

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 8 August 2010, based upon Luke 12. To God be the glory.*

Sometimes on Sundays it's not until we get to the Prayers of the People that I actually feel inspired. Roger Nelson composes them, and the seeming randomness of things he has us pray about is for me a blessing. But he doesn't make up everything. The parts of the prayers when we pray for other parts of the Anglican Communion come from a published cycle. But since Roger is away, it fell to me this week to look review them. Last week we prayed for Burundi; today we'll pray for several countries in central Africa, and so I was reminded of being there, and also of Father Pitt, who was dean of the cathedral in Lusaka, Zambia, and about his friend Trevor Mwamba, the Bishop of Botswana, and about how extraordinarily powerful Africa is...in so many ways.

When I arrived in Rwanda in April of 2008, I was already emotionally spent. In the previous 10 days I had buried by grandmother, and returned home in time to officiate at two big funerals. I wasn't entirely ignorant of what I'd encounter in Rwanda, but the utter devastation born from a sick mixture of poverty, genocide, and HIV, is beyond reach of understanding.

The day we traveled East from Kigali we were in the truck for about 4 hours, but I bet it was fewer than 30 miles. You and I would have considered the roads impassable. The village was a sea of tin roofs, cobbled together with various bits of cardboard, or soft plywood. We were visiting a 12 year old girl who lived by herself. Her parents had died of AIDS, and much of her extended family had been killed in the 1994 genocide. And the stigma of all that, exacerbated by her own HIV diagnosis, meant that the only place she felt safe was at a playground on Saturday mornings outside of Kigali where she'd gather with other orphaned children, most of whom also had HIV, to play games and to dance. Our little organization, CHABHA (which some of you learned about last spring) paid for her school fees, and for the transportation of getting her to and from the Saturday morning gatherings.

The morning before we went to visit her several of us had done Bible study, and I'll never forget it because the Gospel we just heard today, is the very one we had read outside of our guest house in Kigali. The leader of the study extolled the virtues of watching and waiting for the Lord to appear. But as we stood outside this little girl's hut all I felt was unadulterated fury at this gospel text. Who would take the advice to watch and wait in the middle of a world crumbling around you.

HIV in sub-saharan Africa is the most virulent, and it has these awful ripple-effects. Cervical cancer, stigmatization to the Nth degree, and even in rather prosperous countries such as Botswana and Rwanda, an appalling lack of access to anti-viral drugs. Everyone in the helping professions is overwhelmed. I was angry with the institutional church who spend as much money studying and talking about HIV in sub-saharan African than we do delivering care and supplies.

But as angry as I was, the Gospel convicted me. This whole chapter of Luke is about opposition, external and internal. Jesus is speaking to his followers, including us, about the external opposition of greed, and the desire for possessions. The internal opposition was and is the selfishness and the power-plays which affected the early church, and surely affects the late church too. Questions about what it means to have power become front and center, as does our talk about wanting all kinds of stuff in the world. Suddenly, the early church and the late church aren't so dissimilar.

Into this Jesus says there's a way to shepherd ourselves, to guide ourselves to watch and to wait, even in a context like the one I described in Rwanda. It's like being really alert, knowing that opposition exists, and yet bearing witness, in any case. Jesus shepherds us to stay in that awful sadness, rather than to flee to the comforts of a clean guest house in a safe neighborhood of Kigali. And into this Jesus asks us not to turn away when it's really ugly, but to stay alert, giving away our resources when and where they're really needed.

My anger that day as we dropped off some food and some coloring books for that young girl was really about my fear. Behind all anger is fear. Behind all fear is longing. When we respond to our anger, we're usually not so effective, and when we respond to our fears, we're not effective either. But when we respond to our longing, our longing for justice, or our longing for healing, or our longing for returning the world to peace, we find Jesus Christ, who is already working in all those situations and moments in which we feel anger or fear, and who bids us welcome to join him in the work of reconciliation.

Which brings me to you. It's been nearly a year since I joined you, and because we are now community, I hope you'll watch and wait. For what, you ask. The early church expected Jesus to come back, and so they waited and watched, like we might over a beautiful sunset. But the way the church--most of the church--has interpreted watching and waiting centers on our celebration of the Eucharist. The poured out wine and the broken bread is the fulfillment of Christ coming among us. It's why it's so central to our weekly life. He bids us welcome to join him in his own self.

The real beauty of Rwanda is that everything changes quickly. Rains come quickly and disappear just as fast. Mist covers the land, and moments later the sun reveals the glory of mountains, and those mountains are so glorious that you can't really get too caught up in your own stuff.

That's another blessing of the Eucharist which we offer and share. Our own resistance or pain disappears and what's revealed is mysterious grace. And what about that young girl in the rural countryside of Rwanda? She comes with us to this Altar, and we leave here to join her in another kind of feasting, this time with our resources of money, and our willingness to watch and to wait. I'm honored to join you in this saving work. Amen.