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LOVE TRIUMPHANT

As we've travelled together through the previous pages a few may be thinking that the tough realities of missionary life have been minimised in favour of the thrilling adventure of living for Christ. Before I develop this I'd like you to think of Jacob from the Old Testament. He was running away from the hatred of his brother and found himself working for Laban. His lot was not an easy one as he routinely cared for boring old sheep ! He himself sums up his position :

> *"This was my situation : The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes. It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household."*
>
> *Genesis 31 : 40 - 41*

I've also been serving the Lord for these last twenty years and, like Jacob, I know what it is to persevere and suffer. However, like Jacob, I also have the same secret. Jacob was in love with Rachel and I too find motivation in a fresh revelation of Christ's love. Jacob was so captivated by the beautiful vision of Rachel that he practically forgot the difficulties of his service :

> *"So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him* ***because of his love for her*** *"*
>
> *Genesis 29 : 20*

I've been so captivated by the beauty and grace of the Lord that I've not had time to consider the hard labour and disappointments along the way. Forgive me for getting so carried away !

However, Jacob had to learn to love Leah as well ! She was not as attractive as Rachel ; her weak eyes are a sign of lack of vision ! If Rachel was "vision", then Leah represented hard nosed reality. Rachel remained sterile whilst Leah was a fruit bearer. Although it's easy to fall in love with vision we must also embrace our realities, for it is they that lead us to fruitfulness. The vision without reality leads to sterility. However, Jacob learnt to love Leah and eventually saw the fruitfulness of Rachel. If we persevere in the service and humility of reality our vision will eventually bear fruit.

I too have learnt to love Leah over the years ! Africa and France are good places to meet her. Years of working in teams and leading churches has also shown me Leah in all her shapes and sizes.

A bloody cross always precedes a resurrection. Death, division and tragedy are all around us in this sin stained, sad world. One tragic day in Africa a young lady came to see me to pour out her heart. To be able to survive and bring up her baby girl she had to sell her body as a prostitute. This sordid trade sowed the seed of a new baby into her and

she found herself pregnant. The baby grew inside of her along with the panic and worry of another mouth to feed. Tired and alone she reached the time of birth. She screamed in her dark and bloody loneliness and gave birth to another tiny African child. The darkness of poverty and shame put madness into her already fragile mind and her fingers tightened around the screaming child's neck. She squeezed and squeezed and then there was silence. A mother murdered her new born babe. No one saw, no one knew and no one seemed to care. She gathered the small limp body, cleaned up the blood and mess, dug an anonymous hole in the ground and threw the dead baby in. From womb to tomb in a few short tragic moments. Earth covered the deed but the deep scars of guilt were not so easily covered over. Whose guilt ? Sin always flows down from the top to land on the weakest and most innocent. It would be hard to measure the deep suffering and tears that flowed from both European and African eyes as a measure of healing, justice and redemption was clumsily applied to so deep a tragedy.

I could go on. Our first attempts to build a self-help business in Africa met with the sudden death, through the tragedy of A.I.D.S, of the founding member. Coups, road accidents and ethnic violence and disease have only too often demanded a high price from suffering hearts. I can never forget the tears of African intercessors.

The indifference and apathetic decadence of the Christian, civilised West is less visibly shocking but no less destructive. I've known what it is to be rejected for one's faith. The secular mind set of France easily brands enthusiasm for Christ as a cultic deviation. The pain of division, when close friends are separated by demonically inspired traps, is a deep wound to bear. Joseph's dreams were rejected by his jealous brothers and so often "the brothers" in the Church family reject those with the multi coloured missionary cloaks.

Every day life can also be cruel. Children are born less than perfect, Alzheimer's disease brings a slow and undignified end to the most noble of brains. Adolescent children can rebel and bring worry and doubt to a family. Personal weaknesses and fears bring discouragement while habitual sin clings and follows like some unwanted mangy dog. The list goes on.

So, having embraced Leah, what do you do ?

I play with a ping pong ball in the bath ! Like some modern day Archimedes I like to splash around and philosophise. I like to take hold of the ball and draw it down to the depths of the bath. Submerged and hidden under the weight of water there is still a dynamic energy longing to pull the ball back to the surface. In fact the deeper you take the ball down the stronger the upwards pull becomes. Think of Christ for a moment. The Apostle Paul tells us that Christ,

"descended to the lower earthly regions.."

Like some living, divine, cosmic "ping pong ball" he descended from the heights of heaven to take the lowest, most shameful place of suffering. He went under to the very depths of hell. Like a modern day Jonah he was "hurled into the deep", tasting the

profound suffering of humanity in all its madness, lostness and despair. The waves and breakers of a world's accumulated sin bore down on his vulnerable innocence bringing total brokenness. The world's philosophers from Plato and the Greeks, to the existentialist "nausea" of Sartre, the religions and systems of men where Pharaohs, Priests and Prophets like Mohammed, Mao, Marx or Confucius speak their wisdom, to the New Age Gurus of reincarnation and revamped Hinduism. All sink like lead to remain in heavy hopelessness in the depths of human sin and suffering.

Only one man was truly "upwardly mobile."

"He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe."

Ephesians 4 : 9

Christ was full of the breath of God, the air of heaven. The power of love and generosity so filled him, that he naturally broke forth into the reality of resurrection and overcoming life.

"That power is like the working of his mighty strength , which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."

Ephesians 1 : 19-21

Christ is indeed our only hope and the only one who triumphs over death and sin. Knowledge of his love and power enables us to embrace the harsh realities of this world, where innocence dies daily, and to bear the fruit of hope in our lives.

My prayer for all who have got to this last chapter is that you may deeply know Christ. That this relation may enable the breath of the Holy Spirit to fill your own little "ping pong ball" hearts making you too "upwardly mobile" in face of the pressures of sin and death.

"I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe." Ephesians 1 : 18-19

A famous German writer at the end of a long novel about modern man's situation ended with these lines :

"Moments there were, when out of death and the rebellion of the flesh, there came to thee, as thou tookest stock of thyself, a dream of love. Out of this universal feast of death , out of this extremity of fever, kindling the rain-washed evening sky to a fiery glow may it be that love one day shall mount ?"

The simple answer is indeed :

"Lots of loving !"