

## Chapter 15

### A Prophetic Sign of Hope in a Time of Judgement

The following represents a few conclusions that I was able to draw up several years ago in my work to mobilise mission in Central Africa. I include it here as it may contain several prophetic threads relevant to wider situations. It may also enable you to pray more effectively for Africa. In 1996 the television 'news' stories were full of the miseries and conflicts which were sweeping many of the black Central African countries.

Rebel troops on the verge of overthrowing Mbutu's long reign in Zaire, Central African Republic continues to head towards an ethnic war, while other states such as Cameroon and the Congo plunge into economic chaos. We could add our own litany of problems and wars that have followed us into 2004.

Can a missions movement arise out of such tragedy and seemingly impossible situations ? Fergal Keane, writing in Time Magazine (April 14, 1997) summed it up succinctly :

*"... I am reminded of the words of the African poet Mongane Wally Serote, who wrote : "Blood, no matter how little of it, when it spills, spills on the brain, on the memory of a nation."*

*The rhetoric of peace and love will not pull us from the mire of Rwanda, Bosnia, Ulster or the Middle East, nor will the politics of wishful thinking. For the sake of all the victims of hatred, we in the West must get ready for a long, long journey. Despair, disappointment and disillusionment will be part of that journey, but it is one that conscience obliges us to make." (1)*

In times of much anarchy and strife, **the intercessory role needs to be strongly taken up** and interpreted with the eyes of faith, having a firm foundation of "rhema" word revelation. The chapters of this book will, I trust, form some of the building blocks for the establishment of such a foundation.

I find great encouragement in the book of *Jeremiah chapter 32* when the prophet is asked to buy his uncle's field while the Babylonians are preparing to raze the city to the ground. Building world mission in some parts of the world at this moment is a prophetic act like Jeremiah buying his field. I believe that the encouragements and practical working out of vision described in this book are like the deed that Jeremiah needed to sign and seal up in a clay jar (1a) as a prophetic sign of hope in a time of judgement.

Jeremiah interceded with God and proclaimed :

*"Nothing is too hard for you..."*

The Lord answered Jeremiah and confirmed his cry :

*"I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me ?"*

God's sovereignty and power breaks forth. He is able to do this. Again in writing up this conclusion, I received news of yet another brother, who is part of the missions movement in Central Africa, who has died (2) of disease. In the face of such adversity, and sacrificial sowing it is important to see the God of the impossible. The God who is able.

We see judgement on the city as the enemy will,

*"come in and set it on fire; they will burn it down,"*

but at the same time there is a promise of redemption and restoration.

*"Therefore, as I have brought all this calamity on this people, so I will give them all the prosperity I have promised them. Once more fields will be bought in this land of which you say, 'It is a desolate waste, without men or animals...' Fields will be bought for silver and deeds will be signed."*

New mission "fields" will be opened by the African armies and hundreds will consecrate their lives to missionary endeavour. Restoration is beginning now, in countries like Central Africa, Asia and south America, if only God will give us eyes to see.

The eleventh hour workers are on the march, the "sunbrowned bride", freed from the hurt and rejection created by slavery and years of inferiority, is showing her beauty. Prayer is rising for the workers to go into the harvest and the Church is discovering afresh the scriptural mandate for mission written on every page of their Bibles.

New structures are being formed to facilitate the missionary task and make the Church "mobile" and able to respond to this fresh opportunity. The Holy Spirit is blowing over the nations, resurrecting the dreams of the past and incarnating them in a black, brown and yellow "warrior" Church. The dry bones spring to life as we witness a resurrection of nations.

**So called "weaknesses" and vulnerability become the very strengths and means by which the gospel is proclaimed.**

I'll conclude by sharing the three major obstacles which I have discovered over these last years which hinder the progress of the Kingdom in Africa. These may also be the same obstacles which need to be overcome in our own lives to some degree. They are:

- 1) The historical influence of slavery, creating a low self image.**
- 2) The influence of ancestors, and occult bondage.**
- 3) Eschatological Passivity - i.e. Wrong views on the Kingdom.**

## Slavery

Oliver and Fage in their book "A Short History of Africa" show how large the influence of slavery was.

