

AFRECS E-Blast: April 23, 2014

PRAY. TEACH. PARTNER. URGE. GIVE.

Message from AFRECS Executive Director, Richard Parkins

### THE UNEXPECTED

As one reflects upon the re-enactment of the events of Holy Week, an adjective that comes to mind is "unexpected". As Jesus concluded his earthly ministry, we encounter the miracles that Christ performed, certainly unexpected particularly for those who rejected his ministry and felt threatened by his following. Then there were those who gathered at Calvary and witnessed the ignominious death of their teacher and Lord. This was not the way that it was supposed to end. Finally, there was the rolled away stone and the empty tomb - both of which surprised and confounded the women. They had come to show adoration for their slain leader, intending to observe the ritual of anointing the body of a loved one. Their bewilderment was soon replaced with the unexpected realization that Christ was alive and death did not have the final word.

For many of us who have advocated for our Sudanese sisters and brothers, their fate and their present circumstances have not been far from our thoughts and prayers during this holy season. Possibly there are some parallels to the occurrences of holy week as we try to come to terms with what is happening in South Sudan. The events of over 2000 years ago may be more than remote pieces of our religious history.

Were not many surprised at the abrupt and brutal outbreak of violence beginning last December? The independence of the world's newest nation was challenged when a serious political conflict morphed into a tribal war which resulted in the death of thousands and the displacement of nearly 900,000 persons. Few would have chosen to write this part of the script when telling the story of an emerging South Sudan. Then disillusionment came along with the realization that this conflict was not going to end quickly. Both sides demonstrated an intractable stance in spite of efforts made to produce a cease fire and end this horrific violence.

We can imagine that the followers of Christ also must have felt great disillusionment as they contemplated their future following the death of their teacher and Lord. Not only was the end devastating but it happened before the new age - the one that the messiah had told them about - was actually achieved. There was still much work to do. Likewise, the violence now raging in South Sudan speaks to the unfinished business that confronts this emerging nation - a condition that breeds despair among those who hoped that the national trajectory might have been a progressive movement to greater freedom and stability.

Let us remember that the despair of the followers of Christ did not last. Those who witnessed his presence told others that death did not have the final word. Yes, Rome still oppressed the people. Religious leaders continued to deny the message of Christ - that love and forgiveness trumps a legalistic approach to one's faith. Yet, there were those empowered because of

Christ's presence in their lives. They could carry the message of peace and forgiveness forward. Hope had been renewed.

We might apply this concluding chapter of Holy Week - the Resurrection of our Lord - to our view of a way forward in South Sudan. Now we pray for church leaders and their followers who are earnestly seeking strategies for peace and reconciliation in South Sudan. They are empowered by the message of the risen Christ. They hold strongly to a belief that a sense of unity and a willingness to overcome the bitter animosities of the past can prevail. There is a sense of hopefulness that the cancer of tribalism and political avarice will not have the last word. May our prayers be like those of our Sudanese friends - that South Sudan can return to a more promising way forward. As the risen Christ continues to walk among us, may the unexpected outcome of that grim time in ancient Palestine re-enact itself in South Sudan.

Faithfully,

Richard Parkins

Post Script:

Dear Friends,

Since composing my thoughts for this week's eblast, I have been confronted, as most of you have, with the graphic news of horrific violence in South Sudan, particularly the massacre of innocent lives in Bentiu. The fact that the devastation clearly driven by ethnic hatred is equated with the horrors of the Rwanda crisis twenty years ago is particularly alarming. Compounding this tragedy is the prospect of starvation for many and an inevitable death even for those fleeing to a UN compound whose basic resources to respond to hunger and serious medical needs are insufficient. What can we do?

I stand by my message that we are an Easter people and must believe that death does not have the final word. Our fervent prayers must continue.

We must also resist the feeling that all is lost. We know that our friends in the Episcopal Church in South Sudan are earnestly pursuing ways of making peace and reconciliation happen even as they are surrounded by mass atrocities. We cannot be less hopeful or faithful than our Christian brothers and sisters in South Sudan. We can let those whose cynicism may be so potent as to cause them to abdicate involvement in South Sudan's future know that there are still peace advocates who are valiantly attempting to send a different message.

Another action available to us is education. We can let others know about what is happening in South Sudan, not as a way of adding to their list of failed nations, but as a means of rallying support for a robust diplomatic effort by the international community with the US taking the lead to push for a cessation of hostilities and a commitment to hold accountable those who continue to destroy with abandon the lives of thousands of innocent souls. We can enlarge the circle of advocates and prayer partners who seek a peaceful outcome to South Sudan's current crisis.

This is also a time for those who have worked in various capacities in South Sudan, who have supported programs that believe that South Sudan has a promising future, to continue their efforts not only to accomplish the purpose for which they initially offered partnership but as expressions of hope in a country where many could write their own text for the book of Lamentations.

We are called to be faithful. Let us pray that our faith will not waver as we seek to be faithful to those whose faith has often been the mainstay of a suffering people who heroically survived years of unimaginable violence.

