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“The God of Pygmies and Presidents...”

One of my greatest joys over the years has been to spend time with the Pygmy peoples of Central African Republic. I was invited to be part of the initial pioneer African team which made some of the first contacts with a particular group. I had the privilege of cutting my way through the equatorial forest with them as they began their missionary work.

We finally found a group of about 50 (from 5 clans) who gathered in a makeshift leaf church to hear the gospel. I was the first white man who had ever visited them. I felt ashamed as their simple gaze exposed the sophisticated veneer of some of my inherited Western culture of selfishness.

"How on earth do you minister to an unreached Pygmy group ?"

I thought, as the folk gathered round. In our weakness the Lord graciously led us, through *John 13*, to wash the feet of the tribal leaders as a sign of our desire to serve this neglected people, who are unfortunately despised in their own country. Every eye was transfixed by this "ritual" which seemed to communicate more than mere words. My eyes filled with tears that splashed into the bowl of water before me as I held the well worn foot of a tribal leader, who had journeyed many miles under the canopy of his beloved forest. I'm sure that Christ's feet, covered in the dust of Galilee, looked more like his than my own nurtured "plates of meat"!

The African missionary eyes wept too as they repented of the prejudice and crimes their clans had committed against this indigenous people. They prayed inwardly that their future service and consecration would give flesh to the symbolic healing and cleansing that was being illustrated in this forest sacrament.

The Pygmies themselves seemed to have a deep respect and communal understanding of what was going on. A deeper revelation was at work in their collective intuition and wisdom.

“If God is like this”,

some said afterwards,

“We would like to continue in His teaching”.

I went back to France with this phrase ringing in my ears and many questions as to how a nation could be changed from the bottom up. Instead of trying to influence the rich and powerful, could change be wrought by healing the small and rejected ?

The next year at home was filled with much prayer concerning all of this as I prepared for a follow up visit to the Pygmy clans. I'm so thankful to colleagues who were willing to spend hours seeking God's face with me in all of this.

In the month leading up to the trip I had the conviction that I should write up, in French, all the revelation God had given over the years for “mission building” in CAR. It would be a tool for the Polytechnic which Anatole and the “Nations En Marche" team were building.

During our last "prayer day" before the trip we sensed much warfare and the beginnings of breakthrough. Through prophetic prayer we overheard the following:

“I am the God of Pygmies and Presidents.”

This brought release and encouragement in praying for the “destiny” of C.A.R, although I didn't fully grasp all that the Lord was planning.

Armed with this promise and several teaching packs plus the originals, I left for Charles de Gaulle airport where I was to rendezvous with a certain Philippe Monod who had been a missionary to the Pygmies of Central Africa. Philippe’s plane from Switzerland was late so I decided to check-in anyway. Imagine my dismay when the lady at the desk kindly informed me that my passport was out of date!

There was no way they would let me travel without a valid passport! I felt so stupid! In my despair I decided to get all the books and manuals I was carrying out of my bag to pass on to Philippe when he arrived.

“At least they’ll be able to arrive,”

I thought. As I opened my bag I saw clothes that were not mine. It slowly dawned on me. By mistake I had taken the wrong bag from the train! My bag, with the precious cargo of manuals, was probably lost somewhere in Lyon while I had the clothes of some unfortunate holidaymaker!

It was about 11.30 p.m. My ticket was also non-refundable! I was informed that because of the delay of Philippe’s flight that he had been embarked directly from the runway so I couldn’t even get a message to him. Everything was closed. I began to feel depressed. I wandered into a vacant waiting room to share the floor space with a few lonely, homeless people. I felt so useless! The enemy shouted into my ear,

“That’s the end for you! God’s confirming He doesn’t want you in C.A.R.!”

He mocked the word about the Pygmies and Presidents.

“That’s a joke now!... An impossibility...”

A host of other failures seemed to crowd in on me and I hit rock bottom. I just laid on the floor and cried out to the Lord! It was midnight.

As the hours passed I felt the Lord gently take hold of my heart. He lifted me out of the pit and raised me to a place of hope and faith, speaking quiet peace into my heart.

