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Touching Africa's Heart

In Chapter 8 I spoke about a chance encounter with a certain Nicholas Ngarasso, the then President of a large denomination in Central African Republic, a nation nestled in the heart of the African continent. We had given him a little white fluffy toy dog for his newly born baby girl.

The years passed and we became aware that the future of missions lay less and less with the traditional sending nations of the West and more and more with the newly Christian nations of the developing world who were experiencing much growth and revival. The Lord was challenging us to become " mission planters" in such lands. A prayer developed in my heart for an invitation to French speaking Africa. One Summer I found myself teaching at a camp near Chalon sur Saône where I was introduced to a missionary couple, Claude and Jeannine Pettmann, who were linked with a group of churches in Central African Republic. We shared our vision of mobilising the African church for mission and they invited us to come and run a seminar for their churches.

Rowland Evans, the founder of "Horizons" joined me on these early visits and was able to lay down a strong foundation of intercessory prayer.

Though "Horizons" as a mission - with hundreds of missionaries and their indigenous local teams - was growing strongly and successfully, we were exercised by the size of the remaining task Western missionaries were doing a valiant job, but if the mission force were only drawn from the West we were missing 75% of believers. Yet we realised that Western ways and methods wouldn't easily fit with workers from the "South".

So we began to pray for the Lord to raise up leaders, with their armies of missionaries, from the countries where there was a strong Christian church - countries like Korea, the Philippines, the Central African nations and South America.

The Lord rooted this prayer in 1 Chronicles 12. There was a time when, although David had been anointed King over the whole of Israel, only part of that nation recognised him as King. We saw a parallel situation in this present age. Jesus is the anointed King of all the earth, however as yet only part of His Kingdom acknowledges Him. At Hebron, leaders of all the tribes came to David with their armies to swear allegiance to him. Each tribe had different gifts and skills, yet all were volunteers of one heart and mind, fully determined to make David King of the whole of Israel. This was the turning point for David. Shortly afterward he was able to complete his personal journey to Jerusalem. He and his people danced and celebrated, carrying the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the Lord's presence in their midst.

"Look at the nations ... and be utterly amazed"

(Habakkuk1:5)

We saw, in prayer, a kind of spiritual Hebron. Leaders with their armies- not only from the tribes of Israel, but from the nations of the World - gathering to Jesus, fully determined to see that His Kingship is recognised in all the earth. This final mission thrust is to be a kind of ***"Celebration for the Nations"***, as we march towards the coming of the heavenly Jerusalem with the King in our midst. And so ***"Nations"*** was born.

I well remember our first trip to Bangui, the capital city of Central African Republic. A power cut plunged the airport into total darkness and it was every man for himself as panic stricken hands grappled for various pieces of baggage. Running the gauntlet of rapacious custom's men was also a unique rite of passage into the beautiful, vibrant anarchy which is Central Africa.

The nation gained its independence from France in 1960 after having much of its previous population depleted through the ravages of slavery. The country rarely made the headlines except through the infamously unhappy reign of Bokassa who ruined the nation's economy at his horrendously expensive coronation ceremony as Emperor and who committed atrocities to keep his hold on power. He was known to have won the favours of the former French President, Giscard D'Estaing, (The now head of the European Constitution) by offering him diamonds, which are a much misused natural resource of this country.

It was a relief to see the smiling face of Claude Pettmann awaiting my arrival. His faithful Land rover gave valiant service over the potholed tracks which went by the name of roads. He loaded up my meagre baggage and took me straight to a meeting with the church leaders.

"We've just had a major tragedy" he confided.

"The President of our denomination has been killed in a road accident !"

He mentioned that we would be seeing the widow and the man's family at this meeting. We arrived at Lakouanga church which was the base for the 500 other churches in this massive African denomination. On arriving I gave my regards to the widow but found myself captivated by the well worn fluffy white dog being held in the innocent hands of his six year old daughter ! It suddenly dawned on me that the man who had been killed was none other than the same man who had prayed all those years ago at our house in Sorgues. Beyond the obvious sadness I felt a sense of destiny and a mandate to redeem something from this loss for the ultimate benefit to this nation.

