

WAITING TO SEE THE FACE OF GOD

My time in Africa has made me appreciate the blessings of progress and prosperity at home. The nightmare of poverty and suffering continues for so many people in that continent. But I also feel that we can learn something from the pace of life, the spirituality and the wisdom of the people in the rural areas of Africa. They have a great sense of presence with each other and have a deep connection with the spiritual world. Their hearts and souls are engaged with the mystery of life and death. They have a capacity to be together and to wait and let a process take its course. There is no hurry in Africa, as the saying goes. This of course is not always true, especially for the cars and taxis on the roads! But there is some truth in the saying when you look more closely at their cultural practices.

When tragedy strikes people can hang around for days and weeks, doing very little, just being there with one another – waiting. They sit around the home of the family that has been struck by tragedy. They eat and drink and play music, especially the funeral drums, which can go on all night. Some people say that beating the drums is a way of keeping evil spirits at bay. There is little doubt that, with the insights they carry in their culture, they seem to realise that the wounds of loss and grief need lots of time for healing. They know there is no instant comfort. They also know that the face of God is hidden at such times and they have to wait for a while before they will see that face again. It will come, but it must be waited for. And they are good at doing just that.

For the people in the rural area of Kenya where I worked, God is there in the times of sorrow and waiting is the key. This comes from their culture but it is also the Christian way. We find a description of this approach in an article by Ronald Rolheiser. He offers suggestions about the best way to help people who are recently bereaved. He writes:

What is needed more than our words is our presence, our sharing in the helplessness and our sharing in the waiting. In the first hours and days that follow a tragedy we don't need to speak a lot, we need to touch a lot. We simply need to be there.

Moreover, the words that we do speak need to honour how deep and resistant to consolation the wound is. They should not be an untimely balm – good medicine but bad timing. They must speak honestly to the senselessness of the situation and how disconsolate it leaves us... When we are in the middle of a storm we shouldn't pretend that the sun is shining or, indeed, that there is anything we can do to stop the storm. The task is to wait it out, together, hand in hand, offering each other the assurance that we aren't alone. Waiting it out is precisely what is required ... Consolation will come eventually, but it must be waited for

So in the Christian and the African cultural way, being together, supporting each other and patiently waiting are regarded as essential to help people cope with tragic loss, grief and pain. When there is great sadness, it can take days, weeks, months or even years to come to healing and back into the light – to see the face of God once more. It can be a long, dark road to recovery from a tragedy when a loved one dies of illness, or is killed in a senseless accident, or worse still when someone commits suicide. Our God does not always save us from such tragedies, but we believe in God's infinite mercy and that his consolation will come, that soon again we will see His face, which we 'have loved long since, but lost a while'.

*Wait for the Lord; be strong, let your heart take courage;
Wait for the Lord.
(Ps 27)*

From: 'A Life to Live', Jim O'Connell MHM, The Columba Press