

An 'Angel of Mercy' advancing the cause of lepers

THINK of a Victorian lady and images of tight corsets, large hats and refined manners come to mind. Traveling thousands of miles to Siberia, by sleigh and horseback, to help lepers and find a cure for the dreadful disease, does not neatly fit with such conventions. But this was the heroic achievement of Kate Marsden, a Catholic convert whose grave I (literally) stumbled across one day in my local cemetery.

Kate Marsden was born at Edmonton (north London) on 13th May 1859. Her father was a solicitor and her childhood was a comfortable one; family fortunes changed, however, when Mr Marsden died in 1873. Four years later Kate joined an intriguing organisation in nearby Tottenham: the Evangelical Protestant Deaconesses' Institution and Training Hospital. This had been established in 1865 and was inspired by the evangelical deaconesses in Germany. These deaconesses, it should be noted, were not in holy orders but lived in community, serving the poor and sick, and teaching in schools.

Kate was only there briefly as a trainee nurse, for she volunteered to go to Bulgaria to care for the wounded of the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78). Little is known of her adventures, though stories were handed down of her solitary excursions into the battlefields at night to tend the wounded and of how she rode into Plevna with the soldiers and "went straight to the Harem and so prevented the soldiers entering". Her labours were recognised by the Russian Red Cross Society and it was during this time that she encountered



Nova et Vetera
Fr Nicholas Schofield

of Jesus Christ". She sought support from Queen Victoria and the Empress of Russia (the sister of the Princess of Wales), whom she went on to meet at St Petersburg.

Leaving England in September 1890, the account of her journey was later recounted in a book, *On Sledge and Horseback to Outcast Siberian Lepers*. She wrote vividly about travelling by sledge: "Bump, jolt, bump, jolt - over huge frozen lumps of snow and into holes, and up and down those dreadful waves and furrows, made by the traffic... Still on you merrily go - but, oh, for five minutes' peace! Bumping, jolting, tossing; heaved, pitched and thumped; you long for... a nice snug warm room, with feather bed, well-aired sheets, and, perhaps, a warming pan; and the horses seem to sniff their supper from afar, so on they wildly go, snorting and foaming, until, at last, at the post-station you pull up sharp. You are then, in a semi-comatose state, dragged from the sledge; and, on gaining a footing, you feel more like a battered old log



An extraordinary tale - Kate Marsden with Russian Princess Shachovsky and three nursing sisters

its prison camps. Convicts often had to walk there to serve their sentence, relying on a meagre allowance for subsistence and sometimes accompanied by their families. Marsden tried to help the gangs of prisoners that she met on her way: "To see the grateful looks of those men, as I put one of the packets of tea and sugar and a Testament into their hands, was worth all the trials I had suffered, and all that were to come."

Her main focus, though, were

publicity, which aroused much jealousy. Some denounced her as a fraud.

As a result, Marsden disappeared from public view. By 1895 she was back as a convert to Catholicism, a Third Order Franciscan and one of the founders of the St Francis Leper Guild. She was appointed 'Lecturer to the Guild' and continued her work promoting the cause of the lepers. However, she stepped down the following year, afraid that her 'notoriety' would affect the Guild's work. This was despite the appearance of a biogra-

The rest of Marsden's life was spent in considerable obscurity, as she grappled with poverty and declining health. It is unclear whether she remained a practising Catholic and, according to one recent biographer (Elizabeth Baigent) "her declaration in 1916 that she would 'pass on into the great unknown and join the host of our travellers there' speaks of whimsical mysticism rather than orthodox faith". She died in a Wandsworth hospital on 26th March 1931 and, since she had most recently been

Positive Faith of people living with HIV

CARITAS IN ACTION

TODAY is World AIDS Day (WAD). We remember those who have been affected by HIV, those who have died. We also acknowledge 'people living with HIV' (PLWH) who embody both struggle and celebration.

Michael reflects upon this reality: "Initially my diagnosis made me feel guilty and shamed... a sense that God had done this to me... coupled with... other traumatic events... at the time it really felt like God was punishing me... I wasn't... sure what I'd done to deserve this... I felt like that for a very long time. But over time, I've come to see the diagnosis as a gift - I don't mean... God has... given me HIV so I can learn something - it's a fact of my life, and out of that despair and guilt and shame and all those other emotions... I've had... to understand where I fit in, in God's plan - where I fit in, in the world."