*"Compared with an estimate of some 900,000 Negro slaves landed in the Americas by 1600, the seventeenth-century figure is thought to be at least 2,750,000; the figures for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot have been less than 7,000,000 and 4,000,000 respectively..." (3)*

The Dutch pioneered the practice quickly followed by Portugal, France and Britain.

*"In terms of trade alone, victory went to Britain. By the end of the eighteenth century, her ships were carrying more than half the slaves taken to America". (4)*

Thomas O'Toole in the "Continents Hidden Heart" writes

*"The major wealth that Central Africa had to offer the world economy was it's human population..." (5) and he adds that : "...the commerce in slaves had two destructive effects. It set indigenous peoples against each other, and it contributed to the depopulation of the area. Both effects have left their mark on the African Republic today ..." (6)*

Ethnic cleansing finding its evil seeds in the slave trade is a terrible possibility. Repentance, restitution and reconciliation are much needed in this area. As an Englishman I'm shocked to see how my own nation led the way in this abominable trade.

Perhaps prayer walks to redeem the ancient slave trade routes would be a way to begin to counter lingering spiritual bondage created by this tragedy ? Thanks to William Wilberforce and other evangelical Christians of the "Clapham Sect", slavery was finally abolished in 1833, but the spiritual scars still remain. Even as late as 1925 the colonial powers were still exploiting African labour.

*"..The labour demands for the Congo-Ocean Railway in 1925 and 1926 caused further disruption as tens of thousands of men in the prime of life were taken by force to work a thousand kilometres from their home..." (7)*

A deep root of fear, inferiority and rejection has grown through the fabric of many Central African Nations because of slavery. It's effect in the Church is to make it dependent, legalistic and afraid to assume responsibility. A big inferiority complex needs breaking. To build a strong mission identity in such nations we must deal with this root of rejection. As well as humble hearted repentant attitudes from the West, a strong emphasis on the Father heart of God is necessary. (7a) Listen to Paul from *Romans 8 :15*.

*"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father"..."*

Although obvious, this is so important. It seems that *Luke 3 :22* shows how the baptism in the Holy Spirit reveals the Father's heart :

*"... and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven : "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"..."*

**It is so important that we bring the anointed ministry and encouragement which releases the Holy Spirit and reveals the Father heart of God.**

A few years ago Rowland Evans, the founder of the mission "*World Horizons*" and actual International Director of "*Nations*", shared a very powerful experience he had while staying in the manse of John Newton in Olney, Bedfordshire. Newton, along with Cowper and Wilberforce, had fought for the abolition of slavery. Newton's house, (which was then open as a kind of museum) was filled with the horrific relics of his old life as a slave trader. As Rowland looked at the relics he could almost feel the prayer agony of Newton as he fought for the freedom of the slaves. Then God seemed to speak.

*"I've used these men in the past to lead the African out of slavery....I want to use your prayers now, in the same way, to lead the African into his inheritance..." (8)*

**The inheritance is "world mission" and knowledge of the Father's love is the key which opens the door.**

### **Ancestors and Witchcraft**

Anyone who has ever spent much time in Africa will very soon realise that Africans have a very developed spiritual awareness which we lack in the West. The spiritual world is very much as real as the natural one which we Westerners are so used to living in. The influence of the dead, demons and curses on the average person is very great indeed. Most missiologists would call this different outlook and life perception a difference in "*Worldview*." Although this is not the place to really develop this fully, it would be useful to look at a few definitions of *Worldview*.

