

Rachel Thomas-My time on placement in Kenya

Recently back from Kenya I find it hard to know where to begin when reflecting on my time there. But the first thing I must do is give you the greetings and thanks from all those I met, in churches, schools and individuals in Kenya. There will be many things that I will only touch on briefly here but I am sure that there will be opportunity for me to share more in the future months.

This gives me a chance to share with you why I went there in the first place. Prior to starting foundation training I had a strong sense that God was calling me to continue working with children in my future ministry and that this may not always be in the UK, a prospect which has terrified me on many occasions. I am scared of flying, let alone leaving people behind here for a while. So I began foundation training and one of the modules I took was Christian Mission. It was here that Bishop Joseph spoke. He talked of the various projects that he had been involved in, so much of which had involved children. He gave us opportunity to ask questions at the end of his talk. By this time I had a lot. A friend looking over my shoulder said, 'ask them' but as usual, I said 'no, I will talk to Joseph on my own later'. However, Joseph said if there weren't any more questions he would like to share more about what it was like to be a child growing up in Kenya. He then proceeded to answer every question on my piece of paper. It was then that I felt God was saying to me you need to go, I have work for you to do there. There were many times that it did not seem likely, with their drought, the Methodist church being reluctant to fund, knowing how difficult things are there, each time I prayed if you want me there Lord then make it possible.

So it is that I have just returned, having spent just over 3 weeks teaching in a Methodist Primary school, attending many other schools in the area, visiting children from 3 year olds to 18 year olds, talking to them in assembly, answering their many questions and working alongside a Minister, leading a Sunday school with over 150 children! doing pastoral visits, marriage preparation classes, finance meetings and participating within services and many more things beside. Needless to say I was very tired when I first got back.

People said to me that it would be a life changing experience. I went open to experience what life was like there, keen to know why it was that God felt it so important that I experience this, but the idea of never seeing life in the same way again did not really sink in until the second week of my time there when the reality of how hard life really is for the Kenyan people really sunk in.

I had seen photographs of children, I had seen video footage of services and Christian celebrations but nothing could prepare me for the reality of how I would feel teaching a 4 year old little girl called Nelly who was sick, HIV positive whose father had already died of the terrible disease. This disease is so widespread that it has reduced average life expectancy in Kenya to just 46! The government statistics state that 1 in 10 people in Kenya are HIV positive but when speaking to doctors in a hospital I visited they felt it was more like 1 in 3 in some areas. This was the same hospital which did not have any

hot water. They washed the sheets with a chemical which was the only one on the market to kill HIV using cold water. To visit a labour ward where both infant death and mothers dying in labour was high, to think they could not wash with warm water was and still is beyond comprehension. To meet people who would not offer you their hand to shake but an arm because they wanted to protect me will live with me for a very long time.

When I had bought cards from Oxfam where it says give £5 and it will feed 120 children school dinners for a year in Africa I found it hard to believe. Never again, I hope will I complain if I have to eat the same food 2 days running. These children have the same food every day and never complain. Porridge, which I am honest made me feel sick to look at was eaten with enthusiasm by all. Children who had no concept of what a toilet inside would look like, a bath, an unknown word, hot water in houses only achieved by boiling a pan, no electricity, for many no shoes, the list could go on.

I had a talk with a lady called Ann who said to me, "Do you know, we are very, very poor but we are also very rich. We have so little but we have so much love." This was true, wherever I went, people had so little but their thanks to God for what they had was immense. I have never thanked God so often for a cup of tea in my life.

Now I know that we are raising money in the hope that the Bishop will be able to have 4 wheel drive car. I am sure that for many of you it may seem that you would prefer to give it straight to street children as I wanted to do, especially having met them. However I cannot stress enough how this vehicle would enable God's work to be done. The roads are horrendous, like nothing I have seen in life, many impassable in a 'normal car'. A journey which could take 30 minutes in a 4 wheel drive car takes an hour and a half because a much longer route has to be taken, or it has to be walked! People walk or cycle for 70 km a day just to sell produce in the market, for which they will get only a pound if they are lucky. The government say that the aim is to make sure all people have at least a dollar a day to live on, these people are lucky if they have a dollar week. It is only by being able to travel that projects to help these people can be set up. The street children orphanage which I visited is a success story, funded by people in the UK, but they can only take a limited number of children, and it was heart breaking to see how many children are living on the street, hardly clothed, lying as if barely alive at the side of the road. If we enable the Bishop to be mobile more often, because believe me the car he drives now goes 'on a wing and a prayer' and needs to be in the garage very, very regularly! We will be enabling him and his successor as Bishop to do many things for the work of God.

I could go on for hours about their services starting at 11 and finishing at 3, with live chicken's sold in the church afterwards, but maybe another time! However I feel I must say that throughout all my time there I was made to feel loved by those I met, Ann was right, the Kenyan people are indeed rich. Their trust in God as provider, redeemer and guide to the whole of life was a great blessing to me as was the deep faith and prayer life of the children I met. God was indeed present and moving within that place.