

“THINGS WE SAW...GIFTS RECEIVED”

A sermon in four voices.

Voice 1: Introduction

Mission Awareness Sunday...what might that mean to you? For some in our midst it might evoke memories of a mission exposure experience in some different culture from our own. For others, it might be the memory of past encounters with folks who have served overseas in Christ's name. Still for others, it might be a weekly act of grace as a volunteer in a local project of caring for others. It might mean intercessory prayer, or continuing growth in understanding the complexities of our world or perhaps, not much at all. Yet, as part of the Presbyterian Church in Canada we take our place in the world-wide church. You and I are called to live as the body of Christ and thus participate fully in God's healing, restoring and renewing work in life about us.

In our gospel reading for today we hear of Jesus' disciples gathered together, discussing among themselves the events of that first resurrection day. They are trying to make sense of all that has happened within the past few days, including their own accompanying confusions and feelings. Into their midst Jesus appears, startling them and filling them with great fear. Yet Jesus' word to them is one of peace, a word of re-assurance. In a very concrete and tangible way Jesus demonstrates his living presence among them. He shows them his body; he eats the same food they are about to eat. Jesus then goes on to interpret his suffering, death and resurrection in light of the witness of the Old Testament, a sacred scripture, and story, already familiar to those who have known and followed Jesus most closely. In the agony of Jesus' self-giving and sacrifice, the mystery of God's love for humankind becomes revealed through repentance and forgiveness that leads to new life. Jesus invites his followers to share this great-news story, not only with each other but to carry it out into the highways and byways of life. After all, as Jesus points out to them, they have indeed been witnesses to God's amazing redemptive love that has brought forth new life from the depths of the grave itself. Perhaps in the heat of the moment they didn't fully realize what they were seeing, yet as Jesus talks with them he opens their eyes and hearts to a new understanding of past events. They are to share what they have seen and, in so doing, gift others with God's blessing.

In our time, the Presbyterian Church in Canada participates in ministries and partnerships around the world as one of the ways in which we express our faith in the Risen Christ. One of these partnerships is with the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Let us hear how our brothers and sisters in faith, from this country, might witness to our faith here in Canada today, through the eyes of ministers Donald and Marion Barclay MacKay who served on our behalf for several years in the area of lay leadership training.

Voice 2: During A Worship Experience

Ghana is a place of worshipping people; there is awe and a deep respect for the presence of God. In the many hours of formal worship of which we were a part, we were often inspired by the deep faithfulness, vibrancy and expectation of renewal that came from

those gathered for worship. Their deep commitment and value of worship was a gift we received from those with whom we had gathered.

Mr. Mintah, a General Assembly Catechist of our Nsaba District Church, was responsible for worship at Kokoado (Ko-ko-ado), a small village less than 10 kilometres from our home. Five of those kilometres were over a road one would wisely choose to drive only in the dry season!

Easter Sunday 2007 we worshipped at Kokoado, a village of around five hundred people. The church ground, found on the edge of the village, was merely a square on the corner of a field, where goats were seen to play. To protect worshippers from the hot sun a canopy of palm fronds were woven together and held high by bamboo poles. When we, the visitors, were seen to arrive, some plastic chairs were brought out for our seats. Others sat on make shift benches, placed in a rectangular formation. The total space would not exceed the size of many of our living rooms. The experience was genuine. The people gathered after we arrived, young mothers with their children, some tied around their waist and some taking tentative steps on the ground. Some young people left their morning chores to join us, as did a few of the men. An improvised drum was used to assist in the musical accompaniment. Some villagers could be seen to continue their cassava grinding, gathering cocoa nuts and climbing palm trees.

Worship included all the essential items: the singing, dancing, praying, reading and preaching. Eventually we were called upon to bring some words of greeting. Later, Marion prayed for the woman who had special needs and then Donald prayed for the men. Prayer is essential in the Ghanaian worship life, prayer that the faithful believer knows would be answered. There was not any elaborate revival here, or a second part of worship to raise funds. There were just people gathered together in God's name, faithfully experiencing the presence of Christ, and celebrating the power of the living Christ in their midst in the here and now. We could only communicate in a few halting words of Twi and some English words but through this the genuineness of God's presence was felt.

At a moment in the service, our attention was caught by a sound that caused us to look up through the leaf canopy to the sky. High above us was a 747 jet, en-route from Accra to Europe, an airplane operated by computers and other technology, filled with sophisticated persons on business or students going to school or tourists flying to places some had never heard of, let alone see. We sat beneath the palm branches among those still living without electricity and running water, among those sharing the age-old story of Christ's Resurrection. Our worship was deep and meaningful; we felt Christ's presence without the technology the 747 represented. We went home declaring again, Christ is risen, He is risen indeed. What we have seen, we have told, and our faith has been renewed because of it.