David Hesselgrave in "Communicating Christ Cross Culturally" says :

*"The way people see reality can be termed their worldview.... A worldview is the way people see or perceive the world, the way they know it to be."(9)*

Robert Redfield in "The Primitive World View" adds :

*"Of all that is connoted by "culture", "worldview" attends especially to the way a man, in a particular society, sees himself in relation to all else. It is the properties of existence as distinguished from and related to the self. It is, in short, a man's idea of the universe. It is that organisation of ideas that answers to a man with the questions: "Where am I? Among what do I move? What are my relations to these things ..." (10)*

With a final contribution from Paul Hiebert who in "Anthropological Insights for Missionaries" describes 'Worldview' as,

*"...the basic assumptions about reality which lie behind the beliefs and behaviour of a culture ..." (11)*

When considering Africa we have to consider the particular African "Worldview". Hesselgrave and others call this a "tribal" worldview, (although some African missiologists would object to this.) Again, it would be useful to quote from Hesselgrave for a definition of tribal worldview.

*"...Tribal worldview often (but not always) transcends the secular - sacred distinction that is so much a part of the thinking of the West. It may be at one and the same time sacred and secular. It is pre-occupied with gods, spirits, and ghosts, but it is patently anthropocentric (and ethnocentric) in most cases. It brings nature and supernature together in a curious amalgam. It brings space and time together in an inextricable mix. It cements this world and the other world together in a single system. This unity is not that of monism or pantheism, however. It is rather the unity of a continuum on which boundaries between deities, spirits, animals, men and natural phenomena are more or less obscure and shifting." (12)*

Over the last four years I could give very real examples and testimony to how Hesselgrave's definition works itself out in everyday life and practice. Experienced missionaries share stories of men with the ability to change into animals, the secret underwater world of "sirens" and the power of black magic. James Fraser, missionary to tribal peoples in Asia, also encountered this occult reality expressed in the pages of his biography "Mountain Rain". The overlap of the spiritual world tends to keep the African mind locked in tradition where change and the future are seen as threats. **This can create a very passive acceptance of life which presents a barrier to presenting new ideas such as mission and world evangelisation.**

John S. Mbiti in his book "African Religions and Philosophy" brings an African perspective on the issue and very importantly introduces the idea of time into the equation.

*"He insists that Western lineal time with its indefinite past, a present, and an infinite future is foreign to African thinking. For the African time has two dimensions. It has a past and a present but virtually no future. Actual time moves*

*backward rather than forward, and people focus on what has taken place rather than on the future. Individuals move, not to a future existence, but to join the ancestors of the past. Death moves people to that existence where, if the living remember them and perform the proper rituals, they will achieve a 'collective immortality'." (13)*

Mbiti also puts forward the idea that “ancestor worship” is not necessarily “worship” but simple “communion” and honouring of those who have preceded us. Ancestor devotion may be a better word.

All of this in experience means that it is hard to “plan ahead” in the African churches. It is hard to break out of “traditions” of all kinds (especially denominational traditions). Giving new “vision” for the future challenges this worldview and these cultural barriers. In the past white men have come and been missionaries, why should that change now? However, change must come and our true “collective immortality” lies in a personal decision to follow Christ into the future, choosing life and resurrection, rather than a choosing of death to lead us to the past.

I'm not saying that we should dismiss all that is good in the African worldview, but the passive looking backwards and the alliance with death and empty traditions, needs to be broken in order to free the new generations into their destiny. The Bible speaks very clearly on how the blood of Jesus releases us from the past.

*"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.."*

And Paul continues, as perhaps an encouragement for those who have been "stung" by his clear message to renounce the *"empty way of life"* handed down by ancestors, by pointing them to the ultimate **“redemptive ancestor”** the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, Christ himself.

*"...He was chosen before the creation of the world, (you don't get more ancestral than that!) but was revealed in these last times for your sake." (14)*

Jesus himself encouraged his followers not to look back or be controlled by the dead but to look to His kingdom, his present and future reign.

