

## My Life of Garbage

This was the unlikely title of the talk given at the Spring Christian Aid Meeting by Dr. Ajantha Perera and ranks among the most moving and inspiring talks I have ever heard. Ajantha is a Sri Lankan woman who had been educated in Britain, and became a Christian while at University. Despite the opposition of her family, who took her back to Sri Lanka as soon as possible, her faith grew, particularly when she was able to study in Germany for her MSc and Doctorate, and worship freely.

On returning to Sri Lanka she felt compelled to investigate the system for disposal of rubbish in Colombo, and discovered a group of Rag Pickers, who came daily to the municipal dump to make a living. They were very poor, living in damp and inadequate shacks near the dump, and were regarded themselves as 'rubbish'. They collected waste paper, glass and plastics from the garbage and sold them to middlemen, who in turn sold them to the recycling industries. She perceived that, while the well-off and educated people of Colombo threw out rubbish without thought, these rag pickers recognised its value, and knowingly or unknowingly contributed to the national income by their work.

She described her contacts with these people in a way which made one almost smell the stench and see the ugliness of the heaps of rubbish, knowing that it would be disrespectful to them to cover her nose or refuse the offer of a seat in their home. From there began her journey to change the garbage problem in Sri Lanka, confronting attitudes, and as she described it making a thorough nuisance of herself. Some changes have been made, but it was not until she was able to get a grant from Christian Aid that she was able to make the changes she wanted to for the group of rag pickers, providing them with identity cards, education, first aid material. It is hoped to give them carts so they can go from house to house collecting, to provide cement floors for their houses, and to enable all their children to go to school.

This is a very brief resume of Ajantha's talk, but it certainly put any work we do for Christian Aid into perspective. I know I would want to get away from the smell of garbage as quickly as possible, and a couple of evenings a year knocking on doors in Christian Aid Week does not begin to compare! Our Christian Aid Representatives, Don Mackenzie and Gloria Toplis, will be asking for volunteers for house-to-house collecting soon – this was the kind of story which turns the task from a burden to a privilege.

**Margaret Elves**

## Christian Aid Week 14-20 May 2006



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