

Link Letter No.20 September 2015

Dear all,

Greetings from South Sudan where today it is simply freezing! I am so cold, but this doesn't bode well for my next visit home visit which begins in January, as the thermometer here is reading 27°C and I only just took off my warm jumper! I am determined this time to see snow, but I fear that I may become a little Olaf like... reference to the Disney film "Frozen" in case anyone is not aware! I think that this may be the year I succumb to buying some boots! Anyway, I am hoping that seeing snow doesn't disrupt my travel plans around my churches!

Some of you may know that I finished my MA! In many ways I still can't believe it – that I started one let alone finished it! I thought that I would share a little of what I did over the three years I was studying and how it has linked into what we are doing here. During the writing of all the essays and my dissertation, I was blessed to be able to have conversations with different friends here which all lead into a greater understanding of the South Sudanese situation. There was only one essay where I did not link into the situation here; it was more suited to a western context looking at a children's film exploring the values and seeing what themes could be drawn out. I explored Toy Story 3, but "*declares Mr Prickle-pants, the Shakespearian hedgehog*" is a line I never thought I would include within an MA essay!

In the same module I then tackled the question "*Child rights are eminent; discuss in relation to your own situation*". To be honest, although this question was clearly the most pertinent to my situation, initially I didn't want to touch it. I am aware that a number of Christians struggle



Graduating...



Ruth Radley CMS mission partner South Sudan

Ruth is a CMS mission partner seconded to the children's department of Across and serving in Yei, South Sudan. Across is an interdenominational Christian NGO that has worked in (South) Sudan for over 40 years. Ruth's ministry is based on working with churches and communities to help understand and meet children's holistic needs, The years of war in Sudan make this work so vital to a future generation of Sudanese.

with the concept of rights and as we were about to begin a new programme based on them, I was concerned in case my opinion changed – what would that mean for our whole programme and our integrity?

However, I did indeed do the essay. I discovered that there was a concept of "rights" within the Bible, though not equal for all. Exploring the four different categories of child rights – protection, survival, participation and development – I discovered plenty of biblical references suggesting that God Himself has a heart for children in these areas. From this, we developed Bible studies that we use at the beginning of training on child rights and responsibilities.

In survival we looked at the two Hebrew midwives disobeying the king's orders to kill all boys as they were born, enabling Moses to survive (Exodus 1:8-22). This is alongside the story of Ishmael and Hagar (Genesis 12:1-2; 16:1-2; 21:8-20) and how, even in the first book of the Bible, we see God's immense grace on a situation. In protection we looked at how Moses was protected once again by his mother (Exodus 2:1-10), hiding him in the Nile with his sister watching over him. For development we looked at how Jesus grew, using Luke 2:52, and finally in participation we looked at the value of allowing children to ask questions, using Deuteronomy 6:20 and Joshua 4:6 where we are told that children will ask questions.

All of this is done as far as possible within the context of the South Sudanese culture, but we are open to change all the time. For example, in Kakwa culture (the dominant tribe here) it is not seen as respectful for children to directly approach their parents or caregivers with questions; they are to wait until they are approached. As with any culture, however, it is changing so when we do training, we ask communities if they feel it is appropriate for children to be allowed to ask questions at any time. Some people will say "yes", that they are happy with that, whilst others feel that it is not right. The suggestion then is whether it would be possible for the adults to give the children that platform on a regular basis, so they are able to ask questions and grow more.

I also really enjoyed doing my second essay. We were able to choose an independent topic of study, and seeing that I was studying from here, it seemed a sensible option with no lectures to attend. Well, I guess it may have seemed sensible if I had been close to a library and other such resources! I must confess that this was the hardest part of the MA, not having access to materials and using a weak internet which didn't run past midnight and sometimes not at all! I chose to write on "*Spare the rod and spoil the child; discuss in relation to your own situation*" as corporal punishment is a huge issue here; it is against the national law but not cultural law, and has been used for a long time. NGOs tell people not to beat children, but from what we observe they are not offering information on other forms of discipline, which is both so needed and what God expects.

There are then those tough, tough verses in the Bible (ie: Proverbs 13:24). I had struggled with these verses for a long time and had come to agree with those who said that they were proverbial verses about shepherds guiding their sheep. A shepherd would never hit their sheep and therefore the rod that these tough passages were talking of was an authority rod. I also read an excellent book "*Corporal Punishment and the Bible*" by William Webb.

As I began going into real detail on this subject, I realised that I needed to have an open mind. I was getting more and more disturbed as what Webb was really saying, in essence, was that corporal punishment in the Old Testament was real, painful and brought injury. I was connecting this with the grace filled God that we love and worship, and something did not add up. I continued reading, supplementing this with reading around the subject from other books and materials, and came to realise that corporal punishment in the Bible was not just for children but for adults as well. So anyone advocating that it should be used for children because it is biblical should also be advocating for adults to receive it too.

In addition, some helpful readings pointed out that anyone



The mist had stopped me walking as the Lakeland Fells can be dangerous in these conditions, and so I sat to read and journal in the rain, but then I looked up to see the mist clearing and it took my breath away!



The obligatory picture!

advocating corporal punishment as long as it does not harm the child as being a biblical mode of punishment was also not being true to the Scriptures, since it DID bring harm. You can see my confusion! I came to see that the Old Testament laws in this regard – barbaric though they seem to us now – were actually God placing limits on punishment. Looking at the laws at the time, they were far worse. So “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:24) placed a limit on punishment. I continued reading and wrestling, and looked into the New Testament – setting my eyes firmly on Jesus. He didn’t condemn the woman caught in adultery; he didn’t condone her actions but instead showed immense grace. The law said that she should be stoned but Jesus issued the challenge of those without sin to throw the first stone. Unsurprisingly, nobody did.