Another, small unimposing man looked on and was introduced by Claude as being the new President of the church association. His name was Gabriel Gatfosse Yerima. A small man in physical stature but a giant of a man in prayer. He had been a pioneer in bringing revival and church planting to the unreached Pygmy peoples who

lived in the sprawling Equatorial Forest of Central Africa. He shared with me how he had walked hundreds of miles through the forests to bring the message of the gospel to the Pygmies. His words were accompanied by many miraculous signs and healings. On one particular journey he found himself walking on an kind of mound only to discover that it was an enormous poisonous snake ! The snake literally lifted him from the ground and sank its fangs into his leg. The deadly poison quickly touched his nervous system and he found himself running like a madman through the forest. Miraculously he was found by a group of local Christians who spent three days nursing and praying for him. Just when everything seemed lost, Yerima received a vision of the risen Christ and found himself wonderfully healed. He was now responsible for many thousands of Christians in the country who affectionately called him "Baba" or "Papa" Yerima. He was indeed a father to many in the same way as Abraham was called to be a father to many nations. His prayers and welcome helped us to establish the work in Central African Republic.

He invited us to spend several days in the forest town of Scieplac which had grown out of his evangelistic efforts amongst the Pygmies. Two days driving on forest tracks passing huge trunked trees and taking in the breathtaking beauty of waterfalls, myriad butterflies, birds and wildlife, brought us to the village of Scieplac. Tragically, whole areas of the forest were now devastated as greedy wood exporters, hungry for the ebony, acacia and other expensive woods thought nothing of destroying hundreds of trees to gain access to the one they wanted to cut. Such ecological genocide was destroying the natural habitat of the Pygmy peoples and also that of many rare plants and species.

The Pygmies welcomed us with great joy and enthusiasm. They lived in little leaf igloo dwellings which adapted well to their nomadic lifestyle. They loved music and dance and it was an amazing experience to see them dancing rhythmically around the huge night fires. They have a particular polyphonic way of singing which transports the listener into an ethereal world of awe and wonder. One of their songs rang out,

"We bring nothing into this world, we will take nothing back"

echoing a distant wisdom which could even find its interpretation in our bibles of today.

Yerima encouraged us to pray for the many hundreds of Pygmy groups that were still scattered throughout the forest and who were still without any evangelistic witness. It was amongst these Pygmies that I first discovered the culinary joys of caterpillars and monkey !

On the journey back we were presented with a tortoise which is the traditional meal to honour a tribal leader. I sat with this live tortoise crushed up in the back of the Land rover for many hours and miles as we journeyed back to Bangui, the capital city. I grew quite fond of my shelled and scaly companion who grew more and more confident to pop his head out and survey the surroundings. Unfortunately he popped his head out for the very last time in Bangui , was grabbed by strong African hands and plunged into a pot of boiling water ! The next time I saw him, or part of him, was when a plate was set before me containing a clawed and scaled foot floating in a peanut sauce ! As the honoured leader I was obliged to take enthusiastic mouthfuls while my heart was rather

less inclined to be scoffing my travelling partner. I mean, tortoises are family pets where I come from !

In Bangui, we were able to run seminars entitled,

" Central African Republic – A light to the Nations."

In spite of many foreign mission agencies and thousands of full churches on the ground the country was yet to see it's own indigenous mission movement. Our goal was to find the key men and woman who had already received the vision for mission in their hearts and to encourage them to push forward with their projects. We also felt that much local initiative had been ruined by the unwise handouts of money which only fuelled jealousy and dependency. Because of this we resolved from the beginning never to give money but to offer our ministries, prayers, words, vision and fellowship which ultimately required more sacrifice than a few easily given dollars. This was very much going against the grain of traditional Western mission in that land and many groups, finding that we were not simply a push over for easy money, lost their initial enthusiasm. However it also drew the quality people who had genuinely received a vision from God for their nation.

At the end of one tiring day, having been slightly disappointed by the number of folks who had chatted to us only in the hope of getting money, we were ready for bed. Another young man pushed forward insisting on speaking to us. As he spoke to me in French, Rowland said :

"Look, if this is just another fellow looking for money tell him that we really are not interested."

