

Visit to Pygmies in Central African Republic

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We have just returned from a trip to Bobele, a Pygmy encampment about two hours into the jungle from the capital city, Bangui. The worship was wonderful. They clapped their hands and swayed rhythmically with the beating drum as they lost themselves in worship and adoration. Every so often one or more would let out a cry of sheer exuberant joy. They had never heard the gospel until Benjamin and his team left the comforts of the city and made their home in the jungle.

We visited a work led by Benjamin Lessy, a young man from Anatole's church, "Foundation Jerusalem". Benjamin and his family have been living in this area for three years. He began by going to the villages in the area to share his vision to reach the Pygmy people with the gospel. At first he met opposition because the people were of a different tribe to him and because they considered that the Pygmies belonged to them, and they didn't want anyone upsetting the status quo. However, gradually, Benjamin won some converts from the village and some have now become part of his team of helpers and workers.

They have built several huts where they live and the Pygmies come and go. The Pygmies are a nomadic people but Benjamin reckons that about 500 regularly come to the place that he has built. We visited a church there and I guess 50 or more Pygmy believers were worshipping the Lord. It was my first time to meet any Pygmies, and I was their first ever woman preacher!

The worship was something wonderful to be a part of. They clapped their hands and swayed rhythmically with the beating drum as they lost themselves in worship and adoration. Every so often one or more would let out a cry of sheer exuberant joy. They sang in their own language and in Songo, the main African language of the nation. They had never heard the gospel until Benjamin and his team left the comforts of the city and made their home in the jungle.

With the help of the literacy classes the team run, they are learning to read the Bible in Songo, and some are also learning French. Their own language is not yet written down, thus there is no Bible in it, and at the moment no-one is working on translating it.

The team is hoping to set up a small clinic soon. One of them is trained in some kind of medical work - though he is not a doctor. There is a lot of disease among the Pygmies. We could see numbers with bad eyes, and quite a few with cuts that had obviously gone septic. Most of them had worms in their feet because the adults were all bare footed. Simple teaching and medical help will relieve a lot of suffering.

These people have traditionally been the slaves of whoever was in the nearest village to where they were living at the time. They have been much abused by the different African tribes. Often when a new work starts there's a dispute with the villagers who feel that they have ownership of them. I had been teaching at the Polytechnic (The missionary training for Nations-en-Marche, the Central African Mission movement) about the Moravians who were willing to sell themselves into slavery to witness to the slaves in the West Indies. I hadn't realised at that time how relevant it was to this society. Anatole encouraged the students to pray about what they then should do to see the pygmies set free from slavery.

Political unrest

We arrived at a time of political unrest in the nation again. The President had accused a General in the army of being behind the attempted coup last May. The General had denied this and supporters had rallied to him. This led to some fighting and we went to sleep on several nights to the sound of gunshots the other side of the city. We could often hear these gunshots through the day. Anatole's two year old son, Caleb, cried every time he heard them because he was remembering last May when he, his mother and sister had to flee from their house, leaving his father behind, not knowing whether they would see him alive again.

After the first few days the situation eased and there was no more fighting in the streets of the city. The General fled to Chad with his supporters, and we have since heard that he was arrested there. Whether he was guilty or not is another issue. The leaders of the nation certainly need prayer. The General is the leader of a sect that comes from West Africa. He has been bringing many followers of the sect into this nation and giving them positions in the army. The President's wife practises voodoo and people think that she has a lot of influence over her husband.

Witchcraft and Islam

There is a tremendous power of witchcraft in the nation and it is very easy to see the evidence of it. Anatole's neighbour is the chief of the area and his household practise witchcraft. Unfortunately, the practice is still rife in the churches. Even some pastors in certain denominations practise witchcraft. It's only in the last 20 years that the Pentecostal movement has come to the Central African Republic and with it the discernment about evil spirits.

Islam is also gaining ground in this country. Until recently, statistics showed about 10% Muslim. Anatole's brother, John Pauline told me that there were now about 40-45% Muslims in C.A.R. The main reason for this is that Libya and Saudi Arabia are pumping in money and buying people's faiths in return for education, housing etc. Muslims own most of the thriving businesses in the capital. It is Muslims who benefit from the diamonds and gold in the country. It is difficult for Christians not to resent Muslims. In the recent attempted coup it was Libyan troops called in by the President who killed many Africans.

I was able to teach about Islam, and the forces of fear and mockery that are behind it, and encourage the students and the people in Anatole's church to believe for the Lord to save Muslims through them. Anatole is seeing Muslims come to Christ himself, and is leading the church into a 40 day prayer and fasting time that covers the whole of Ramadan.

The other all-pervading force is poverty. This has some human sources, but the main stronghold is in the attitudes of the people. There is hopelessness, even among the young. The schools and hospitals are closed more than they are open. Disease and idleness leads to apathy and dullness.

Can a Nation be changed?

In the midst of all this Anatole Banga and many other righteous men of God are standing firm in their faith and in prayer for this nation to be taken back for the Lord and for it to be a blessing to other nations. Nights of prayer are common, and there is a tremendous love of worshipping the Lord.

Anatole leads the indigenous mission movement called "Nations-en-Marche" and is running an Interdenominational Polytechnic, a small training college for missionaries. The course lasts three years and is just coming into its second year. There are nine students in the first year and seven in the second year. Debbie, Dan and I were teaching them each day. These young men are hungry to serve the Lord and already on their short-term mission trips in this last summer have seen many people saved. There is an local team of dedicated men of God who are giving their time and skills freely to help train these men in spiritual and physical skills.

