

The God of Opportunity

Real life is on offer – it just needs accepting!

It was close to Christmas 1986 when I turned to my wife and said, “What on earth are we doing here?” Peering out from the window of our air-conditioned aircraft as we flew into Malawi, all we could see was scorched and barren landscape, the occasional bare tree and small groups of mud huts connected by paths worn into the dust by countless bare feet.

The main road connecting Blantyre, the commercial centre in the South, to Lilongwe, the capital city some 250 miles further north, came into view. We would see much of this thin ribbon of deteriorating tarmac in the future as we dodged the potholes and various starving animals on our way to serve church congregations in this hopeless land.

We’d been asked to go to Malawi to erect a church building in Blantyre and consolidate the church members into congregations. Only nine hours before landing at the main airport in a temperature of well over 110 degrees and a humidity level which felt like breathing thin soup, we had been a “normal” middle class couple living in Dorset, England. We had sold our house, dispatched all our belongings in a container, doubting we’d ever see them again, and here we were standing alone on the tarmac clutching our hand luggage.

The next few days made an indelible impression on both of us. We had thought of ourselves as comparatively less privileged, in the middle-to-lower-bracket of society and lacking the opportunities of some, but Malawi changed all that.

We transferred from our British Airways 747 to what was euphemistically called “the box.” And a box it was, a cube with wings, with one engine, one pilot and ten very nervous passengers. We flew shakily at a height of about 300 feet, enabling us to view our new home at close quarters and wonder how we would survive it. We landed at Blantyre, found our way through customs and arrived with what was left of our luggage on the dirt road outside.

Fending off the beggars we hired a taxi to take us into town, and the twenty-minute journey changed our view of life forever. The car was a wreck, just able to keep moving and it smelled so badly I nearly parted with my last meal. But it was the view from the window that transformed my thinking. As I looked out I saw the usual African scene of people sitting around in their rags in front of crumbling buildings begging or trying to sell whatever they could, but worst of all was the children. There they sat, squatting in the filth, hardly moving and staring aimlessly into space. That was something I hadn’t prepared myself for. Up ‘til then I’d never known such hopelessness existed.

I can still smell it. A gut-wrenching stench of decay, human waste and decomposition. My stomach coped, but my heart didn’t. I could stand the stench, but the sight of the children in their rags sitting amongst this filth was heart breaking. The deeply embedded African culture that treated children as useful only as workers, but not worthy of respect, screamed against the Christian values of love that I’d been sent to teach.

It was a harrowing trip. The taxi, meanwhile, managed to get us to a hotel, where we would stay until a house became available. Two days later we both contracted food

poisoning from the hotel food, and the day after that I delivered my first African sermon!

As I gazed at the pathetic little group of children leaning against the filthy crumbling wall of the building we used for church services, I realized that all they needed was someone to love them and give them an opportunity to live. I also had to hide my tears as it came disturbingly clear to me that this is how Jesus had looked at me and the rest of mankind as he too wept over us.

Like any Christian I wanted to share the love and life Jesus had given me, but this was different. The sight of these children wrenched at my heart. I had four and a half years in Malawi to achieve what I had been sent for, but most of all I wanted to drag those children out of the dust and see them flourish.

And flourish they did. Given the chance, despite the grinding barrenness of their lives, they blossomed. They joined in the life of the church, got ecstatically involved in sports, learned to play piano, operate computers, contribute to the church and serve the community. All they needed was the chance, the opportunity and people who cared.

It's the same for every human being, too. Most of the world, even people in affluent societies, are just like those children in Malawi. They sit in the dust of doubt, debt and frustrated expectations, staring hopelessly into an uncertain future, with no idea or no interest in what the loving God has on offer. If only they knew that, in Jesus, God is offering everyone a life that's full and real. He's offering us the chance to blossom.

It's the Christian dream that everyone comes to know and live this amazing life Jesus offers, but I learnt in Africa that there's only so much you can do in helping people experience it. This is where the children in Malawi taught me a profound lesson, however. Although what was offered to them was almost alien to their culture - they had never seen a computer, much less been taught how to use one - instead of ridiculing or rejecting what they could not understand, they responded, and that's what it takes. They took full advantage of what was on offer. Likewise, God is offering an amazing life, but first it has to be accepted!

So, what is God offering us?

What he *isn't* offering is a genie who grants us our every wish. Nor is he providing us with a heavenly welfare system or a magical wizard who removes every burden in a puff of smoke. What he *is* offering is a Saviour who cares, who knows our frailty, who heals our deep emotional wounds, who has the power to help us stay happy no matter what burdens we carry and to grow and blossom despite all the restrictions this world imposes. He offers us in Jesus a God who walks alongside us, gives us peace of mind and a confident optimism for the future and, above all, a God who will teach us how to live. Learn from me, he said, I am gentle and not overbearing. I'll give you rest and make your burden easy to carry. I came to give you life ever more abundantly.

I know some Malawian children, now grown up, who would agree with him.