*"...He said to another man, "Follow me". But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my Father."*

*Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God". Still another said, "I will follow you Lord, but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God"."* (15)

Jesus is clearly against “looking back” and encourages his Body to plough straight lines into the future, proclaiming his heavenly hope and reign.

Marilyn Hickey in her book *"Breaking the Generation Curse"* also gives a strong argument for living free from ancestral bondage.

It is so important to proclaim the blood of Christ and his finished work on the cross in Africa, both in and outside of the churches, to free people from the bondages to death and the past. Passivity and legalistic tradition need to be exposed and broken within the Church.

Hesselgrave, as Wimber and many others, recognise that it is the “power” behind our lives and words which is so important in breaking such bondages.

**"...It has often been pointed out that in the context of a tribal worldview power encounter takes precedence over truth encounter..." (16)**

True spiritual power can only come when we tap into God through prayer.

**Prayer is the offensive arm of spiritual warfare.**

Prayer is vital for breaking the hold of the past and the occult and freeing the African Christians to vision, change and hope, as they march out to take their place in the World Christian army.

Stuart Robinson in *"Praying the Price"* gives a strong encouragement for the Church of Jesus to major on prayer. Also much of Derek Prince's teaching and especially his book *"Curse or Blessing - You can chose"* gives useful guidance in breaking curses and the influences of satanic bondage. He looks at the curses and blessings in *Deuteronomy* 28.

Disease, confusion, defeat, madness, robbery, violence, prolonged disasters, drought and dire poverty are all symptoms of curse he explains. Rather than passively accepting them we are encouraged to repent and break unholy alliances, pledging ourselves to obedience to Jesus. His set prayers are excellent for leading whole congregations out of the shadows and into the light.

**Breaking the hold of the past is the key for releasing the African, and other churches into their missionary future.**

### **Eschatological Passivity**

Question! Why, if there are so many born-again spirit-filled, dynamic, wonder working Christians in Africa, are their countries in such an awful mess? One of the answers to this would have to be a wrong view of the end times and hence a distorted perspective on how Christianity should be lived out.

So often the Christian viewpoint, which was mainly modelled by the dispensationalist theology of some of the early missionaries, sees Christianity in passive, pessimistic terms. The earth is totally evil and corrupt, something to have nothing to do with. Heaven is only seen in terms of the future.

The Church becomes a kind of spiritual “waiting room”, a bit like waiting to see the dentist, only instead of flicking through magazines, the Bible is read and worship offered. A little flock battle vainly to keep the church pure and the people out, waiting for their small remnant to arrive happily to heaven while the vast majority of souls suffer destruction in hell.

**This mentality in the Church greatly reduces Her effectiveness in the world or a nation.**

For example, in many nations there is a strong reticence among Christians to be involved in politics or professional positions. Poverty, which is very clearly a curse in the Bible whenever it is not a chosen vocation, has often been accepted as a “gift” from God. There is often a strong resistance to Christians being involved in business or in the exploitation of the many natural resources that fill the rich African soil. Islam does not have the same “theological” problem with business, and Muslims from many different nations control the major share of the economy in many “Christian” African nations. So although Christians may be strong numerically they have very little clout.

**The ground abandoned by the Church is taken up by the enemy**, and all sorts of corrupt men and Mafia like groups have found their way into the decision making posts and power zones of Africa.

The Church may point to such corruption as a warning not to get involved, but surely she should be trying to redeem and impregnate with light such structures, rather than running away from the challenge. The future of Africa depends on it. Much of these results are symptoms of a wrong view of the Church's mission on earth.

