcers, malaria, dysentery and hepatitis.

Then she was struck by the greatest of betrayals. After a couple of years in Uganda Irene’s husband Jeff left her for another woman. Irene was now in her early fifties, alone in an isolated and deeply male dominated part of Africa. The temptation to return to her family in Australia was immense, however, she decided to stay. She was motivated by an overwhelming desire to address the imbalances between Australian and Ugandan children. As an orphan herself, her life had seen its fair share of sadness, and she felt it was her chance to give back and save a child from the life she once lived. Irene was determined to make a difference in the devastated region,

and slowly she did.

Over the coming years the Irene Gleeson Foundation established:

- Four primary schools, which feed, educate and provide medicine for 8,000 children each day. The kids all wear red T-shirts symbolizing the blood of Jesus, which they claim as their protection from abduction
- A 60-bed AIDS hospice, which releases school children from the responsibility of having to care for their dying relatives so they can continue to attend school
- Dug many, many water bores to provide safe drinking water
- A women's hospital
- A community health program addressing hygiene and sanitation to minimize disease
- A vocational training college, which provides 1,500 students with training in carpentry, building, admin, tailoring, IT and welding
- Planted a number of churches
- A three-story art, drama and dance studio
- A library

- A radio station with more than 1 million listeners
- Today the Foundation employs 450 staff supported by funds through their child sponsorship program

In recognition of her service to international relations, particularly through her sustained humanitarian work amongst children affected by war and HIV/AIDS in Northern Uganda, Irene was named an Officer of the Order of Australia in June 2009.

Irene passed away on July 21, 2013 aged 68. At her memorial service attended by 14,000 people Irene Gleeson Foundation director John-Paul Kiffasi said, *"She gave away her children's inheritance, sold her home in Sydney and came into a war zone to set up a caravan in the bush. She first gathered 50 kids under a mango tree and fed them, clothed them and educated them. Twenty years later we now have had more than 20,000 gone through these doors. The first 50 are now managers at our four schools, one became a doctor and four are nurses."* *"Her sacrifice has transformed the landscape of north Uganda. She has rescued and given hope to thousands of children who could have perished in the war had she not helped."*

The Foreign Affairs Minister Bob Carr sent the following tribute on behalf of the Australian people and government: "Her life charted an inspirational path from Sydney to Kitgum. Mama Irene demonstrates the difference that one dedicated and courageous human being can make in the lives of many others. She leaves an enduring and remarkable legacy, not only helping thousands of children who attended the schools she established, but their families and wider communities. She was committed to helping build hope and new dreams in the aftermath of conflict."

There are so many things that we can learn from Irene Gleeson's story but I'd just like to highlight one characteristic of saints that can be seen through the lens of her life.

Irene once wrote, "It is certainly not my choice to be here in Uganda. In fact, some people say to me 'You must love it their.' And I say you'd be insane to love it because the food is terrible, the sun burns my skin, the isolation – there is no art galleries, there is no literature. So why would I prefer to be here than live in my beautiful country? But it is God's destiny for me. And as I stay here God works out

his plan of rescuing these beautiful children. He loves them so much. I'm just his vehicle that he uses. Many times I'd say 'God you must hate me to bring me here. But he showed me in Hosea 2:14 a special word, "I brought you into the wilderness and I will speak tenderly to you there. And the valley of trouble is going to be your doorway of hope. You are going to sing there as in the days of your youth." So gradually I came to know Jesus as my husband. He's the only husband I ever want. For a person like me that's unusual because if I was in Australia I'd be up at the local RSL, playing the pokies and chatting up whoever was around. On the other hand being stripped of materialism, I'm able to contact God in a moment and feel the fullness of his presence."

Saints experience God

As I read her life story this was a woman who regularly heard the voice of God, she experienced miracles of healing, provision and protection. The Bible was a living document – she would turn to it and find words of comfort and direction. For Irene God was not abstract, God was not a theory but a living being, a living reality to be encountered. She participated in life with God as an active presence.

“Be still and know that I am God” **Psalm 46:10** The word ‘know’ in the Hebrew language suggests a face-to-face intimacy. Saints not only know about God, they *know* God.

Ephesians 1:17-18, I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may *know* him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may *know* the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in *the saints*.

Conclusion

If you’d like to learn more about Irene Gleeson – there’s an autobiography of her life called ‘Heart of a Lioness’ and there’s a documentary called ‘The Cinderella Children’, which you can watch on YouTube. You can also visit the website irenegleesonfoundation.com.