This pastoral context inspired Catholics for AIDS Prevention and Support (CAPS) to embark on a new project called *Positive Faith* - an online film resource on HIV and Christianity. Over a year we interviewed priests and lay leaders in churches, including St Paul's Cathedral, which hosted AIDS Memorial Quilts for WAD last year. We raised questions: 'Why should the Church engage with HIV?' 'Why does it matter?' 'How would Jesus react to PLWH?' Among many excellent insights, HIV activist Martin Pendergast emphasised the importance of including PLWH in the Church, not just welcomed by Church members, but that "they themselves come forward, they have gifts to offer, and they can do things that anyone else can do in the church. PLWH men, women, or children, can enrich the diversity of the Church."

The testimony of people affected by and living with HIV through *Positive Faith* advances this enrichment of the whole Church.

It contributes to HIV prevention: A more informed Church, able to speak honestly about the issues, is a safer community for

during this time that she encountered her first lepers: "The emotions aroused by the sight of two poor, mutilated, and helpless Bulgarians," she later wrote, "cannot be fully described" and built upon her conviction 'that my mission in life was to minister to those who received the smallest attention and care of all God's creatures.'

But this mission did not start immediately. The next few years were spent as a nurse in England and New Zealand. Back in London in 1886, she hoped to arrange a visit to Molokai (Hawaii) to meet the famous Fr Damien. Frustrated in this, Kate hatched a plan to travel to Siberia in order "to discover a remedy, and, if such efforts failed, to devise efficient methods for alleviating the miseries which accompanied the disease, and for bringing all lepers under the humane as well as the religious influence of the servants of the Gospel

of mahogany than a gently-nurtured Englishwoman." Reaching the major settlement of Yakutsk, she continued on horseback, with a cavalcade of 15 men who carried her provisions and acted "as a means of protection against the dangers to be encountered, not the least amongst them the bears".

Earlier on the journey she was accompanied by a friend, Ada Field, but due to poor health she had to turn back at Omsk. Marsden went on alone and must have looked most distinctive, wearing a jacket with a red cross on her arm, trousers and a deer-stalker she had bought in London, and carrying with her a whip, a revolver and a small bag. She even brought with her an ample supply of Christmas puddings – 18 kilograms worth of them! – not only a favourite food but with excellent nutritional properties for such an arduous journey.

Siberia was, of course, known for

Her main focus, though, were the lepers. She took note of their dismal conditions, set up committees to provide care for them and found a herb that she hoped would cure the disease (in this she would be disappointed). Returning home in 1892 she recounted her experiences in publications and public lectures and established a Siberian Leper Fund. The Queen presented her with a brooch, in the shape of an angel, and she became one of the first female Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society.

However, Marsden's heroic efforts were soon hindered by controversy. There were allegations of financial impropriety and eyebrows were raised over the nature of her friendships with other women. It is clear that Kate was not an easy person to deal with; she could be egotistical, arrogant and fickle; she scrounged off supporters and relationships often ended acrimoniously; she loved courting

despite the appearance of a biography aiming to dispel much of the gossip and the blessing of the Holy Father himself for Marsden's work. She quietly continued supporting the Guild and travelled to Paris, Philadelphia and Honolulu to further its mission, although a further complication was caused by rumours that she had herself contracted leprosy – still very much a taboo in Victorian society.

At the beginning of the 20th century Marsden moved to Bexhill-on-Sea with two sisters, the Misses Norris. Here she embarked on one final project: founding a local museum, which still exists. She organised meetings and fundraisers, donated her collection of tropical shells and encouraged others to make gifts, including her friend, Walter Amsden, who deposited an important Egyptian collection. The museum opened in 1914, though by this time Marsden had resigned from the committee.

and, since she had most recently been living in Hillingdon, was buried in the Hillingdon and Uxbridge Cemetery.

Here her grave lay forgotten for decades until interest was revived recently, largely through the work of Jacki Hill-Murphy, who has followed in Kate's footsteps to Siberia and published an account of her adventures (*The Extraordinary Tale of Kate Marsden and My Journey Across Siberia in her Footsteps*). The lonely grave has been identified and cleared, and a laminated photograph and biography have been placed on top, along with a small plaque from Siberia paying tribute to this 'Angel of Mercy'. Kate Marsden's life may have been marred by unedifying controversy and personal failure but her heroism is still remembered by many and, in a special way, the St Francis Leprosy Guild continues her work, helping 80 leprosy centres around the world.

everyone, including young people growing into adulthood. *Positive Faith* will encourage inclusion in Church and society. Our model? Christ's friendship with people. He never hid from the reality of people's lives. Neither should we. He touched the excluded ones in all aspects of their lives – the 'outsiders' called back into community, followed, and brought their faith and life as gifts for others.

Most PLWH remain hidden because of stigma. For many years Christians living with HIV have been strengthened in faith through sharing their lives together, within CAPS' HIV peer support ministry 'Positive Catholics'. They first recognised the need for this resource and had the conviction to make it.

