

I don't think I've told you that Philip and I went on another mission adventure in 2004, before we ever thought about going to Honduras. In the year between my completion of seminary and my ordination, we decided to go with Fr. Tom Furrer and seven other good people of Trinity Tariffville to visit the Anglican diocese in Kaduna, Nigeria. The Diocese of Connecticut has had a good relationship with the Anglican Bishop Josiah Fearon who is the spiritual leader of people in a large swath of the Nigerian countryside surrounding the city of Kaduna. (Yes, it happens to be the same city that the would-be terrorist bomber on Northwest Airlines on Christmas Day comes from).

Our 9 day visit there would probably best be described more as Christian sightseeing than a mission trip. Our goal was to see and hear from the Nigerian people about their faith and work so that we could take their stories back to our churches here in the US. But, after saying that, we DID bring with us a doctor, a nurse and a couple of suitcases full of medical supplies for the newly built Kateri Medical Clinic located between the cities of Kaduna and Abuja.

So, now with that background I'll tell you a story. One day we set out for a remote village in a worn out minivan, one of the three that the Bishop had in his compound. We always had to pile 10 people in an 8 passenger van. It's just the way things are there. Our trips were always to a village 3 or 4 hours away, and so we carried spare fuel, tires, spare hoses and belts and other parts because we always had some sort of mechanical problem and there was nowhere, I mean NOWHERE to fix a car.

After a bumpy, dusty, hot trip sitting on a half of a seat we arrived in Idon, a mostly Muslim village, but one in which the chief is willing to be open to Christianity. Religion in Nigeria is very black and white. You are either Muslim or Christian. There is no room for gray area. There is no one who is sort of religious, or who sometimes goes to church I was told. The

reason for this is that there has been a great deal of violence in Nigeria, all in the name of God. People must take sides or they are persecuted. And when one chooses their faith, they must be prepared to defend it...sometimes to death. This is no joke.

The first person we met when we arrived in Idon was Fr. Yashim. His son was murdered in 2000 by a gang of Muslims who demanded that the young man convert to Islam or die. The brave son of Yashim stood firm in his Christian faith and died. But the day we met him four years later, Yashim smiled brightly as we arrived and told us where to park in the dusty town square. Yashim spoke English although most people in the town only spoke Hausa, the lingua franca of the area. The children learn English in school, but most of them do not attend school for very long. I was surprised to see that Yashim was wearing a parka over his clergy shirt, and all the curious children that followed us were wearing long sleeved shirts, sweaters and some had knitted hats. But, they all had bare feet. "Why are you wearing a parka, Yashim," I asked him. He said, "Because it's a cold day today, of course." He thought we Americans were the crazy ones because at 80 degrees we were all wearing short sleeved shirts.

The Chief of the village of Idon was named Alhajji Abubakar Turaki . Some of you may know that anyone who has been on a Hajj receives the formal title Alhajji for having completed their once in a lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca. He was very proud of the fact that he had been able to get from Nigeria to Saudi Arabia, and was therefore very well respected in his Muslim community. He was a very welcoming man, but he too could only speak Hausa. He was also a very practical leader, and realized that by welcoming the Christians he would be putting the town in a position to receiving some aid and that was more important to him than the purity of their town's faith.

His openness to Christianity was the exception and not the rule in Nigeria. The chief invited us into his home which was one of the few with concrete floors as well as concrete walls. He had a few old plastic molded patio chairs and some wooden benches for us to sit on. His wife

offered us lemonade. As always, we worried if we would better off refusing the beverage for safety's sake, or take the risk in order to be good guests. We drank. It just seemed too rude not to.

As the sun set on the western horizon we walked through the town to a field between two concrete block homes. Children followed us as always to see what these pale people were doing. It was the entertainment of the week or month. As we arrived in the grassy field another van from the Anglican Church pulled up. Some men piled out and began to unload equipment in the field. Fr. Yashim's daughter, Salome arrived too and explained to us that this land had been purchased by the Christians, and they hoped to plant an Anglican church here in the next year or two.

Salome is a nurse and cannot become a priest herself in the Nigerian Anglican church, but she has been working very hard to help with church planting efforts. The men set up a generator and filled the tank with gas. They brought out some sound equipment and set up a large movie screen.

As darkness fell the men started up a cassette player and some loudspeakers, and began blasting African Christian praise music at top volume. Certainly everyone in town could not fail to notice that the Christians were doing something in the field.

People started arriving to see what all the fuss was about. Some came with their benches and chairs. They arranged themselves around the movie screen but were unable to talk to each other because of the loud music. When there were about 20 people altogether, and it was quite dark, Yashim and his friends turned off the music and began to show a movie. I was thinking to myself, this is an awful lot of work to go through to show a movie to 20 people.