"Don't worry"... "I'll take care of everything..."

As it says in Genesis,

"There was evening, there was morning".

God always takes us from darkness to light, to new beginnings.

And God did take care of everything. He led me to an incredibly helpful railway assistant. She did so much more than duty and phoned around to trace the missing bag, which they found in Lyon. Usually I would have had to wait and pay the costs of re-transportation but she arranged for the bag to be shipped back on the next train to the airport without cost! It would be here by ten o'clock!

Then there was the passport problem. I had two hours to get from the airport to the Swiss consulate in Paris (my passport's Swiss) to see if they would help. It took ages to get there but wonderfully they prolonged my passport in fifteen minutes!

And the ticket... Having got my bag and passport sorted I went to Air France. For an extra £50 they were able to put me on another departure for Bangui (capital of C.A.R.) for the Saturday night. (My original flight was for Thursday night.) I would lose only two days. In the space of three hours, God had worked everything out in a most miraculous way. As I boarded the flight on Saturday night I felt it was "Resurrection Day!"

Imagine my delight on arriving in Bangui on Sunday morning to discover that the congress actually began Monday for a week and not over the week-end as I had wrongly assumed. I had lost nothing by the delay!

After the morning service at brother Anatole's church, "Fondation Jerusalem", we made hectic preparations to travel to the Pygmy conference which was to be held in the equatorial forest some three hours from Bangui. This conference was the fruit of the last year's evangelism. Large groups had come to the Lord and many other works were now interested in working together. This convention and the mission work was, and still is, totally funded by the Africans themselves. This was the first time such a self-funded conference has ever happened in C.A.R. The delegates either walked or took precarious bush taxies to the venue. About 150 folk were regular attendees at meetings with a total of 360 being present. The convention split between the Pygmy peoples themselves and those seeking to work amongst them.

It was encouraging to see the site the African missionaries had set up, all built by hand from natural resources costing practically nothing. Several mud huts and a meeting

hall made up the complex. This was probably as far as you could get from the Western mission convention.

Various Pygmy clans gathered around their fires as delegates arrived from different areas of C.A.R. I'd brought with me a manual tape player equipped with testimonies in the "Baka" Pygmy dialect. Although the language wasn't the same as theirs it was a great "ice breaker" and the Pygmy families had great fun guessing where the guy on the tape was from. As usual the millions of mosquitoes, flies and other creepy crawlies also turned up for the convention no doubt inspired by the promise of fresh "white" blood, a change from the usual routine of Pygmy corpuscles.

The congress began with an all night prayer meeting! Each delegation took an hour, with every session trying to outdo the others in noise and passion. I don't think there was much hope of sleep for those who retired to bed!

Monday began at 5 a.m. with the morning prayer meeting of one hour (night and day tended to blend in such an environment!). A couple of hours was given to breakfast and basic wash before beginning the first service at 8am. Various meetings and workshops took us to 12 am when a delicious meal of "boule" and "coco" (green weed) was served. Siesta till 3am, when proceedings resumed till 5.30am. Another dose of boule before an evening session in Pygmy style including testimony and dancing around the fire.

Needless to say all this together made up a beautiful symphony of worship to God and the weeks among the Pygmies were truly a glimpse of heaven on earth. A small corner of paradise.

The pioneer work had been established by a great guy called Benjamin Lessy. He explained that early that year, one of the Pygmy ladies died. A famous witch doctor (feticheur) proclaimed that by his spells he would raise the lady back to life. It was all bluff and he failed. Benjamin felt that this was now an opportunity to challenge them that God could raise the dead. He moved out in faith and prayed over the lady asking God to bring her back to life. The Lord heard his prayer and resurrected the lady!

Another Pygmy man testified that he had come to the Lord because of the kindness the missionary team had shown him. He had found a wild-boar in his animal trap. Thinking it was dead, he touched the animal which was however very much alive ! It seriously injured him before escaping. He lay bleeding in the forest. Maggots began to eat away at his wounds. The Pygmy's wife alerted the mission team who went out to look for him. By the grace of God they found him and nursed him back to health. He would have died without their intervention.

