

## AFRICAN ANECDOTES

Many times on our busy trips I have to confess that I feel much like the tired apostles that Jesus commanded to watch and pray – but they failed. However, on this trip, I was very conscious of the need to pray – and the fact that it is only God’s power that can strengthen, protect and open doors. Truly, we are both grateful to the Lord and to you all who make supplication to God on our behalf.



There are many amazing women in Africa. Thokozani (Gladness) heard the gospel for two days – that’s all – but she is responsible for the beginning of the church in this place. She never had any children but did have an adulterous and abusive husband – and last year she eventually got a court order to keep him away from her and came with her brother’s newly orphaned toddlers to live this village – clearing her own property, building her own mud hut, fetching water, fetching firewood, planting and cultivating her cotton field and vegetable garden by hand – all at an age when many Americans are thinking



about retiring! The hut is their bedroom, storage room and barn – it is half full of cotton. The kitchen is visible in the picture on the right, just in front of the chicken coop (on stilts). The dish drain is hard to see, but it is also on stilts, just in front of the coop. The trees in this picture are mainly Mopani trees – famous for Mopani worms – a protein “crop” than can be harvested twice a year.

Thokozani seems to be highly respected in the village, being chosen to be a pall-bearer at the funeral, even though she is Ndebele and everyone else is Shona. Although she is slightly younger than I am, at the funeral she became my mother: “You must shake every man’s hand and say these Shona words. Now you must come here to the women’s side, shake every hand and sit down here.” I want to describe this funeral to you because I want you to get a glimpse of the harsh reality of death in rural Africa. There is no money to soften the ugliness. When the woman passed away, about 10 pm, the village head shouted the message – and the message was shouted throughout the village until all heard. Early the next morning, the men gathered around the grave, taking turns to dig a hole about 5 feet wide and 8 feet long, chest deep. In the bottom of that hole was another hole, the size of a body. (There was no coffin.) The men had also chopped logs to cover the lower hole in which the body lay, and mixed dung with dirt in preparation for making “cement” that would be put on top of the logs. The woman who died (after a long illness) was 23 years old, a widow survived by 3 children, both parents, and 8 siblings. The aunties and mother were with the body in the hut where she died, and the corpse was wrapped in a towel and a blanket with the face visible and a cloth over her mouth. The women were singing hymns and dancing outside the hut to the accompaniment of drums (a log covered by animal skins), maracas (made from tin cans) and a huge kudu horn. There was much laughter at the silly dance antics of the women “to make the mourners feel better.” My “mother” was most puzzled when I disobeyed her instructions to dance to the hymns, but seeing as her English was about as good as my Ndebele, I could not really explain. After an hour I was allowed to go back to teach three ladies who had come from another village to hear the word of God. As Thokozani and I walked the 2 kms back to the house, I said, “Remember how we learned yesterday that God accepted Cain’s sacrifice and not Abel’s? That is why I did not dance.” “Ohhhhh.” At two, one of the men came to fetch us for the funeral. We were instructed to go into the hut and say goodbye to the woman – as did everyone else. Then everyone sang (no dancing or drums) while six women put on surgical gloves and carried the woman to the grave side by holding the blanket she had been wrapped in. Six men stood inside the grave and took

the surgical gloves from the women. They lowered the body, unwrapped the blanket and someone hung it in a tree. An Auntie stood over the grave and was not happy until the body was just “so.” The woman’s plate, cup, washing bowl and other personal items, and the surgical gloves were buried with her. The mother sat under another blanket – totally covered – and it was hot. Then Les preached (one of the Christians in the village interpreted), several gave words of thanks, and then the village head, dressed in his ordinary tattered clothing, spent ½ hour telling everyone the importance of getting their “juice” (anti-retrovirals for the treatment of HIV). After that the head commanded me (there was no other word for it!) to come and stand next to my husband in front of all the people – that was a first! He introduced us to the village and said they were free to attend the teaching because we did not bring politics. Slowly those who attended walked back to the homestead for the traditional funeral meal (a few goats were slaughtered) and drinking of home-brewed beer. No one was paying any attention to the mother, so I went over and put my arm around her shoulder and she leaned up against me – and so we walked wordlessly back to the hut (I know about 10 words of her language). We did not stay for the “feast,” and a few Christians came back for an impromptu class after eating (but hopefully not drinking!).



