

## Last letter from Okulonyo

Dear Friends

It's my last day in Okulonyo and like the welcome to the missionary family in 'The Poisonwood Bible' the local community has decided to slaughter a goat in my honour. It arrives tied to a broken bit of chair strapped to the back of a motorbike, and then is tethered in the shade of a hut. It's frightened by the journey and looks defeated. As it stands alone I think of Rene Girard's writing on the crucified Christ as the final scapegoat who challenges the human impulse to project all our ills and unexamined anger onto the 'other'. The goat doesn't have to wait long before firm and skilled hands are laid on him and his throat quickly cut.

Whilst the meat is prepared and roasted Sam, Epuerte and I make a pilgrimage to Loramotoit, scene of a massacre at the CHIPS base in 2001. In those days there were frequent cattle raids in the area and CHIPS, by having a base there, was wrongly blamed for encouraging the raids. On January 14th 2001, local Teso politicians called a meeting under the tree by the bore hole. Once the community had gathered, soldiers who were there opened fire and 10 men, women, children and 2 unborn children were shot dead in a premeditated attack. One former CHIPS member died along with his pregnant wife and 2 children. The CHIPS team only survived as one of its members had been a school friend of one of the soldiers, and was able to prevent their killing. Immediately the team scattered to different locations and it was some time before new bases were established elsewhere in the region.

Epuerte, Sam and I leave the motorbike and follow a track for the last few hundred yards. We soon hear children's voices, laughter and the familiar creaking and gush of the bore hole pump. And there in front of us is a smiling group of women and children filling their yellow plastic jerrycans in the shade of the same tree where 11 years ago the massacre happened. As I look at the tree I think of Dorset and the huge Sycamore at Tolpuddle that also marks history, where all those years ago 6 men met and formed an agricultural Trade Union. Earlier in the week I'd been telling the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, of their organising a union, their imprisonment, transportation and finally the pardon. We'd been discussing how to help a man who'd been forced off his land by a big local absentee landlord seeking to expand further. After being threatened with violence, the man had responded by smashing bricks on the new tool shed built on his stolen land, and had ended up arrested, imprisoned then fined. We'd helped him pay the fine by buying seed off him, but it didn't seem enough, and it almost felt like we were colluding with an injustice. 'It'll take time to solve the land issues' I said 'and to get justice just like it did in England'.

Sometimes here it feels like the force of injustice, the projection of hatred and the recent memory of violence is overwhelming. All CHIPS can do at times is to be present, to wait, sometimes disperse and then regather; but always modelling peace in our common life and trusting that our prayers and right action will bring justice and grow peace.

As we pass under the tree we enter the old CHIPS compound. It's lovely, green and shady because of the trees the project planted 15 years ago. Now ironically it's an army barracks and 3 soldiers welcome us, hand us stools and invite us to sit under a tree with them. We discuss how things are better now; just 1 cattle raid in the last year, how people are settling nearby again and how the army is no longer under partisan local control, but commanded nationally. As we leave Sam says to the soldiers 'Thank you for the provision of security' and they reply 'Thank you CHIPS for the trees and for peace.'

Jonathan