There are many others who would want to be trained in the Polytechnic. Anatole is only asking a basic cost to cover their food. However many of the students cannot manage even that. Most have other family commitments too. In the end is the responsibility falls back on Anatole, and so the number of students must be limited. Pray that the students would learn to stand before the Lord for their own support. Anatole has looked at various businesses they could run, but nothing has worked so far. We are now looking with him at the possibility of a small chicken farm.

Righteousness

One of the prayers that has constantly been with us for Central Africa Republic is for righteous leadership in the nation. Anatole took us to meet one man who is suffering because he has tried to work for righteousness in the country. He was a businessman in a very high position with a lot of favour and influence in the government. However he has now fallen from favour and was recently put on trial for some trumped up charge. He was acquitted, but the President did not agree with the decision, and so is going to sentence him anyway. He is presently awaiting this. His life is also in danger because the present leadership feels that the French government might try to establish this man in some position of authority. Through all of these troubles he has become a Christian. Pray for this man and others like him. Anyone that stands for righteousness meets the full wrath of an unjust regime.

Youth: the hope for the future

As I have already mentioned, during the last coup in May, Anatole sent his family to safety, but stayed in his home himself in prayer and fasting. He cried out to God for the way forward for his nation. The Lord spoke to him about the youth. A little while later a group of men came to see him saying that they had a burden for the youth of the nation, and the Lord had directed them to Anatole. This group of seven or so have now become the Youth leadership of Nations-en-Marche and in prayer have found a strategy to see the young people of the nation rise and take their place in all that the Lord has for them. We had the privilege of being able to meet with them. Each man brings his own speciality, artistic talents, education, agriculture, social awareness, spiritual training. Their desire is to release the latent potential in Central African young men and women. It is significant that they are also looking to the women, as they are still often thought of as second class citizens.

Signs and symbols

"Here I am and the children the Lord has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty" (Isaiah 8:18) Dan has been praying out of this verse for several years for Anatole and Odile and the children. We went with a deep concern for little Caleb, who is two and has been ill with liver complaints and malaria more or less since his birth. The Wellingborough team had prayed over a handkerchief, which Dan laid on him we prayed for his healing.

Over the two weeks we were there, Caleb went from being a lethargic little boy, to a bouncy, fun loving chap. His appetite developed and he put on weight. We felt that he was indeed a sign of what the Lord wants to do for the youth of Central Africa.

Conclusions

The sense of spiritual heaviness in the C.A.R. is very real. Babylon, the False Bride who steals the jewels and tries to crush the life out of God's people, is a very real force. She is fed by the abominations of witchcraft, of slavery, of idolatry and of Islam.

"The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages." (Revelation 17:15)

She keeps the people in poverty, and poverty dulls hope. It dulls life. It makes a mockery of dreams. It dulls the eyes of the people. Somehow, although Central Africa is vibrant with the colours of the jungle, the impression I have come away with is that of a nation that is living in black and white. The "kings" of that area are taking their stand against the Lord's anointed. They seem so well settled there that they feel very secure,

"In her heart she boasts, "I sit as queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn" (Revelation 17:7)

"She" brings untold suffering, and steals the jewels, the "colours" of the dreams of the people of God, just as Joseph's multicoloured coat was ripped from him in an attempt to crush his dreams and reduce him to slavery. However Babylon will fall, and there will be a mighty release,

"Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like the peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For the Lord God Almighty reigns." (Revelation 18:6)

Men like Anatole are standing up against the weight of Babylon. The Lord is sending in reinforcements. The battle is fierce, and the warriors often grow weary. Anatole's prayer is for a move of God's Spirit in the nation to cleanse the church, calling her out of witchcraft (out of Babylon?) into faith, so that as God's people in the nation they can demonstrate the power of the Kingdom and rise together into their destiny.

"Awake, awake, O Bangui, clothe yourself with strength. Put on your garments of splendour, O Bangui, the holy city. The uncircumcised and defiled will not enter you again. Shake of your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, O Bangui. Free yourself from the chains on your neck, O captive daughter." (Isaiah 52:1-2)

When the people were under the control of Babylon, they lost their song; "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept....How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137)

However when they were released so were the songs and the dreams; "When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy." (Psalm 126)

I feel that the Lord wants to release songs and dreams and laughter. They can only come as we, His people, realise His absolute victory over every other "king" and power. He invites us to face the real reality of poverty, witchcraft, Islam, violence and corruption, and yet still laugh with Him, the laugh of faith.

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against His Anointed One.....The One enthroned in heaven laughs." (Psalm 2)

"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations....he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead...yet he did not waver through unbelief" (Romans 4:18-19)

When we face facts with faith we will receive Isaac, Laughter!

The C.A.R from one perspective is "as good as dead", yet because of the faith of a few, the nation will rise and join the Lord in a laugh of victory, because His resurrection LIFE has defeated death and all the power of the enemy.

Like Joseph, the nation will rise out of slavery to the place of authority and sonship. The fulfilment of hopes and dreams will give colour to the people again and there will be a sound of singing in the land.

Please join me in the prayer for the multi-coloured grace of God to flow from Central Africa to the nations of the world!

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