Faithfully,  
Richard

\*\*\*

[Radio Tamazuji](#) reported from Juba on April 14, that the National Program for Peace and Reconciliation (NPPR) would encourage citizens to speak openly about human rights abuses and grievances ... while facilitators gathered the people's recollections into a 'body of truth.'

\*\*\*

[Catholic News Service](#) (CNS) reported on the South Sudan massacres on April 22. "South Sudan's civil war has taken a brutal turn, despite appeals from the country's church leaders to stop the violence."

The article quotes retired Catholic Bishop Paride Taban, 78, who compared the situation in South Sudan to Rwanda, which recently commemorated the 20th anniversary of a genocide that killed more than 500,000 people.

"I saw mass graves in Rwanda, but in all my life I never saw mass graves in South Sudan. Until this current conflict began in December," he said. "I used to tell people that when God created South Sudan he laughed, but this has become the place where God weeps," he added.

\*\*\*

On April 21, the [Sudan Tribune](#) published an opinion piece written by Juliana Bol. She is a public health specialist, holding a Masters in Public Health from Columbia University, New York. Her key focus area is Population and Family Health concentrating on Forced Migration and Health.

Entitled "Embracing victimhood to celebrate victimisation" the article concludes: "This has been a horrible week for South Sudan. I reiterate that time is running out for us, we are on a precipice. Let us do all that we can to ensure that we do not fall into the abyss."

\*\*\*

Also on April 21, the [BBC](#) published this story: "South Sudan conflict: Bentiu 'ethnic slaughter' condemned". It reads in part:

"Hundreds of people were killed because of their ethnicity after South Sudan rebels seized the oil hub of Bentiu last week, the UN has said. They were targeted at a mosque, a church and a hospital, [the UN Mission in South Sudan said in a statement](#). It added that hate speech was broadcast on local radio stations, saying certain groups should leave the town and urging men to rape women."

\*\*\*

A similar story was published in [Reuters on 21 April](#) under the title: 'Hundreds of civilians killed in South Sudan ethnic massacre - UN'. It reads in part:

Around the country the United Nations is protecting tens of thousands of civilians who have sought refuge at its bases. After the rebels seized Bentiu, Dinka residents of Bor town in Jonglei state attacked a U.N. base on Thursday where about 5,000 people, mostly Nuer, were sheltering. The mob of armed civilians pretended to be peaceful protesters delivering a petition to the United Nations before opening fire in the base. Some 58 people were killed and another 98 injured, including two Indian peacekeepers, the U.N. mission said.

On Jan. 23, the warring parties in South Sudan agreed to a cessation of hostilities but fighting has continued in parts of South Sudan, which seceded from Sudan in 2011 under an agreement to end decades of war. The current conflict has disrupted oil production, which provides a hefty portion of the government's revenue. After seizing Bentiu, the rebels warned oil firms to pack up and leave within a week.

\*\*\*

Finally, this article was published by [National Geographic on April 20](#), Entitled: 'Why South Sudan May Face World's Worst Famine in Quarter Century' with the subtitle: 'The coming weeks could determine whether tens of thousands will die.' As part of an eight-month Future of Food series, the article begins, in part:

**[South Sudan](#), the world's youngest country, is on the verge of the world's worst famine.**

**[The UN estimates that a third of the country](#) of 11 million are facing starvation unless farmers can plant a critical round of crops before the annual rains hit in May.**

Experts believe as many as 50,000 children could die. It would be the most devastating famine anywhere in 30 years.

Since December, when South Sudan's leadership splintered over suspicions about a coup plot, violence has spread across the country, disrupting the planting season, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee, and leaving more than 10,000 people dead.

"We're grappling with a whole host of issues now," says [Toby Lanzer](#), the UN Assistant Secretary General and the senior UN official leading relief efforts in South Sudan. "The scale, depth, and ferocity of what has happened has engulfed this country as a tsunami would have done if we had a coast," says Lanzer. Whether or not there's a famine, he says, could depend on what does or does not happen by the end of May: "This is crunch time."

\*\*\*

Thank you to our readers for your interest, your prayers, and your support.

Ellen J. Hanckel, E-Blast Editor

\*\*\*

PRAY FOR PEACE AND DEEP HEALING OF THE CONFLICTS AND RIVALRIES IN SOUTH SUDAN.

PARTNER, URGE, GIVE

If you'd like to be doing more to help address the crisis in South Sudan, please consider the following:

\* If you have contacts in South Sudan and are able to get news of various parts of the country and the church from them, keep AFRECS in the loop by replying to this email or using our main contact email address: [info@afreecs.org](mailto:info@afreecs.org).

\* Pay attention to the evolving events and be prepared to advocate for peacemaking with the US (or other) government, especially if attention to conflict resolution wanes.

\* Give to provide relief for internally displaced persons and others whose resources are compromised by the fighting and instability. One hundred percent of [donations to AFRECS](#) go to ECSS&S entities that can provide direct help to the people most in need.

If you have received this eblast in a forwarded message, you may [sign up here](#) to subscribe. Then you will receive them from AFRECS on a regular bi-weekly schedule.