Writers such as Gerald Coates in his challenging book "What on earth is the Kingdom?" and Wimber in his works "Power Evangelism" and "Power Healing" make much of the **“kingdom now theology”** - God's reign and presence actively breaking into our "now" time and space, to emphasise the active role of the Church in the nations. Much of their inspiration comes from the earlier writings of the theologian George Eldon Ladd whose books "The Presence of The Future" and "The Gospel of the Kingdom" give vital teaching and insight into a balanced view of God's reign, which will motivate the Church in Her mission to actively preach the good news of the kingdom to the nations. **I believe that such teaching is essential at this time for the church in Africa and beyond, in order to bring freedom from passivity, and active collaboration with God's plans.**

Eldon Ladd, with his title "The Presence of the Future", views the Kingdom of God as being in an **"already/not yet"** tension. He carefully uses scripture to show **both**



the "tomorrowness" and the "todayness" of the kingdom, the "present age" and the "age to come". He continues :

*"... Hebrews 6 :5 speaks of those who 'tasted...the powers of the age to come.' The Age to Come is still future, but we may taste the powers of that Age. Something has happened by virtue of which that which belongs to the future has become present..."(13)*

Ladd concludes that the Kingdom of God is God's reign defeating his enemies. He shows that God has carefully worked out the process of history and that the Kingdom comes in via three major acts.

*"...The Third and final victory occurs at the end of the Millennium when death, Satan, and sin are finally destroyed and the Kingdom is realised in its ultimate perfection. A second victory occurs at the beginning of the Millennium when Satan is to be chained in the bottomless pit...*

*An initial manifestation of God's Kingdom is found in the mission of our Lord on earth. Before the Age to Come, before the millennial reign of Christ, the Kingdom of God has entered into This present evil Age here and now in the person and works of Christ. We may therefore now experience it's power; we may know it's life; we may enter into a participation of it's blessings..." (18)*

Because the Kingdom of God is “now” in Christ, Ladd energetically encourages the Church to get on with proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom, the victory of Christ over death, over Satan and over sin.

*"..The abolition of death is the mission of God's Kingdom..." (19)*

If the Kingdom is “now”, as well as future, the Church has a duty to impregnate society with the values of the Kingdom. The Dutch theologian De Kuyper saw different decision making zones in society such as politics, business, education, sport, arts and culture, and felt Christians should be present in such domains. This is right, but the priority must always be the evangelism and discipleship of all the peoples of the earth. Our first call must be to preach the gospel. It is also important to get a correct perspective on our success in these areas. Some “newer” churches go over the top on the “triumphalistic” side of the “now” kingdom, expecting the world to become totally Christian, while others in opposition, remain passively pessimistic and negative about the gospel's chances in the world. Again, Ladd has a good grasp on these issues, and I'll leave him to inspirationally encourage us to be “**biblical realists**”, proclaiming the gospel to the nations.

*"...The last days will be evil, but not unrelieved evil. God has given us a Gospel for the last days, and He has given a power to take that Gospel into all the world for a testimony unto all the nations: then shall the end come.*

*This must be the spirit of our mission in This evil Age. We are not rosy optimists, expecting the Gospel to conquer the world and establish the Kingdom of God. Neither are we despairing pessimists who feel that our task is hopeless in the face of the evil of This Age. We are realists, Biblical realists, who recognise the terrible power of evil and yet who go forth in a mission of world wide evangelisation to win victories for God's Kingdom until Christ returns in glory to accomplish the last and greatest victory..." (20)*

To sum up then.

The antidote to the barrier of slavery is to preach the Father heart of God.

The remedy for bondage to ancestors and witchcraft is the preaching of the blood of Christ and His finished work on the cross.

The answer for wrong eschatology is a correct preaching and teaching concerning the "now" of the Kingdom of God.

Before concluding it would be wrong not to mention the practical steps that are already being worked out on the ground in Africa and which might well prove to be an inspiration and encouragement to other budding mission movements around the world.