The young man looked across at Rowland and replied in good English.

"Let me assure you Sir, that I have not come for your money but I have a vision from God on my heart."

We were suitably embarrassed by our suspicions and sat down as he unfolded his story.

His name was Anatole Banga and, although growing up in a wild, animistic family, he had managed to fight his way through to education and study. He even managed to get a scholarship to study agriculture in China. Gifted at languages he was able to learn Chinese and came into contact with the Chinese underground church. As he saw their tears, prayers and love for Christ, his own heart softened and he gave his life to the Lord. He then found himself discipled in this Chinese church and in his turn called to serve this movement amongst his fellow students. He also gained a scholarship for the Haggai Institute which trains up and coming third world leaders. At this institute he had the opportunity to emigrate to America and begin a ministry there. This was a huge temptation for a young African man from humble origins but as he prayed he felt the Lord asking him to go back to Central African Republic and set up an indigenous

mission group that could send African missionaries to the unreached parts of the world. He had helped found a church called "La Fondation Jerusalem", and was keen to see how far we could work together. Anatole has since become the major force in building mission in Central African Republic.

Another man who crossed our path was Cyriaque Bomba Bengabo. He was an evangelist with a major church grouping called "Action Apostolique". He too had studied in East Germany and had returned to his country with strong political ambitions. These ambitions had seen him sent to prison (he was falsely suspected of a bombing) where he was hours away from a firing squad. It was during this desperate time of incarceration that he began to pray and seek more than his Marxist dialectics. He found Christ, the way, the truth, the life. After training in a Bible school he went into the unreached towns and villages to plant churches. He had no fixed income and so he developed creative ways to fund his ministry. First of all his wife started making doughnuts which she would sell in the markets. He began making mud bricks which he was also able to sell. He trained some of his first converts in how to make the same kind of bricks and before long they had managed to build their own church as well as having quite a healthy business running. Cyriaque's heart was for self-help projects that could provide work and social development for his corrupt and poverty stricken nation. Cyriaque, Anatole and Pastor Yerima formed the nucleus of a missionary movement which was to bring hope and transformation to the entire nation.

As we prayed and worked together over the years we came up with the name "Nations En Marche" as the title for this African missionary movement. There were three major thrusts to the work.

- Missionary outreach to the most unreached people groups both within and beyond the nation.

- Intercessory prayer and fasting with the establishment of 24/7 houses of prayer for the nation.

- Business for Mission. The teaching of business skills so that entrepreneurial gifting could be released for the setting up of self-help works that would not only defeat poverty but also finance the missionary thrust.

Anatole was able to set up a small "Polytechnique" training school operating under these three principles. Students have been able to start pioneer works amongst the Pygmy and Muslim peoples of C.A.R. and others are now moving on to Chad and beyond as the work grows. Hundreds have come to the Lord, lives have been saved through the setting up of basic health care, children are learning the skills of reading and the vision still burns strong for this holistic African gospel to spread further a field.

To understand the challenge of all this you need to take into account that C.A.R. is one of the poorest countries in the world with the highest incidence of A.I.D.S. in Francophone Africa. It has known severe political violence with at least 4 coups over the

last 10 years with much fighting amongst the different ethnic groups. Only the prayers of the people of God have kept the country from falling into destruction, civil war and anarchy. Recently the government has asked Anatole and "Nations en Marche" to be responsible for a national programme of literacy and reconciliation. The present Prime Minister is keenly aware of the possibilities this movement offers to the nation. Over the years we have been able to pray with several of the Presidents. On our very first trip, having barely arrived in the country, we were granted an audience with David Dacko, the former President, who was an inspirational source of information concerning the history of the nation. I was also asked to pray with General André Kolingba who also had his stint as President following a coup and one of our team, Maguy Barthaburu, who has a distinct ministry of intercession for her nation, was able to pray with Ange-Félix Patassé (the recently ousted President) and also his replacement General Bozizé. She was also influential in giving decisive prophetic direction to the present Prime Minister Abel Goumba. On one trip with the Pygmies in the equatorial forest I was able to see God break into the life of the son of the most infamous President, Bokassa.