Another Pygmy man testified with his son. A few months back his son had broken his leg. The Pygmies have no resources to care for such things and usually the child ends up crippled. However the team were able to send the boy to hospital in Bangui where he was well cared for. He can now walk perfectly.

The Pygmies were the earliest inhabitants of Africa. There is something very special about them. From Matthew 25, which speaks of honouring *"the least (or smallest) of these brothers of mine,"* we sensed that the pygmy people offered some kind of **REDEMPTIVE OPPORTUNITY** (or condemnation!) for the Central African Nations.

Their very **VULNERABILITY** was an opportunity for blessing or curse. As we worshipped together it became apparent that the Bantu people of Central Africa had badly treated the Pygmies and needed to put things right.

A number of folks representing the various Bantu clans, knelt in tears as they confessed their own sins and the sins of their fathers towards this people. Something seemed to break in the heavenly realms because of these prayers.

The Pygmy worship took on a new dimension and the songs of this "particular" people seemed to pour blessing and healing afresh on the land. I was thanking the Lord for being a friend to the Pygmies, but as I recalled His promise I began to doubt whether we would find a President in the midst of the Equatorial forest !

Over the next days the presence of the Lord was very real. He wanted to lead the nation into a greater measure of healing.

At the end of one powerful meeting, unbeknown to many of us previously, a young man stood up. He introduced himself,

"My name is Jean-Serge Bokassa, the son of the former Emperor of C.A.R."

He explained a dream the Lord had given him. He had seen folks wanting to crown his father. However the crown, although sparkling, was fake gold.

His father's infamous reign had ruined the nation and had been violent and repressive. The young man explained how difficult it was for him. He wanted to honour the memory of his father (his father was himself an orphan after witnessing the murder of his own father - whipped to death by the colonial rubber barons! He had also seen his mother hang herself.) Jean-Serge, the son, wanted to ask forgiveness for all the wrongs and evil perpetrated by his father and family.

The atmosphere became electric as he made this plea for reconciliation. Then gradually, as the Lord led, representatives from each tribal group stood up and forgave, hugging Jean-Serge and exchanging prayers.

One man explained that he was the actual President's cousin, representing the Patassé clan which was traditionally divided with Bokassa's. The two men embraced, weeping, forgiving past hurts. Another was struggling to come forward. He finally managed to stand in front of Jean- Serge.

"Your father killed my father" he wept.

Some supernatural force at work within gave him the strength to forgive. As he embraced Jean-Serge, the Holy Spirit came down on both men sending them to the floor. Everyone in the hut was deeply touched and in tears. It was a very profound moment. A brother from Cameroon felt led to anoint the very soil with oil as a sign of the deep healing that the Lord had done through the prayers of reconciliation.

As this was going on a mighty thunder storm tore open the heavens and the rain came pouring down. It was a moving, majestic moment. Words alone do not do the scene justice. As the rain washed the land I was reminded of the prophetic word God had spoken.

"I am the God of Pygmies and Presidents."

I felt so privileged to have had some part in it all.

A few years later at the end of 2003 the nation was in the midst of a national conference of reconciliation held in their Houses of Parliament with the proceedings being broadcast nation wide. Presidents and former Presidents were together trying to find a way forward. Suddenly, the protocol was shattered when a young man stood up and gave his own personal testimony of reconciliation that had occurred a few years back in the forest. The man was Jean-Serge Bokassa and his intervention brought a strategic breakthrough which led to bitter political opponents publicly asking forgiveness of one another. The meeting concluded with all the delegations chanting:

"We want prayer! We want prayer!"

In the light of this I tend to believe that God can change a nation from the bottom up and that He is indeed the God of Pygmies and Presidents.

I'll end this long session on Africa with a further story of "new beginnings".

A Christmas Tale From the Forest

Just how many people can you cram into a Mitsubishi Pajero ?