Missionary movements are already being founded by key national leaders. In English many of these groups go by the name 'Nations' but in other countries this may be different. In French speaking Central African Republic for example the movement is known as "*Nations En Marche*" (Nations On The March). The major goal is to get as many Central Africans as possible moving out to pioneer missionary situations. Already teams have gone out to the unreached stone-age "Luthos" tribe in the North of the country and also to the many nomadic Muslim "Peuhls" who inhabit the nation. Each missionary team needs to be autonomous financially. This is where we have introduced two support structures to enable the evangelism to continue. The first support structure is to create 24 hour prayer chains, and houses of prayer. Africans know how to pray and have a strong desire to give time to regular nights of prayer. Whole women's movements are already participating in this.

The second support structure is what we call "Business With Mission" and is involved in teaching life skills and business principles in order to help the Christians earn their own living, exploit the natural resources of their country and finance the missionary endeavour. Thomas O'Toole in C.A.R. Africa's Hidden Heart writes :

*"... Qualified and trained managers and technicians of all sorts are the second major infrastructure need in the Central African Republic. (The first need is for a decent transport system for such a land locked country.) For a variety of historical, cultural, and perhaps nutritional factors, Central Africa lacks personnel trained in the necessary managerial, planning, analysis and*

*administrative functions to create, direct, and upgrade agricultural, manufacturing, trade, and marketing institutions for the nation..." (21)*

This confirms the importance of giving much practical teaching along with the mission mobilisation. It is as if one needs to restructure and rejuvenate the entire economic situation in the nation in order to finance the missionary move. A Christian mining co-operative has already been started, hundreds flocked to our seminars on “*starting small businesses*” and we are developing a kind of “**missionary polytechnic**” at a very large piece of land which has become available.

I'd recommend reading Glenn Schwartz's articles in "Mission Frontiers" (Jan-Feb. '97), the magazine of the U.S. Centre For World Mission, for a fuller analysis of the questions of “funding” mission. He argues strongly for not creating dependency and underlines the principle that works should be African owned, sustainable and reproducible. The odds are very much against all of this working but whatever the outcome, like Jeremiah of old, we will “*buy the field*” and continue to preach the message. The continent of Africa, along with others, will rise to become a light to the nations. **God's Kingdom purposes sometimes hang on the slenderest of threads.** Africa is experiencing the birth pains that will take it into its destiny.

On a recent visit to Dublin, Ireland, I looked at Parnell's monument. Parnell, a Protestant, had fought for the nation to rise free from colonial oppression by Britain. Written in bold words at the foot of the statue was the following statement :

**"No man can set bounds to the march of a nation."**

May this be a cry of hope for the emerging nations of the world as they march, rag-tag eleventh hour workers, into the “vineyard” of the Lord. Seamus Heaney in his poem "The Cure At Troy" reveals something of the silver thread of hope that is running through the patched tapestry of this continent's destiny, and trumpets a clarion call of hope as a fitting conclusion.

"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."

I'd also like to conclude with a more general encouragement to open up our eyes to future possibilities. I simply need to "*Find Ruth*", and yourself ?

### **Finding Ruth - A Personal Journey**

Moses was also a man on a journey. After so many years of walking in the dry desert his heart must have been longing to set foot in the promise land. *Psalm 106 : 23* shows us Moses at his best, interceding for the people and saving them from destruction. *Verses 32 & 33* however, show Moses in a less favourable light as his spirit becomes bitter and frustrated with the people because of their rebellion. My French version translates it, "*they (the people) made him bitter in spirit ..* " After 20 years of pioneer Christian work in France and other nations I can identify with Moses best and worst moments.

Moses faced the challenge of "**Meribah** " and "**Massah** ". **Quarrelling** and **testing**. The constant squabbles and strife amongst brothers coupled with the onslaughts of cynicism and unbelief are enough to put "*rash words...* " on even the most saintly of lips ! The Satanic pressure was strong enough to push even Moses to unbelief and anger resulting in him falling short of his dream. I'm always glad to see that he finally got there being " beamed up or down " at Jesus' transfiguration !