The conclusion I came to was that yes, the Old Testament passages were in fact physical, nothing about nice authoritative rods, but that our God is a God of grace. He works with us, knowing it takes time for us to change and working graciously with us through that. When Jesus came, He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it, and with Him He brought the Kingdom, which is here but not yet – a kingdom where there is no pain or suffering. Jesus’ coming brought everything into full circle, God’s redemptive plan that brings us closer to where God wants us to be. I really enjoyed challenging myself on this one, and feel much more confident now in discussing it with others from a biblical perspective.

The following essay was a disaster but by some amazing grace I passed but on a very low grade; it was not my finest piece of work. Whilst writing it, I was delayed in the UK after the war broke out here again, so I went to Cliff College – where I appreciated being part of the community at that time – for a week to try to finish it. In truth, I was also glued to the internet, talking with friends over Facebook, checking the news sites and trying to work out what was happening. One day I heard my colleagues in Juba had been ambushed twice, and although everyone physically was okay it was still not good and my mind was very distracted. I finished the essay from here, but still with so much security rumours around and concerns, it was not an easy task.

My final essay was one which I really enjoyed reading up on but found the subject so challenging that even today, my head is messed up through it! I attended a module on Celtic Christianity and was determined this time to be a normal student and not make up my own title, as I had done for most of the others (apparently making things harder for myself!). I had acted all normal, going to my tutorial, discussing what I was to do and had felt settled. Then



With my close friend from childhood, who treated me to an AMAZING spa day; this afternoon tea finished us off!



With my mum, sister-in-law, father and brother at my graduation

on the last morning, as we were walking for coffee, a tutor said this to me: “I mean Ruth, you think of all the missionaries in the past who were commissioned in cathedrals around the country which are full of pagan symbols to go to other nations and destroy their pagan symbols.” Oh my! I realised that this was what I wanted to look into! I hurriedly went to the MA programme leader at lunch and told him that I needed a lunchtime tutorial, there and then! Thankfully he obliged!

Again, I really enjoyed the reading for this but struggled with it too. One thing I

pointed out (and was called wise for doing so!) was that the early missionaries did what they felt was right, and we are doing the same today. In 50 years time or so, what will a new generation of mission partners feel about what we are doing now? The early missionaries were some amazing people who sacrificed so much, and in no way do I wish to degrade what they did. However, I came to realise that the Celtic mode of mission is about entering a culture, living with people, sharing Jesus with people and allowing people within their own culture to adapt practices where they feel adaptation is necessary as they come to know Jesus more and more. It's not about change because someone told them that it was necessary to do so. For example, in England the Celts only destroyed the pagan idols in the temples. They did not destroy the temples themselves, as that was where the people were used to going, but once the people knew the one true God, they would worship Him instead. Pagan festivals of celebration were Christianised, which is why we celebrate Christmas as the way it is known now. The Celts used what people were used to to bring them closer to Jesus.

The early missionaries appeared to sometimes confuse faith with culture and brought a faith wrapped in a cultural way of expressing it, instead of allowing it to be contextualised within a culture, something that is still often seen around the world today. What really saddens me is that I see the same thing happening today. Different churches feel a call from God to "plant" a church in another nation. What saddens me most is that there is so much experience of this around the world, but often this experience is not drawn upon.

Churches go it alone and mistakes are made, often at the cost of the host nation. One thing can't just be picked up and transplanted into another culture. It is something which really troubles me as I feel also that often we Westerners come with the attitude – sometimes unknown – that we know best. I feel the same with many NGOs as well, entering into another person's community and stating what the needs are instead of engaging the community to help in the process. This is something I struggle with a lot in my work; I do NOT want to be bringing simply a Western way of doing things, and constantly try to question myself about why I think what I think, and am blessed to be close to people here who I can discuss these things with. A question I often find myself asking is: "am I just being Western or..." and I am blessed that often my friends will answer with honesty!

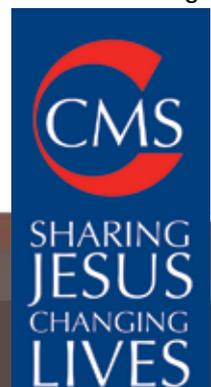
Finally, I had to do a dissertation and I looked at bereavement in children of the Kakwa tribe, the tribe I predominantly work amongst. As there was no literature from South Sudan available for this, and even not much across East Africa that I could find, I had to use mainly western literature and balance this against interviews from youth, parents, medical staff and church leaders to see if there were similarities as to how children in this culture grieve to children from a western context. There seemed to be a number of similarities indeed, but with a good number of differences too. One thing that came out strongly in my interviews is that the culture is changing as all cultures do, but that made it a little hard to work out what really happens with children and bereavement. I concluded that there was need for more research in this area, but from what the interviews showed it seemed that children needed more support and understanding in this area. I suspect that if I had done the same research in the UK the conclusion may have been similar.

Anyway, it is a closed chapter now, but considering I always said I never wanted to do an MA it is amazing that I completed – and enjoyed – it... my South Sudanese friends are now nagging me to continue to PhD level but I think not!

Blessings and thanks again for all your support,
Love

Ruth

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