On the average trip to the Bobelé Pygmy encampment in Central African Republic the answer may take on an entirely different dimension. For a start you have to pack the vehicle full with as many bananas, yams, and other cut price delicacies from the generous forest. Myself, as the honoured guest, is then ensconced in glory in the front seat with Anatole Banga's two children, Ariel and Caleb. The next row is filled with Anatole himself, his wife Odile, Benjamin Lessy our pioneer African missionary to these Pygmies, and a very pregnant African lady called Opportune. And just when you were already holding your breath for lack of air and pressure…. five Pygmies are squeezed in for good measure ! Of course you also need to include the driver in the grand total of **thirteen**.

As we bounced along the forest tracks, a mobile fount of plenty, I couldn't help but doubt the beautiful image of solitude generated by the pictures of Mary and Joseph as they travel along to Bethlehem on a slightly less than loaded donkey !

The wheels dipped violently into the thousandth pot-hole in the track as a muffled cry emerged from the heavily pregnant lady next to Anatole. Through gritted teeth the cries grew louder as the labour pains came in unstoppable waves. It's one thing to pray to be the " father " of many nations but we were on the verge of experiencing the only too real consequences of new birth.

The Pygmies stared, Anatole grew paler by the minute, the lady groaned, bananas flew in all directions as the driver headed full speed for the capital city of Bangui. We arrived at a small set of buildings which served as a maternity ward in the aptly named area called " Bimbo." We carried the lady out of the car and gratefully handed her over to what the French call " sage femmes ", wise women, or midwives for the English.

Two minutes later a shrill cry broke the hot, humid African air as the miracle of new life was welcomed into the world. A cloud obscuring the evening sun permitted sun beams to stream out of heaven as God seemed to be giving his own particular welcome to this precious African child. My own eyes filled with tears at the majesty of the moment.

Two thousand years ago another cry broke the middle eastern skies above Bethlehem, a cry no less human, yet divinely redemptive as God became a man to live, suffer and die amongst us. A cry that brought life and forgiveness to untold millions around the world, drew the rich and the poor together in worship and caused God to fling a new star into space.

This adventure was just the latest chapter in my history with Central African Republic. While the Embassies were withdrawing their staff and closing, and while the missionaries were leaving because of the political instability and anarchy, we felt we should be holding a mass rally for reconciliation and change in the nation. Standing shoulder to shoulder with brothers in their hour of need does more good than a year of sermons.

Miraculously the Lord opened the door for us to hold a three day period of fasting, prayer and repentance for all the pastors and church leaders. The government enabled us to use their parliament buildings for this free of charge. Only the bravest pastors turned up for this event (about a hundred folk) but we had a " critical mass of faith " to be able to intercede prophetically for the nation.

This was followed by a mass rally in front of the national stadium where over two thousand people gathered to pray and take part in a " reconciliation " ceremony which involved the various tribes and factions asking forgiveness of one another.

It was a privilege to continue to teach the students at Anatole's Polytechnic. They never stop praying ! In spite of facing successive coups and violence, shocking poverty and breakdown of society, and even resistance from the established church, the first wave

of missionaries have successfully graduated in April 2003. One group will be going to Chad to set up " Nations en Marche " in that challenging Islamic environment, while another goes to the unreached " Luthos " tribe in the north with still others fanning out to other unreached people groups as far as Niger. The world is not worthy of such as these.

The work in Bobelé continues to grow with whole areas now cultivated and earning a living for the missionaries. The indigenous Pygmy church is growing and at the end of a Sunday service a young Pygmy mother presented me with her new baby girl for me to name. I named her " Sylviane ", after my wife, which means " daughter of the forest ". A dispensary is saving lives and an educational programme bringing dignity and progress.

A holistic gospel. God's Shalom !

In spite of the opposition it seems indeed that God does indeed have a wonderful destiny for this nation. Recent research has uncovered the biggest oil reserves in the world under this country's earth, which may explain some of the political unrest at the moment.

God came to man, born amongst muck and beasts in a violent poverty stricken world. His Shalom became flesh.

In front of " Bimbo's " maternity shacks a small new born baby girl was carried out for me to bless. Fragile, stained with blood yet covered in the white sheen of the new-born, she seemed to symbolise all that Central Africa could be in the future. I remembered Saul's blessing of David and prayed :

" May you be blessed, my daughter ; you will do great things and surely triumph. "

They also named her a daughter of the forest.