### **Better or Bitter ?**

I'm sure that most ministries eventually come to this kind of testing. We either become cynical, negative "has beens " or we come through into greater victory and brokenness. The testing brings a real cross and, as the years roll past, Paul's words in *2 Corinthians 4 : 10-12*,

*" ..death is at work in us , but life is at work in you. "*

become more experience than theory. How do you become better when circumstances around cry out for bitterness ?

The book of Ruth has given me a personal, and dare I say prophetic answer.

Let's look at Naomi. She can be an image of all the tired ministries amongst us. She is equally an allegory of the tired Western Church. ( I've not forgotten Israel either ! ) Tragedy strikes and she finds herself under death, bereaved of sons and husband. How many sons has the Western Church lost through its cruel, intolerant religious wars and how many more cut down in the prime of life on the killing fields of Flanders during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War ? Countless others drift into spiritual death without a shot being fired, seduced by the deceiving decadence of the " free " West.

In a nutshell Naomi has lost all hope of fecundity. She is hopelessly, tragically barren ! Was this her sad destiny ? Her original name means " tenderness ", " charming ", " pleasant ". Love, grace and joy ; holy attributes of Christ's Body the Church, called to

fill a world with light and life but tragically wounded and old before her time. Whether we like it or not the Church in the West is pretty barren and in decline. Naomi has changed her name !

*" Don't call me Naomi "*

she told them.

*" Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi ? The Lord has afflicted me ; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. " Ruth 1 : 20-21*

Mara means bitter. Often, when we think of Christmas and the hope it brings its sobering to think of Naomi journeying back to that sacred place to be **bitter in Bethlehem**.

Is there hope for her ? Is there hope for my own weary heart. Can the Western Church know a new beginning ? The answer for Naomi, and for us, came in two things.

The first.

**A fresh revelation of Christ as REDEEMER.....Redeem your dreams !**

Naomi had a friend in Boaz and, as the old song puts it, we have a friend in Jesus.

*" That man is our close relative ; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers. "*  
*Ruth 2 : 20*

Jesus our redeemer. The one who can heal history and hearts. May we know a fresh hunger and passion for His presence.

That's the obvious " spiritual " answer ! As every Sunday school pupil knows, Jesus is always the answer to everything ! However, there was also a more strategic answer for Naomi which was the second requirement for healing.

**She Found Ruth....And Ruth Clung To Her.**

Ruth, from the " evil ", incestuous race of the Moabites, was the answer for Naomi. What does Ruth represent to me ? At least two things.

**1) Youth :**

We must be investing in, and praying for the next generation. I'm convinced that, even in the face of Satan's destructive onslaught on the youth of nations, God is wanting to bring a powerful missionary revival amongst a new generation of Joshuas. Just as the Jews may have been shocked by Ruth's culture and background our religious and

missionary structures will need to adapt to the adolescent energy and fun of young people. Without realising it some of our Churches and missions look more like adverts for " Help the Aged " and "SAGA" holidays ! Many of us are totally out of touch with the real world of young people, with their dreams, temptations and aspirations.

## **2) New Nations :**

**Make way for the sacrificial martyrs of China, the fervent prayers of Korea, the hungry soul hunters of Africa and the globally generous Brazilians ! To name just a few !**

As Ruth received Naomi we will find our future in creating discipleship environments for such as these. We will be learners as much as teachers, receivers as much as givers. Again, structures and personal comfort zones will need to change to stand alongside the colourful, potent, raw energy of God expressing himself in many cultures and skins. A humble Chinese man recently stood in front of over 500 French pastors urging them to pray for his " Back to Jerusalem " vision and the raising up of 100,000 Chinese missionaries. He'd spent much of his life in prison but spoke out :

**" Whatever the circumstances on your life, God's calling does not change. "**

A young Chinese girl from Paris who had come with their choir to sing to us then said how the Church had begun in Paris 5 years ago with just 10 members. They now have 500. I also remembered how a French mayor of an inner city district of Paris had said that the people who were doing the most to curb inner city violence were the Black African Churches.

