

Mission Partner Communique -- November 2005

Gospel Sounds

"Pastor, can we talk?"

Those were the first words I heard as I was just getting out of the truck. I had just pulled up to Vicar Phiri's house.

Both the sound of his voice and the look in his eyes indicated the concern on his heart.

"Of course!" I replied, as we moved away from the other people who had been gathering around the truck. We found a private place to talk.

"Pastor, remember the man whom we tried to visit last week?"

Though the time between that question and his next statement was only a second or two, the memory of that day flooded my mind. It still does.

I remember it well. We were making "every member" visits. We rode in and around the villages on our bicycles.

The village sounds swirl around in my head. The rhythmic thud of the pestle. The crackle of a fire. A distant beat of a drum. An occasional grunt of a pig. The rustle of leaves. As we biked from "here to there," I enjoyed the chirping birds, scurrying chickens and laughing children. Nyanja conversations were taking place all around.

Missing were other noises. Noises that come with traffic jams and revving engines and angry commuters. Obnoxious sounds of high pitched whining machines couldn't be heard. Absent were the irritating sounds of busy factories. Missing were sounds I know well. Missing, but not missed.

I remember it well. We would silently roll up to the houses, dismount and then lean our bicycles against mango trees or against the mud walls of the grass thatched homes. I can't forget the children staring at me. Giggles. Smiles. Wide eyes. White teeth. I knew what they were thinking. *Look! A white person - riding a bicycle! What a strange sight!*

I remember well arriving at this particular man's house. To be honest, I can't even remember his name. In fact, I've never met him before. The elders told me that he had expressed interest in learning about what we taught and what we preached. He asked Vicar Phiri if we could visit him. That's what we did that day. Or better said, that's what we *tried* to do. We found that he wasn't at home. We had our days and our times straight, but upon arriving to his home, we learned that he had been called to another meeting - something that had to do with his contract with the cotton company.

I remember bidding his daughter good bye, telling her that we'd find him another day.

Remember I said that Vicar's question was followed by a statement? His statement was short and yet powerful:

"He's dead."

I did a double take. I thought the eyes of the Zambian children seeing me on a bicycle were wide. Mine were bicycle rims.

"Dead?"

Vicar explained: *"He was walking to his field two days ago; he was walking through grass and was bitten by a snake! They buried him yesterday."*

"What kind of snake?" I wanted to know, already anticipating the answer.

"A Green Mamba."

Just as I thought. No wonder he's already in the grave. Not only is the venom lethal, but proper medical help is absent. There is no medical help because there is no clinic nor hospital in the area that is able to keep, or even get, an antivenom for a Green Mamba bite.

I remember that day well. I can't help but turn the facts over in my mind:

The man wanted to learn what we taught in the Lutheran Church.
That man wanted to hear, not only what we had to say but especially what God had to say.
That man would have heard the law in all its fierceness and the gospel in all its sweetness.
That man would have learned about the reality of hell and the joys of heaven.
That man would have heard the precious news of forgiveness that you and I have heard a thousand times over.

But he won't hear it from me. He won't hear it from Vicar Phiri. We won't find him another day at his house in Kakhumbi Village.

He's dead. Vicar's statement raises questions...

Is his soul in hell or heaven?
What words will he hear when Christ comes again?
Will his teeth gnash or his voice sing?
Will his eternal residence be a lake of fire or a glorious home?

I don't know. I don't even know his name, much less anything about his faith.

But I do know what God's desire is for everyone.
I do know that the loving will that God has for me and you was the same will for that man in Kakhumbi Village.

He wants us in heaven.
He wants us to hear the words, *"Come, take your inheritance!"*
He wants to hear our voices singing.
He wants us to live with Him forever in a glorious home that He himself has prepared.

God willing, I'll soon be back in Kakhumbi Village making "every member" visits on my bicycle with my backpack stuffed with a Bible, a hymnal and a water bottle. Though the sounds of the village are appealing, I have every intention of proclaiming some which are so much more beautiful. The ones that I hope that man heard before he died....

Gospel sounds.

John Holtz
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A typical village path