Filmed in 1979, and looking very dated, the movie titled simply "Jesus" did not seem so wonderful to my jaded ears and eyes. It was certainly a low budget flick. It was badly dubbed in the Hausa language, but it counted for something that they could understand it. I found

out later that this movie, made by the Campus Crusade for Christ, is actually quite famous and has been translated into 1049 languages and has been seen by an estimated 6 billion people worldwide.

It is not very sophisticated and some of us thought it was pretty funny. We nicknamed the movie “Jesus’ Greatest Hits” because it portrayed the life of Jesus miracle by miracle. At the end of each scene the hero Jesus always saved the day. The crowd applauded and whooped at the end of every story of Jesus healing, feeding and blessing. At the crucifixion scene everyone became very quiet. Most of the people there knew of at least one person who had been killed for their faith. The story rang very true for them and they could identify with Mary and John weeping at the foot of the cross.

The movie ends, of course, with Jesus rising from the dead and ascending into heaven. The crowd cheered and clapped and then I realized that there were a lot more than 20 people in that field by the end of the film. Someone turned off the movie projector and plugged in a light bulb, and now I could see that there were hundreds of people now assembled ...most of the residents of the town had shown up while the movie had been playing. With no electricity in all the rest of the village, it was the THE event.

Fr. Tom Furrer then preached in English, and Fr. Yashim in Hausa. The people listened and prayed with us and, then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over and we were packing up the cars and heading out for the long trip back to Kaduna.

When I read the passage from Nehemiah for this week I thought of that experience in Nigeria. It has stuck with me over the years. Times are different, of course, for you and me here in our well fed and well lighted communities, and we can only imagine what it must have been like for the people of Jerusalem to gather to hear the Torah, perhaps for the first time since most of them were probably not literate. Jerusalem, Idon, Nigeria and Lime Rock , CT – we have something very much in common.

When a community gathers together to listen to our collected wisdom, laws, and stories there is something much different than reading or listening by ourselves. Just think of the difference between watching a play in a theater and watching the same play in your home on TV. First and foremost, it's more enjoyable to be with others, just like the residents of Idon laughing and cheering and applauding the words and deeds of Jesus. If I had been watching that film alone, I probably would have turned it off after the first 10 minutes. But experiencing it with others, and with empathy for others, I was connected to them. If my companions and I had just walked through the town that day, and shook a few hands, we would not have had such a connection with them. We experienced something together...we experienced God's gift of Jesus to us together. In Idon Nigeria that night, the Epiphany, the Light of Christ, shown brightly in the African sky.

The people who lived in Jerusalem at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah must have felt that connection too. We read that when they heard God's law they wept. Maybe they wept for their sins and those of the community. Maybe they feared what would happen to them at the hands of an angry God. Because they were gathered together listening, Ezra could set them straight. Ezra told them that this wasn't an occasion for sorrow and shame and guilt. It was a time to be joyous instead. Why? Because God had spoken.

We probably would not think that coming together to hear the Torah, God's law, would be such an occasion for joy. But for those people in that day this was God with them.....expressing, through the patriarchs and prophets, his relationship to his people. He was not like the gods of old who were capricious and ruthless. This God, our God, was caring and loving. I know, sometimes we hear that the God of the Hebrew Scripture is an angry and vengeful God. But putting it into perspective, the laws of the Torah were just and expressed God's desire for peace and mercy. The Lord wanted them to know how they should treat each other and how to do the right. It was something to rejoice about. They knew what to do.

In Jesus day this way of listening to scripture together became known as synagogue worship. The people had begun to gather in small groups to study God's Word and so continued to be a people connected to each other and to God. Jesus announced in his interpretation of the words of the prophet Isaiah, that TODAY things will and can change. It is no longer a matter of hearing God's law and trying to do it to the best you can. Jesus told the people that the days of waiting and hoping that God's promises would come true were over. Jesus told them that they would be released, healed, and freed. This is what they had heard for centuries. But Jesus said that it would happen Today.

How could he say that? How is that possible? There are people in prison, people who are sick, people who are blind. Who is this man Jesus who is so bold to make these pronouncements as if he is God. You can imagine how the whole of the faithful community must have been asking these same questions. Jesus was beginning to turn their world upside down by making them see God's action in the world in a new way. Come back next week to hear the next chapter in this story. What will the people do? It's a cliff hanger.

Jesus meant that we no longer have to be held captive by all that troubles us. We no longer have to be blind to those around us who reach out to us, and we don't or can't see them. We no longer have to be oppressed by other people, or by our medical condition, or by our economic situation. We no longer have to be a prisoner to our worries and fears. When we understand that, that is our epiphany from Jesus. That is our time to applaud like the Nigerian Christians because Jesus has just healed another soul. Ours.