In the light of this, my own prayer is very much to find Ruth. Practically this may give us all a renewed direction in prayer. For example:

- Pray as never before for a massive revival amongst youth. Europe desperately needs a fresh touch from God while Christian youth in Asia, Africa and South America need to see relevant missionary structures emerging in their contexts and cultures.
- Pray particularly to see a "New Africa", free from poverty, corruption, war, ignorance and disease. May the African "Sunbrowned Bride" rise to her destiny.
- Pray that God will release you into your own personal calling and destiny and that you will have a new hunger and faith for prayer.

Yes Lord ! In your grace help us to find Ruth .

Perhaps you think I've been hard and extreme on the " Western " Church and that your own church is wonderfully alive, winning the lost to Christ, sending out missionaries and influencing society for God. If you are indeed a Caleb, go and take your mountain, seize the territory but learn to love Ruth.

And there in Bethlehem, where Mary was to hold Jesus to her breast, old Naomi finds new life, nurses a son of promise in David's line;

*" she took the child , laid him in her lap and cared for him. " ,*

rediscovers her name and is " **blessed in Bethlehem.** "

As some of you might be reading this in anticipation of Christmas, (even if it's January!), may you too be blessed in Bethlehem, may you be " better " rather than " bitter " and may the opportunity Ruth offers be accepted as a true gift of Christmas to a waiting Church.

*" Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel ! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter- in-law,(Ruth) who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons , has given him birth. "*

*Ruth 4 : 14-15*

## **Endnotes**

1) Keane Fergal, No Forgetting, No Forgiving, Essay TIME, April '97, P.37.

1a) Jeremiah 32.14

2) Gaston Mduka, died of illness last year and was a key man in a pioneer project we were involved in, while today I learnt of the death of a young man, Jacques Kengugaba who was part of Anatole's team. Even this month, 05.07.2004, I'm saddened by the death of a young mother in childbirth. The wife of one of our dear brothers in Central Africa.

3) Oliver & Fage, A Short History of Africa, Penguin, Middlesex, 1962, P.120.

4) Ibid, P.120.

5) O'Toole, T., The Central African Republic - The Continent's Hidden Heart, Westview Press Inc., Colorado, 1986, P.15.

- 6) Ibid, P.16.
- 7) Ibid, P.25.
- 7a) see McClung, F., The Father Heart Of God, Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, 1985;  
Sheikh, B., I Dared To Call Him Father, Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, 1979;  
Cuthbert, God Is My Father, Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, 1986.
- 8) Shared with the present author by Rowland Evans. He heard God 'speak' into his spirit. Not necessarily an audible voice but a deep conviction and intuition in the spirit.
- 9) Hesselgrave, D., Communicating Christ Cross-culturally, Baker Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991, P.197.
- 10) Redfield, R., The Primitive World View, Random House, New York, 1961, P.100.
- 11) Hiebert, Paul, Anthropological Insights For Missionaries, Baker, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985, P.45.
- 12) Hesselgrave, D., Communicating Christ Cross-culturally, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991, P.222.
- 13) Ibid, P.222.
- 14) 1 Peter 1.18-20.
- 15) Luke 9.59-62.
- 16) Hesselgrave, D., Communicating Christ Cross-culturally, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991, P.231.
- 17) Eldon Ladd, G., The Gospel of The Kingdom, Eerdmans, Michigan, 1995, P.41.
- 18) Ibid, P.123.
- 19) Ibid, P.127.
- 20) Ibid, P.139.
- 21) O'Toole, T. The Central African Republic -The Continent's Hidden Heart, Westview Press Inc., Colorado, 1986, P.113.
- 22) Schwartz, Glenn, Dependency in Africa, Mission Frontiers, Jan-Feb '97, P.P.8 -17



