

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I HEARD ABOUT COMPASSIONART. MY WIFE AND I WERE EATING WITH FRIENDS – FRIENDS WHO HAD HEARD AT FIRST HAND MARTIN’S HALF-FORMED PLANS THE SUMMER BEFORE THINGS ALL KICKED OFF. I DON’T REMEMBER WHAT WE WERE EATING, BUT I REMEMBER WHAT I THOUGHT ABOUT IT ALL.

I didn’t think much of the idea.

What possible good could come of a bunch of wealthy Christians flying from across the oceans to slap each other’s backs and fiddle with their guitars? It was . . . well, I don’t know what I thought it was. I just knew I wasn’t all that excited.

I don’t know what happened, but somewhere across the nine months that passed between then and now I changed my mind and my heart. Slowly at first, then with gathering pace, I began to see what this CompassionArt project could achieve. I saw the sacrifice made by each member, the openness and honesty, the passion for being a part of something that was aiming at nothing lower than changing the world. I realised that it was me that was stupid and self-indulgent.



Let me give you a little background. CompassionArt started when Martin and Anna Smith wondered what might happen if Christian songwriters

got together, wrote songs and gave away every penny that they generated. What started as a slightly crazy idea rapidly became a set of concrete plans. Before long, CompassionArt found life: with twelve musicians retreating for a week in January 2008 to write, then coming back in February to record an album that tried to join the dots between faith, worship and the horrific level of injustice that surrounds us.

At some point someone talked about a book. What started out as the kind of book with nice pictures and few words eventually became this: a wad of pages across which the twelve people who had attended the retreat tried to find a whole load more words to explain what they thought about compassion.

Books like this are not supposed to come together in this way. They're supposed to take time – the kind of time that makes the passing of the seasons look like morning rush hour. They're supposed to require complex skills of negotiation as writers and editors work out how much trust exists between them. They're supposed to be complex, complicated and – at the end of the day – probably not all that good. After all, isn't this just another bit of branding, another 'product' put out to make some cash on the back of the other, more high-profile releases in the CompassionArt 'series'? No one really expects a book like this to change their life. Do they?

But none of the above is true when it comes to discussing these pages you're holding in your hands. None of the above sums up the process, the path and the outcome. None of it is right.

The Art of Compassion took just a couple of months to write. None of the names on the front jockeyed for position or held tight to their message or polished their ego. And – for me – the job of playing midwife as these words have come to life has changed my own. Neither I nor my family will ever be the same again. CompassionArt has changed us for ever.



I buried my mother while working on this book. Her nineteen-month battle with cancer ended the day after I agreed to take it on. In the days that followed – days stained with despair and an aching sense of loss and sadness – I was only able to think about CompassionArt for a few seconds at a time. Could I still be involved? Was it wise – would I lose my grief if I stuck my head into a book so soon? Could I even find the words any more? Did any of it actually matter at all? Was it worth it?

It turns out that all those questions were easily answered.

I hope that these words help. Across these pages you'll find stories of suffering, chaos and pain. You'll find hope, help and genuine, faith-soaked optimism too. You'll read words that come from the mouths of those who usually give us melodies and harmonies and songs that bring us closer to God. But these words you'll read now will be different – there's pain among them, confusion and frustration. There's pride in the sacrifice of others and gratitude that God has allowed them to join in.

None of them are experts about any of this, and that is where this book is unlike all those others that tackle the subjects of poverty and faith. These twelve people are not professional theologians, aid workers, campaigners or development specialists. They're people who – like the rest of us – wonder how their lives can be more effective when it comes to fighting poverty and getting closer to God's agenda for us all.



God's agenda . . . I hope some of you will already have your minds made up about it. I hope this serves as more fuel for your fire, a whole bucket of flammables that leaves you pushed further out to put faith into action.

And I hope others will be doubtful about it all. I hope you start this book with a cynicism about it all. If you give it time and space and allow these words the concentration and debate they need, I hope you'll come out the other side a little more convinced of our collective ability and responsibility to offer whole-life hope to the world that is so scarred by need.

'The local church is the hope of the world.' You'll probably read that phrase way too many times across these chapters. I'm sorry for the repetition. No, actually, I'm not. It's a phrase that needs to be pressed into us. It's a phrase that articulates our responsibility to be agents of human justice in the world. And it's a phrase that's utterly soaked in optimism and excitement.

There are temptations all around us. The chances are that it won't take you too long to remember some of the ones that have drifted through your mind over the last twenty-four hours. But while some of them are obvious, there's a range of temptations that are subtle and sometimes harder to spot.

Take this one, for example: our lives don't matter that much.

This myth comes in many forms, plaguing us with thoughts about it being God's business and not ours, that we are too small or that the world's problems are just too great.

But if we choose to give in to these temptations we'll be left muzzled, blindfolded and deaf, like those three 'wise' monkeys all wrapped up in one. Giving up on action cuts into our potential and reduces our impact. Giving up on our potential to change the world around us is giving up on God.

There's more to being alive today than being a monkey, no matter how wise.

In the days of the early Church, with its ever-increasing roll-call of martyrs, the numbers of Jews and non-Jews joining the Christian sect grew with phenomenal power. By the end of the first century – and not more than seventy years after Christ's handful of followers were told to go and make disciples – there are as many as one million Christians spread across the Roman empire. Within another three centuries, forty million people would count themselves as Christians – almost a quarter of the world's population.

The numbers are different today. There are even more of us: almost one in three of the world's six billion people are Christians. Within the next week we could do more to change the state of the world than any single government could do in a decade. We are, quite clearly, the hope of the world – and what a truly awesome hope that is.



Biblical themes don't come much stronger than this: God's offer of relationship with his created beings and our flip-flopping between responsibility and apathy, between being the bringers of the blessing and being trapped by the bubble.

It was just this way with the Israelites while they were held captive by the injustice of Pharaoh's reign. They found themselves at the wrong end of a power system designed to protect the interests of those at the top. Fortunately for us, God's plans were bigger than the Egyptian restrictions:

The LORD said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am

concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.'

Exodus 3:7-10

Look again at God's speech. It makes such a great start, like an Oscar-winning warm-up to one of those explosive sequences where the good guy ends up in his vest, trashing the town and trouncing the baddies. The fact that God declares that he has 'seen the misery . . . heard [the] crying' and has 'come down to rescue them' would surely have got Moses settling back into his armchair and rubbing his hands in eager anticipation at the remarkable spectacle about to be witnessed. Then comes something unexpected: 'I am sending *you*', the killer line, the counterpoint that shifts the tone as God places Moses at the heart of his plan.

'You', God says: singular, not plural. 'You', alone, impetuous, unwise and wholly unqualified to do the job. 'You', overwhelmed and dwarfed by the task. 'You', worrying about how on earth you're going to make a difference.

We all know what followed. We know that God's power to save was more than enough without the input of Moses, but that through his grace Moses was invited into partnership with God, to be the waiter who delivered the order. Does God want us as ready-made heroes? I doubt it. Surely he'd rather we were on our knees, aware of all the reasons why we can't match up, but ready to obey all the same.

As I add these final words – barely three months after starting to

work on this book – death and funerals are once more a part of my house. My mother-in-law died tonight. Her battle, like my mother's, was with cancer. Both my and my wife's mother shared a type of faith that propelled them out to engage with the world beyond the Church – a world scarred by alienation, isolation and poverty. They were – and still are – the Moses-ladies I look up to, the ones I know for sure would have understood far more than I what it means to talk about – and then get on and put into action – the art of compassion.

Craig Borlase

May 2008