Voice 3: During A Football Game

In Ghana they play football -- almost as soon as they walk, or so it seems. Certainly by the time the boys go to school, they are mad for football. Football, well, we call it soccer

in Canada, is the national sport in Ghana. It is by far the largest participation sport in the world bar none. In February 2008 Ghana hosted the African Cup of Nations football tournament to determine the best team in all of Africa. For a whole month the focus was football. When the Ghanaian national team, the Black Stars, played the whole nation stood still. It was as if the future of the country stood in balance. Gone were the regional differences, the tribal divisions, and the clashes between whomever. For a time the nation was one in pursuit of the African Cup of Nations. It was good to see and feel what that pursuit could accomplish, a unified people, a nation focused in a common task, people together because of loyalty to the team. It was indeed a phenomenon to observe.

Soon after the furore about the tournament subsided, one of the high-school students living on our house compound embarked upon his own initiative. Instead of the continuation of the usual pick-up football matches each school day afternoon on our front lawn, he and a mate organized two regular teams of Junior High and other school lads who lived in the surrounding houses. They played their own tournament. These were not fancy teams, uniforms were uncoordinated, and football shoes were at best improvised. But they did have a coach, and they did have practice sessions and there was a referee who had the essential yellow and red cards, all home-made. And with what they had, they moulded themselves together with enthusiasm, zeal and faithfulness to the goal of the game: play hard, play fair – to win.

In both the formal African Cup of Nations and the local version, we saw the gifts that the simple game of football brought: first, the joy of playing and supporting a team; second, the importance of uniting in one goal to win; and third, the necessity to give all in one pursuit of these goals. We were blessed in what we observed and that we could give witness to others of what we received.

Voice 4: By A Student

Jacob is a young man who is a student at the Nsaba Lay Training Centre in Ghana. Several times a year he travels to the centre to spend a block of three weeks, participating in courses that will prepare him to serve as a catechist within the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. On Sundays, throughout the year, he is responsible for coordinating and leading the Presbyterian service of worship that takes place in his small, rural village. In between Sundays he is on the front line of providing pastoral care to those in need or in trouble. In complex and difficult situations it is his responsibility to contact his district minister, which usually means a trip by local taxi over dusty dirt roads since mobile phone service is not yet a reality for those in his village. All this takes time...and money...from someone who works voluntarily, out of his convictions and desire to share the good news of God's love with others.

It has been some years since Jacob finished his basic education. While his ability to speak English is quite good, reading and writing English pose some extra challenges for him. The courses he participates in at the centre make use of manuals written in English, so Jacob has learned to review the material with a few other students, so that, together they could help each other out in understanding the information presented. At the end of each block of courses there are national examinations to be written...again, all in English.

Since much of Jacob's learning takes place by careful listening, he is willing to ask the exam invigilator to read the questions for him in English. Jacob is relieved that "spelling doesn't count" when it comes time to write down his answers!

Being a student at the centre is not easy for Jacob. He and his family have to make sacrifices in order for him to receive this training that is designed to develop his gifts and knowledge in ministry and help him grow in faith as a follower of Jesus. Yet Jacob already brings a presence of faithfulness to his life as a student at the centre. He is there because he trusts God's goodness to him and his family. He believes that there are small ways he can serve...like quietly making sure the tote bag of classroom supplies is always available for the course tutor day by day. In his daily life he wants to honour God, even in the humblest of tasks. Jacob also believes that God will honour him, even through the challenges, stresses and strains, of learning in a language in which he is not completely at home. Jacob's exam marks are not always "a pass" the first time around, yet persistently he faces opportunities to re-write those exams dedicated to the call to serve God with all that he is.

Jacob's ability to keep hold of the broad picture, to persevere and not give up in the face of adversity is a witness to the rest of us, of his faith in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to continue to do a good thing in his life.

Voice 1: Challenge For Our Lives Today

Today, you and I are witnesses to the great story of God's redeeming love in human life. In the ordinariness of human living we are invited to see evidence of Christ's living presence with us. The scars of hands and feet and the humble partaking of broiled fish become mirrored for us in experiences of sacrifice, commitment, sharing, and service that surround us and touch our lives. Experiences that draw us to a fresh realization of God's faithfulness to us, experiences that heal us, strengthen us and inspire us, helping us hear afresh the voice of Jesus, the Risen Christ. Long ago Jesus tells his disciples that they have seen God's life-changing power and love as it has unfolded before them in the events of their daily lives. Jesus commissions them to be witnesses to these things...to tell others what they've seen and experienced, and now know to be true for daily living. As they move out into the streets of Jerusalem, and beyond, things happen: a lame man walks; a crowd marvels and repents; people share what they have with others. By the disciples' telling, lives are blessed and made new and whole. Today, in our awareness of being the Church, the body of Christ in the world, may our hearts be blessed by those who witness **to us** of God's presence and reign. May we in turn, bear witness to God's transforming and renewing love with us, and in so doing be a means of God's blessing in the lives of others.

To God be all glory, honour and praise, now and forevermore. Amen