

A Sower Went Out to Sow'

Revd Malcolm Pritchard

This article is an edited version of a letter from Malcolm to his Link Churches in the UK.

Greetings from Gulu. I am so grateful for your incredible support which allows me to be in this beautiful and challenging part of the world. I am not sure which is the more remarkable, the support from those who have known me only a very short time or the support from all those who do so despite having known me for much longer! But either way, your kind generosity is hugely appreciated, so very many thanks indeed. I am frequently reminded of the vital place of prayer. I continue to covet your prayers and value the shade from the "heat" they provide for me. Thank you!

The plants look good enough to produce a harvest but closer inspection reveals "worms" (think caterpillars) which have devoured the business end of the country's maize crop. The cause is a matter of dispute but what is indisputable is the large and powerful seed company selling maize seeds which, pests permitting, will produce one crop but are so designed that one crop is all they will produce. Any seeds from those plants will all be sterile. The poor farmers will have to go back to the rich multi-national and purchase more "single-use" seeds next time. In my naivety I found it staggering that there are people who are deliberately creating dependency. A quick internet search of the company concerned reveals deep concern about the methods the villains use to exploit the Ugandan poor with such impunity.

Of course Jesus talked a lot about seeds and sowers. The Kingdom of God is indefinable but Jesus keeps finding different ways to say: "Well it's like this...." And then he tells a story. So I find myself asking, as a paid up union member, what kind of seed are the sowers of today scattering?

Wise advice given to visitors to a certain country goes like this. After one week you will be absolutely certain about what needs to be done to right the nation's wrongs. After one month, you will not be quite so sure. And after one year, you will shut up. So it is perilous to attempt an analysis of the way things are here from my vantage point of relative ignorance.

That said...

There are ambiguities without doubt in Ugandan Christianity. Unlike the UK there is no embarrassment about talking about God. "Praise the Lord" is a common conversation starter. Prayers are offered at every opportunity. Not even a cup of tea is taken for granted. The thanksgiving for safe deliverance through the night to the gift of a new day is heartfelt. The Bible is treasured. Worship is exuberant and joyful. It seems that everyone can sing and sing well. I have always loved a

syncopated rhythm and only the traditional English hymns are sung to the “thou-shall-not-dance” four-four beat of a colonial march. Churches are busy. Fellowship groups, youth groups, choirs, Mothers’ Union, Fathers’ Union, prayer meetings and more. There is lots going on.

At the same time, something is seriously wrong. Turning to our neighbour for a moment, in his installation charge, Archbishop Jackson Ole Sapit of Kenya asked: “If Christians form 80 per cent of Kenya’s population, why are our elections often violence-prone? Why is our society riddled with corruption, nepotism and a great level of social stratification? Why are environmental degradation, poverty and disease still ever-present realities?” Or as John Stott once said: “The salt cannot blame the meat for going bad.”

Too often it seems the gospel seed sown is for single use only. It is buried in the heart of the believer as a golden ticket to secure safe passage from this wicked world to an ill-defined place called “heaven”. It is a private treasure that will not be required until the point of death. It is escapist and sterile. Jesus is a personal Saviour but not necessarily Lord. Of course this blunt view of the gospel is not peculiar to the Church in East Africa alone.

So I find my primary challenge is to apprehend the true gospel and communicate what I have received in the various settings in which I now find myself. Recently this has been with a group of 23 enthusiastic lay readers and catechists at Archbishop Janani Luwum Theological College (AJLTC). The subject allocated to me was “discipleship” so we have spent time thinking about what the gospel really is and what it means to be a disciple. Of course I am learning loads and I cannot speak for the students, but it feels good! Only a few in the group speak English so I am dependent at the moment on an interpreter while I persevere in language lessons with my patient “helper”, Raymond.

From a practical perspective I have put the classroom chairs into a circle. I have also broken a cultural norm by choosing to eat my lunch with the students from time to time rather than just with staff. I think students expected me to download information to them in a one-way “stuffing the goose” fashion. I hope that the discussions and shared learning and reflections on group activity have been pleasant alternatives to the traditional expectation.

In the absence of the Principal, who is taking some well-earned leave, Revd Jane Tordera is acting principal until the New Year. One of the ways I can assist her is by looking after the banking. Vincent, the administrator, and I aim to reconcile the books each Friday afternoon but it sometimes spills over to Monday morning. More importantly, Rev Jane and I aim to continue the Principal’s practice of praying together for College every day. We usually do this around lunchtime if you would like to join us in prayer for AJLTC, wherever you grab your maize and beans.

In addition to my work in College, the bishop has appointed me as curate to Christ Church in Gulu town, with responsibility for the English service. Sunday morning services – and there are three in quick succession – last a couple of hours. Twenty minutes is given to the sermon and a churchwarden delivers a “time’s up!” note if you step over the limit. So glad the wardens in Luton didn’t think of that trick! But once again I long to find a way to sow seeds that will bear fruit. I will speak about a gospel that is always personal and never private, that will make a difference 24/7 and not just for a couple of hours on Sunday, and which is genetically engineered to make a difference to life on earth now, not merely in the new earth and new heavens to come, a gospel to be shared not guarded. Good news not fake news.



Participants in trauma-healing training week

Other pieces of work have included a trauma healing training week in the village of Biyaya near the town of Adjumani around which many of the South Sudanese refugee settlements are located. “Refugees” is such an over-used category and it was good to put faces to the label and a particular privilege to hear their stories of heartbreak and hope. There is a strong belief that God is at work among the uniting South Sudanese in exile for the future good of the young nation.

Back in Gulu, a small group goes out each Wednesday evening to local villages to worship, pray and read the Bible together. Often these meetings attract many children so I have been looking for ways to encourage a model that is more accessible to them. Bring on the visual aids!

Revd Malcolm Pritchard is a Mission Partner with the Church Mission Society: since June 2017 he has been serving at Archbishop Janani Luwum Theological College in Gulu and more generally within the Diocese of Northern Uganda: previously, he was for over 20 years a vicar in Luton