We're proud of *Positive Faith*. The films are high quality and expectations have been exceeded. Funded by an NHS Government grant, we have met all NHS targets, completing an ambitious project on time within budget. It shows the value of funding a small grassroots Christian charity and what can be achieved when public health issues are addressed by people motivated by faith. Mostly we are proud that there are Christians with HIV on camera, openly sharing their stories, courageously witnessing to faith in Christ: making the experience of HIV personal so that others are encouraged to love and live well. Unthinkable ten years ago!

As CAPS trustee John Thornhill wrote in this column on 22nd September: "In so many ways people living with HIV still experience deep stigmatisation, misunderstanding, sickness, prejudice, poverty and exclusion."

We were determined to produce films that would be shameless in tone and confident in faith. We have addressed HIV responsibly and honestly – 'holistically' in the language of faith. *Positive Faith* dispels myths and brings new stories to light so that a church or individual can benefit from PLWH who also seek new life in Christ.

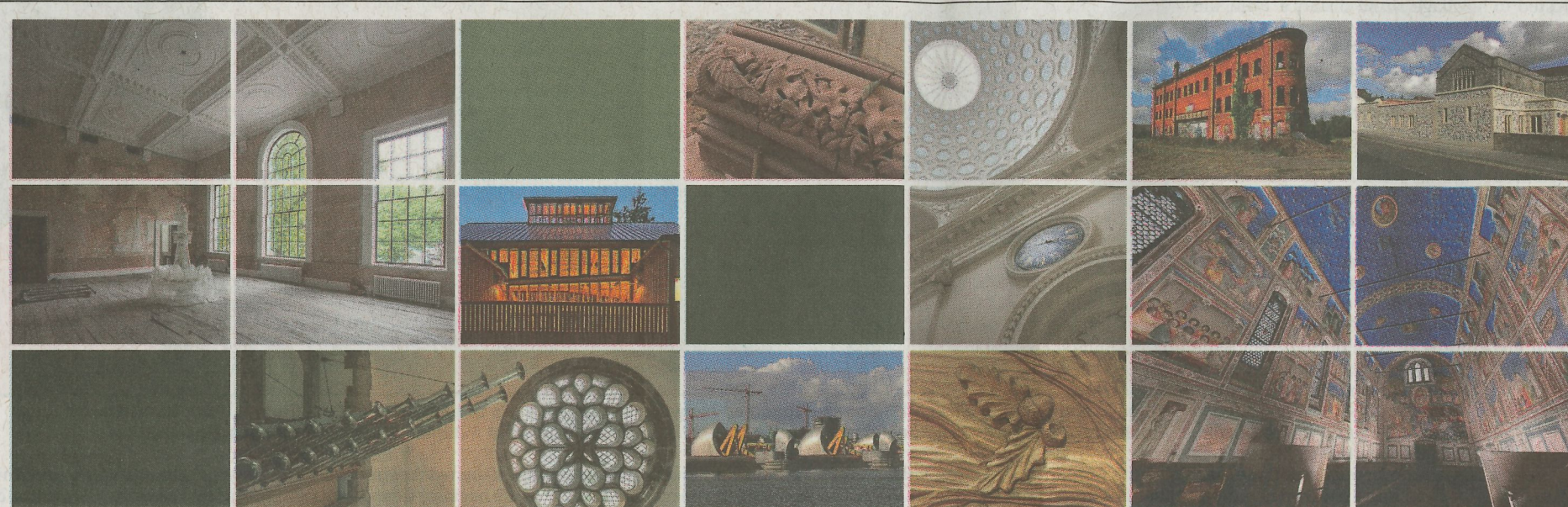
The short films are free to use in parishes and schools, with discussion starters, prayer guides and action ideas. We encourage churches to celebrate WAD and respond.

VICTORIA MORRIS
and VINCENT MANNING

Victoria Morris is freelance project manager and Vincent Manning chairs Catholics for AIDS Prevention and Support, which is a member of CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network), the Church's social action agency in England and Wales

Visit www.positivefaith.net to find out about videos and other resources that address the issues at the centre of HIV and Christianity, produced by CAPS with film director, Kip Loades and funded by Public Health England HIV Prevention Innovation Fund

LGBT Catholics Westminster invite you to celebrate positive lives at a Mass to mark the global impact of HIV and AIDS, on Monday, 4th December, 6pm, at The Church of the Immaculate Conception (Farm Street Jesuit Church) 114 Mount Street, Mayfair, London W1K 3AH, which will include a showing of *Positive Faith*, addressing HIV and Christianity in the UK. All are welcome.



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