This story, along with many others are included in the following accounts. They are little snippets of the live action on the ground over the last few years, cameos of God's grace and dealings with a nation. May these true events give you hope and prayer for Africa which is so often portrayed as a hopeless case in our news media. A song from South Africa says :

"We see a new Africa."

And this is indeed my hope and prayer as we push forward into all that the future has to offer.

Tears For Souvenirs

A well known song begins "Tears for Souvenirs" and that could well be a description of one of my first visits during a military coup ! While most of the missionaries were being evacuated out I found myself on one of the last "Air France" flights going to Bangui. The folks on the ground were surprised to see me arrive amidst the armoured vehicles and myriad soldiers at the airport. Every day I was emotionally out of my depth before the courage and dignity of my fellow African brothers and sisters.

Anatole's wife, Odile, had just seen armed soldiers shoot down the doors of her house nearly killing two children who hid under the bed. Fleeing to the "safety" of another "quartier" her husband left for a conference in South Africa two days later. Her little girl, Ariel, went down with malaria. As Odile struggled with thoughts about her lost home and the shock of the last weeks, tears welled in her eyes. I can still remember her crying/praying through the nights as I was sleeping in a neighbouring room. Yet such dignity! She insisted on cooking and cleaning up after us missionaries! She refused self pity, considering our own comfort and food more important then her own situation!

And then pastor Yerima. He had been in the bush when trouble broke out in Bangui. His van had broken down again which left him a difficult two day journey (standing room only!) back to Bangui through endless check points, manned by ruthless soldiers. "Ethnic cleansing" was already rearing its head as people who happened to be of a different tribe were dragged off the bus and shot by the soldiers. Yerima used his spiritual authority to protect the deacon (he was of the "wrong" tribe) he was travelling with. His health had also broken down due to the stress of everything. He had heard of his young cousins at University who had been killed by vengeful militia as well as hundreds of other such stories.

"You know, these ethnic problems are the fault of the church", he confided in me;

"We started the divisions within our own churches and it is now spreading to the nation."

Suddenly, overwhelmed by the burden of prayer he was carrying, he broke down weeping. All of us in the room felt the weight of the moment, as if God's own heart was weeping, and all we could do was humbly weep alongside.

And Cyriaque. He had been on the run for a week as various factions wanted to kill him. (He had been instrumental in saving hundreds of lives as he had been able to give a warning concerning the impending French bombing which annihilated a whole district on the night of the 4-5 January.) He was also living in the dangerous South side of Bangui where over a 100.000 people had been displaced because of the bombing and revenge killings of the M.I.S.A.B. (the "peace" keeping force !). He explained to me how his little girl had gone into shock during the bombing (the w/k of the 20-21 June 1997) and was suffocating. He ran out into the night as the shells were falling carrying his daughter in his arms.

"Will you pray for me Rob " he said eyes moistening,

"Things have been hard."

I could go on. The Rwandan Tutsi pastor who had walked 3.000 km through dense forest with his Hutu flock to arrive at the refugee camp in Bangui. The young girls who broke down in church after nearly being raped by the soldiers. The list of such personal tragedies was endless.

And yet, far from descending into despair, these folks carried a powerful dignity and strength which transfigured their suffering.

Rev 7(13-17) speaks of those coming out of the tribulation. These folks have "come out" of a great tribulation. Tribulation and injustice are like unholy fumes which penetrate the atmosphere and impregnate the hearts of innocent victims of tragedy. This is why the holy ones needed to,

"wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Victims of tribulation need to be cleansed from the hurt by the blood of the Lamb who suffers with them. However, the pain once cleansed leads them to the presence of God.

"They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple."

Serving God day and night in his temple (see Luke 2(37)) is the life of intercession. In God's mysterious sovereign purpose he uses tribulation to prepare intercession.

I believe that the Lord is building his altar in Central Africa. The French translation of ***Psalm 6(9-10)*** says,

"The Lord has heard the voice of my tears."

