



SEEING HEAVEN ON EARTH

April 2016

We had been travelling for what seemed like an eternity in the back of a rust-ridden, camouflaged old pickup truck, during which time the temperature had gone from freezing to furnace. I don't remember David Attenborough ever mentioning how cold it can be in the African savannah, but as I stood in the early hours of the morning, bedecked in four jumpers, an old military overcoat (courtesy of my guide), a woollen hat and gloves, and a very attractive pair of aviator sunglasses, I was shivering from head to toe. Only a few hours later, I was down to shorts and vest with a scarf round my mouth to keep the dust out - a great look!

Short-sighted

Disappointingly, however, we hadn't seen any wildlife. Nothing. Just hours and hours of barren grasslands and emaciated bushland. Then, late into the afternoon, as the sun was about to set, we stopped on top of a mountain escarpment and my companions started to jump up and down with excitement. I, on the other hand, couldn't see a thing. Then it dawned on me. I was looking immediately ahead of me. They were focused on the horizon. As I strained my eyes into the distance, I saw silhouettes the size of a pin head: hundreds, if not thousands, of wildebeest and a trail of dust extending as far as the



eye could see. To witness the mass migration of these noble creatures was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but I nearly missed it because I was looking in the wrong place.

Following the persecuted church is a bit like that. In the foreground is the pain, sorrow and pure injustice of it all. But if you look hard into the distance, you will see something amazing: fellow believers showing the distinctive hallmarks of our master in their response.

Persecution and peace

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:10) Blessed? Those words always stop me in my tracks. The previous sentence, 'Blessed are the peacemakers', I can agree with - no problem. But the persecuted? It's a swift gear-change from peace-making to peace-breaking which John R. W. Stott remarks on in *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*.

"It seems strange that Jesus should pass from peacemaking to persecution, from the work of reconciliation to the experience of hostility. Yet however hard we may try to make peace with some people, they refuse to live at peace with us. Not all attempts at reconciliation succeed."

In many parts of Africa, we see the sad truth of this: Sudan, the Central African Republic, Somalia, Kenya and of course Nigeria, where the killing of Christians has risen by 62% in one year. Where is God in all of this? Perhaps we don't see many signs of hope in the news on our screens and tablets, but in the distance, I am confident He is bringing heaven on earth, through persecuted Christians like Agnes.

Agnes' story

In 2008, Agnes' husband and one of her sons were stabbed to death by Muslim extremists in Nigeria. During the months that followed, she felt completely abandoned by God: her sorrow affected her health and she no longer wanted to live. But the Lord made a way for her to attend an Open Doors trauma healing seminar. There participants were encouraged to nail their burdens to the cross. It meant the beginning of a new life for Agnes.

"When it came to that day, I said, 'Yes, Lord, you are good. Lord, you are good. God, I need a heart of forgiveness to forgive these people.' And the very day that I nailed the paper to the cross was the day I forgave them for what they had done to me."



Today, Agnes is able to talk to Muslims at the market without always having the murder of her husband and son in the back of her mind.

"People look at me and ask, 'These people killed your husband and you can even associate with them? I look at them and say, 'He that is in me is greater than that. You don't understand.'"

A few years after the death of her husband, another extremist attack hit Agnes' town. Everything she had in her shop was destroyed. "Why would they do such a thing to you?" people asked. I just look at them and say, 'I thank God that I have something that people can steal. I am grateful to God. He will not leave me.'"

Long-sighted

You need God's perspective to react as Agnes does. It's easy to pick up a stone and throw it when rage is white hot, but to look beyond your own pain and to see the brokenness of others, to show grace and forgive as you are forgiven, shows that you value the teachings of Jesus more than your own right to revenge. That's when you're blessed by the grace of God. That's when you become a peace-maker, bringing the blessing of heaven on earth.

Robin Mark's beautiful song talks about 'Outrageous Grace' ... it most assuredly is.

I'm praying for you today that you will encounter that grace as you grow deeper in your understanding of today's persecuted church.

Eddie Lyle
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