In the past 13 months I have spent in total about 6 days with these women on the left. Even though we cannot say much to each other (they don’t even know Ndebele), the aspirations we share unite us. They love me for my efforts to help them have a better life here and hereafter, and I love them for their efforts to overcome circumstances I can only imagine. They asked me for help to live with their husbands, their mothers-in-law and their sisters-in-law. The mother-in-law often interferes in the marriage and tries to make a “slave” of her daughter-in-law, but I was initially very puzzled about the “sisters-in-law” as that is not typically a problem in their culture. Eventually I figured out that by “sister-in-law” they meant “co-wife!” So how do you live with your co-wife?

You don’t – or at least you shouldn’t! But I didn’t tell them that – I let them discover it themselves by studying the relevant verses – a very long and laborious way of learning for women with no study skills -- but it is the only way their faith will ever rest in God and not man. When this picture was taken at the end of our last afternoon (several women had already left to help with supper), I had no inkling that it would probably be the last time I would ever see them on this earth (I never thought the village head would have such a bad attitude) – and the thought brings tears to my eyes. Yet, I know that God’s word is a hammer and fire – it can break opposition in pieces and burn away falsehood. I pray that God’s word will bear fruit in their lives and those that hinder the word will turn to the Lord.



Teaching women is always a challenge, but at this place, it was extra tough. The women sat in the shade up against the fence at the back of this photo – right next to the road. There was constant street noise: village women calling to each other as they went to fetch water, herds of animals with their bells, donkey carts, children playing, and the music of the local beer hall. In the class itself were dogs, chickens, crying babies and two naughty toddlers who were incessant screamers. The women were constantly in-and-out to do the chores you see them busy with in the picture on the left, and this kitchen area was in full view of the class. Once I “lost” my class, turned around, and saw the cooks stirring the maize meal into that pot of boiling water. I guess my students were hungry!

However, the most difficult thing about teaching here is the women's lack of education and background information. They did not know what hell is. They thought fornication was only adultery and prostitution. When they read 1 Pet.2:13-14, they thought God was saying we must listen to angels. ("Those sent by him" in their language is the word "messenger" – "angel.") Finally they saw that they must listen to the king. "Who is your king?" "President Mugabe." "What law did he make about getting married?" They don't know -- not one of them is legally married. They had *heard* of "signing." "Signing is no problem to us – tell us now to do it." So I asked Les if Elias could come explain to them. Of course they *say* it is no problem, but to get to the nearest magistrate is quite a mission. If you want to reach civilization you walk 20 kms to the nearest crossroads and wait up to three days for a lift to the main road (another 40 kms) where you can get a bus or taxi. Does God expect them to go through all of that to sign a piece of paper? I was pondering on that and thought of the birth of Jesus – how far did Joseph and Mary walk because their government required it?

I meant to take a picture of the local school – a pathetic collection of tiny log structures that look much like the kitchen in the picture above. I was told that the parents in this area do not generally want their children to go to school, even if they have enough money. They reckon that education is wasted since the children just jump the border and go to South Africa when they grow up and they never see them anymore. However, partly in exchange for being able to keep a small piece of his once huge farm, a local white farmer is going to supply the cement and roofing material for a proper school if each family in the village moulds 1000 bricks. So...the women were



busy doing this across the street from where I had my class (notice that they are holding moulds made from tree trunks) – and notice their SMILES. No matter what happens, Africans can always find something to smile about – it is one of their most endearing traits. After drying the bricks in the sun, they make an oven from them. Then they cover the oven with peat and light a fire inside to burn them. Maybe, having put all this work into the school, they will become more pro-education! As you can see from the vegetation, the people in this area usually manage to get at least a partial crop. But malaria is a huge problem in the summer.

When we arrived back in SA, I had a message on FB that I needed to fill in a form for my high school's 40<sup>th</sup> reunion – am I *really* that old? They asked me to list my occupation. I asked Les what my occupation was and we both got a good laugh! Whatever my occupation is, it is only possible due to your love evidenced by your support and prayers. Thank you so very much, and may the Lord bless us all as we all deal with the various challenges we face in living the Christian life and trying to help others get to heaven.

With love,  
Linda Maydell