I believe He has heard the collective sorrow of this nation as it rises through tribulation to become an intercessory force for good. The *"Slain Lamb"* at the centre of the throne of God *(Rev 4(6))* epitomises the dignity and beautiful mystery of a love that dares to weep and bleed. His wounds are real, eternal, and yet pure and beautified.

"No angel in the sky, can fully bear the sight,
But downward bares his burning eye
At mysteries so bright..."

God cleanses and redeems our sufferings. As I was thinking of the 100.000 displaced peoples who were the innocent victims of this coup, (lost children and the weak and aged, with no medicine, sleeping out in the bush in the middle of the rainy season) the rest of the Revelation passage seemed so real :

"He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them..."

The very best shepherd is the one who has learnt to be a lamb. God is gently shepherding this nation to its living water.

"For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd;
he will lead them to springs of living water.
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Hallelujah! He is healing the land and the hearts and, gently as a Father to his troubled son, wiping away the tears.

In the midst of the trials we were able to continue with our "mission building" seminars which included a significant session at the Foreign Office in front of 600 people including the minister of the interior.

Many people came to the Lord as well. A highlight for me was an open air meeting in a very volatile area, preaching in the light of a full moon under African skies to over 500 folk who had gathered.

However, the ultimate blessing was the last night when we finally managed to get together with all of the ***"Nations"*** leaders for a night of prayer. It's hard to explain but the Lord was very powerfully present and the five hours passed like five minutes. Every prayer was pregnant with prophetic utterance and while we prayed I could see clearly that God was building his altar in the Land. It was a fulfilment of the word from *2 Samuel 24(18)* that the Lord had given for the time:

"Go up and build an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunan the Jebusite..."

Although the country was on the verge of civil war and destruction I believe the Lord used the prayers of many in G.B., France and elsewhere to turn the country back. We had been in prayer and fasting for 3 days before leaving and from the same passage in Samuel had found the faith to speak out against the angel of destruction :

"Enough! Withdraw your hand!"

From our arrival the cease fire began, the mutiny ceased and normal life started again. A healing of hearts is always necessary, but God is patiently pursuing His purpose and the tree of life stands at the crossroads of history, bearing fruit each month and giving leaves for,

"the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22(2)).

African poet Mongane Wally Serote writes :

"Blood, no matter how little of it, when it spills,
spills on the brain, on the memory of a nation."

and Irish poet Seamus Heaney sums up our hope for such healing in "The Cure at Troy" :

"History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave of justice
Can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea change
On the far side of revenge
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here

Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells..."

Pygmies, Prayers and 'Papillons'

Early man found himself in a beautiful garden with trees, fruit, steams and the perfect presence of God. .....Paradise.

Caught up in the heavenly songs of a hundred polyphonic Pygmy voices, a forest for our Cathedral, and dozens of multicoloured butterflies gliding on the wind of prayer, I heard an echo of that distant garden.

God gave an authority to early man to reign, and, in a realm way beyond human strategy and modern machinery, I discovered an 'authority' amongst the 'early' peoples of this Central African Republic. An 'authority' of life in harmony with earth, but as redemption works its purpose, an authority in prayer to usher in the chosen destiny of a nation. It is the pursuit of this 'hidden' destiny in the heart of Africa that has led our brave brothers in C.A.R. to give their all to this pioneer work amongst the Pygmy clans of Bobelé.

For those linked to *'Nations'* the Chinese word for 'New Beginnings' - a buried seed with a long root beginning to sprout fresh green shoots above the ground - has been an inspiration. The pygmies also have a word for 'New beginnings' or 'New thing' : 'To Yé' (Tow-Yeah). It's the word they use to describe God calling creation into place. A new beginning. A new thing.

"See, I am doing a new thing !
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it..."

God is working a quiet miracle in the secret of the equatorial forest. The African team here have won over 100 of these 'unreached' peoples to the Lord over the last years and are involved in the delicate task of discipling them.

