

Letter from Okulonyo 07

Dear Friends,

It's Ash Wednesday and appropriately, Philip and I are walking through a burnt landscape. Everything seems to be in black and white, charred grass, cracked black earth and charcoal stick trees. The journey could be out of Lord of the Rings, through dark barren Mordor and then all of a sudden it's all glorious Technicolor as we return to the Shire, birds are singing as we enter an unusually lush landscape where green grass and leaf indicate the presence of water close to the surface. We carry on under the Midday sun, I'm worried about my near-empty waterbottle and the fact that our young guide seems to be expressing the false confidence of the lost. After 2 hours walking and just as our water is gone, the distinctive straw colour of a hut roof is seen in the distance. Within minutes we're standing amidst 40 huts in various stages of construction, but the place seems deserted. We shout greetings and eventually an old man appears and tells us all the others are out hunting for game. We're offered water. Philip drinks deeply; I try some but immediately spit it out, tasting all manner of foul bacteria and learn it's from a dam in the river some 3 miles away, their only water supply.

We're here surveying new settlers as part of CHIPS seed and tools distribution programme before the rainy season, and this is the most remote place. This year we've counted 676 new households, which probably represent about 4,000 new people. Giving people the potential to grow their own food, means they'll probably be here next year and is a major way of building peace in this border area. Settlements become buffer zones, agriculture brings peace, food security enables people to give up cattle raiding and agricultural surplus promotes trade. On our way back we stop in the town of Apeitolim and we see this vision realised. A place once deserted, that had reverted back to bush, because of years of violence, is now a thriving trading centre where 25,000 people live in its vicinity, where once there was only the pioneering CHIPS base. The brightly painted new school and health centre shine out as a testament to peace. There's a noisy but orderly queue at the borehole pump and pigs wallow contentedly in the mud produced by its overflow. Old men sit on stools in the shade of trees planted by CHIPS and watch a growing town bustle about them.

Back at Okulonyo we gather round the fire for prayers and there's a few more than usual. Luca has brought his wife and their 3 month old baby, she's sick and he asks us to pray for her. We sing then everyone prays for her at once, in Ateso, Karamajong, English and as the flames flicker around us it feels like another Pentecost. As I lay hands on her and pray for healing I notice the strange 'shut down' expression on her face.

The next day I learn she's been 'bewitched' by the witchdoctor in the camp, but the prayer seems to have worked and she's now breast feeding. I insist she goes to the Health Centre to be checked, but how to get there and pay for medicine? Our bank account is still frozen, I've no money and no one else has. I feel paralysed by this temporary poverty. We've just enough fuel in the bike to get them to town and I arrange credit for more fuel and all is well as they get the necessary treatment. They're lucky compared to so many others. I've learnt what 'dirt poor' really means; only having one set of clothes and not being able even to afford soap. Probably no one here dies of hunger but plenty of children die of poverty- not having money for transport to hospital, cash for simple life saving drugs, immune systems decimated by feeble diet and dirty water. These are the people living on much less than a dollar a day.

In the face of such suffering, what can I do this day but remember that I too am but dust and ashes to which I shall return? But I also recall that Ash Wednesday calls us to repent for the Kingdom is at hand, and in places like Apeitolim this 'metanoia' is happening.

Jonathan