Total joy emanated from the evenings of worship, dancing in a circle around a huge fire sending myriad sparks up into the star filled African nights and bringing memories of God appearing in a flame to the shepherd Moses, or speaking of a multiplied family to nomadic Abram as he contemplated his own African heaven.

It's hard to evaluate the worth of a little basket woven with wise dexterity at the hands of a young Pygmy girl and then carried with effortless grace on her head, or the greeting of a grey haired elder, honouring a visitor, his muscle bound frame and noble bare feet, speaking of years of dignified labour on the earth. Western clothes are not well adapted for the natural wear and tear of forest life, and maintaining a minimum of dignity with the coverings the forest provides, the more hidden clans teach a long lost secret about lack of shame and self consciousness.

Spending 2 hours a day teaching these peoples has to rate as one of the deepest privileges... and challenges I have found over the years. You can throw away every book and prop of Western thinking and theology! Who's teaching who ?

Leaning heavily on the crutch of grace, every step being a prayer for help, I discovered that mime, theatre and song were the means of communication rather than preaching words (albeit though a translator) at them. The best times were ones of group activity where everyone got a say in creating the word God was giving. I was absolutely amazed to see that they could compose a new song -usually the word in their dialect that the Lord was giving - within five to ten minutes and then sing it joyfully together for the next 15 minutes! We acted out their own creation mythologies before going on to make a mime and song of the true creation story. My greatest joy came when I realised that they had grasped the secret of prayer as I listened to the joyful ode they had composed from John 14.14.

"You may ask me for anything in my name and I will do it."

I'm sure that part of Jesus' *"joy set before him"*- even through the sheer suffering of the cross, was to see the nations of the world owning his word in their cultures. Pygmies rejoice the heart of Jesus!

New beginnings are also the fruit of suffering and even the most hard hearted atheist would confess, along with the poem of Milton, that this world is now a *"Paradise Lost."* One can also hear the echo of sin and suffering amongst the now "fallen forest".

The "little brothers" shared how some of their oppressors (nearly every other African tribe!) forced them to sell their blood cheaply to them so they could then sell it on for profit to the hospitals! The grossly enlarged feet of elephantiasis, the swollen bellies of little children - the legacy of malaria, and horrendously infected wounds also testified to the curse of illness.

The missionary team pulled a little girl back from the brink of death caring for her and sending her to hospital, at their own cost, in Bangui. She got well, bloomed under the care and I met her smile a number of times during my time. Amongst her early problems had been syphilis in her blood. Shocking, and yet the reality of the demonic infestation of paradise. Healing and redemption, a real possibility with some acts of selfless love... and yet. On return to the clan her family, not yet belonging to the Lord in the fullest, wanted her back in the old ways and exposed again to the old dangers.

Over these last years a sustainable health care project has been established as well as a literacy programme, at the request of the Pygmies, who long to be able to read the word of God. Again, creative, God inspired solutions have been prayed into existence.

A number of different groups from other African tribes in Central African Republic made up the number for the consultation. We spent the whole time in a 24 hour prayer chain interrupted only by the teaching sessions!

I’m always amazed at the grip of prayer and prophetic statement that comes from these forest consultations. At one session God seemed to be cleansing and healing the “conscience of the nation” as we prayed for 3 generations of leaders. The old, the now and the future "Joshua" generation that will rise in pure intercession to lead Africa into its destiny.

At another session a prophetic mud brick was laid and anointed as a sign of a "Joseph" (missionary movement) being birthed in the forest. Anatole Banga (the leader of Nations en Marche) had been praying about basing his training in the forest, and the brick may well be a sign of a 24 hour prayer house and "Centre for the Nations" being established here in the future. I couldn’t think of a better place for pioneer missionaries from around the world to be trained.

We ended the teaching sessions with a night of prayer. At about 2 in the morning an anointing came on the praying and I heard the "sound" of "nations" on the march! It is a new, non-western, energetic, vibrant, wild and powerful sound! It is the sound that lies in the hearts of this new African generation and no doubt in the heats of multiplied thousands from the new missionary armies around the world.

Each nation will bring its "sound" to make up the redemptive harmony of a new world.

“To Yé Bobelé!”