

Out Of Africa

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[0 : 0 0] I promised to speak on this, and some of you may remember that I promised to speak on coming out of Africa, and in what is a vast jumble of experiences, experiences of a lifetime, there is one predominant reality that both Fran and I experienced very strongly.

Finally, it's enormously helpful to step into a totally different culture and try and see, even in a quick way, what that culture is all about, but also from within that culture to look back to where you come from and see the kind of cultural imprisonment we suffer from here.

We first went on the coast of the Indian Ocean at Mombasa to a beach hotel and were looked after there for the few days we were there by an endless number of black men who made beds, swept floors, raked lawns, sold coconuts, waited on us, did everything that you could imagine.

and there was an endless number of them, and all of them with wives and children from whom they were separated for weeks or months at a time because their employment didn't allow them to live at home with their families. The hotel was run with great efficiency by a woman who only made herself known to us on Good Friday when in the evening of that day, outside our hotel room in the dark, under the trees, there was this lovely Easter music coming up, and the choir from the local St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Mombasa were out there in total darkness singing without benefit of instruments of any kind, singing in a beautiful way and preparing subsequently to come and sing to all the guests at the hotel and sing all the music of Easter weekend for all the guests, whom I must say, from outward appearances at least, were a very pagan-looking lot. The choir sang beautifully, and the lady sort of stepped out from her anonymity to say, did you enjoy my choir? And she obviously was the manager of the hotel, belonged to this church, and brought them in to sing to her guests. She was a remarkable lady who ran a superb undertaking there. We then went to the CPK guest house in Mombasa, and there another extremely efficient and hospitable lady looked after us with great care and made us very welcome indeed. In Nairobi, the same thing, the CPK guest house, CPK being the Church of the Province of Kenya, which means the

Anglican Church of Kenya, in Nairobi, this lady in her 50s, who could light up a whole room full of strangers just by her presence and her graciousness. And with everybody, she shared the great cause in her life, which was to set up a school to train young women in the Christian faith and how to be effective people in that society. When we went subsequently to the conference center at Kanamai, which is just north of Mombasa, again on the ocean, there was a widow with four teenage children, and she managed to send all the children to boarding school, which is about the only way you can go to school at that stage. And she ran a conference center for 200 guests, and again an innumerable staff of people that worked for her, plus she ran the choir in the local church. She was really a very remarkable lady to me. In the local Anglican Church, when we gathered as you have this morning for church, sitting up in that corner in what you might think of as the bishop's seat, was a lady who had on what we might think of as a kind of Aunt Jemima costume, but which is a formal church-going attire for people in Kenya. And she was the senior member of the congregation. She had a peculiar kind of aristocracy of her, because she belonged to a family of freed slaves. And in that part of Kenya, there's a whole community, which was where freed slaves came back and established themselves after they had been enslaved in other parts of the world. But her family had done well, and they had owned some land, and part of that land was given to the church. And a church. And a church was built there. And so she was the kind of senior elder of that church. And she led the service, announced the hymns. She had a young man who was the assistant manager of another local hotel who came and preached, and a very distinguished lay reader who came and took the prayers.

[5 : 53] But she was a remarkable lady. And she was a remarkable lady, and obviously was spiritually a very important person to that community.

We stayed two weekends ago at the home of the dean of the cathedral in Nakuru. And the lady of the house, who kept the house, sold the excess milk from their cow, who did the shopping, prepared the meals, was a very gracious hostess.

Our first meal there, we were sitting around the living room. And in she came with a pail, a jug of hot water, and a towel. And went around and poured water over all our hands so that we could wash them before the meal, and gave us a towel to dry them.

And it felt very New Testament-ish to have this happen to us. But she was a very gracious lady. And she fed us in the dining room, that is, the men, and Fran, who was a guest.

She fed us in the dining room, and the four children in the household, she fed in the kitchen. She was an extremely competent and gracious hostess. And she was 15 years old.

[7 : 15] And it was really stunning to meet such a person. The woman who took care of us in Nairobi just moved in on us and chauffeured us around, arranged tickets, arranged travel, saw that we weren't left as strangers, did everything for us, prepared a meal, got us on the train, made our booking, everything she could possibly do, she did for us.

And she was a lady of great presence. And wherever she went, we went into the bank at 2 o'clock on a holiday weekend. 2 o'clock on Friday afternoon is when the banks close.

And if you see the paperwork they have from not having automated banking, you would think that 2 o'clock was late to close. But the bank was filled with people. It was just jammed with people. I mean, hundreds of people, literally.

And within 2 minutes I was in a private room being looked after because of having this lady who was in charge.

Our last meal in Africa was in a fairly well-to-do suburb of Nakuru, where about 12 women, the wives of professional men in the city, doctors and accountants and lawyers and people like that, they put on a beautiful Sunday dinner for us of ugali and lamb and chicken and rice and salad and endless supplies of fruit.

[8 : 54] And it was indeed, it was lovely. And these women were extremely gracious. And they met together weekly to study scripture and to pray for their husbands, who were not particularly interested in the Christian faith, to which all of their wives seemed very committed.

And they met together with the Christian faith. You could see much of the strength and spiritual vitality of the church in Kenya was in the commitment of the women in their discipleship to Jesus Christ.

Well, that was very impressive. That sort of series of women that we met through the week that we were, or through the three weeks we were in Kenya.

At the conference at Kanamai, there was a lady from India who talked about evangelism among the women of India. And I want to share with you things she said, because this is one of the strongest impressions we got from our three weeks there.

She spoke of being brought up in a Hindu society. And she said, in Hinduism, in order to obtain salvation, it's necessary for every woman to be reincarnated as a man.

[10 : 19] I don't want to arouse feminist tackles by saying things like that. But that's a country of 800 million people.

So the combined democratic impact of the 25 million in Canada wouldn't change much in that society. Then she spoke of Islam and the Koran.

And further, though, with respect to Hinduism, in the 600,000 villages of India, killing of girls at birth is increasingly widespread.

Women are considered to be irresponsible so that in childhood they are to be obedient to their fathers, in marriage to their husbands, and in old age to their sons.

And that's the only way that the problem can be contained. In the Koran from Islam, she said, it is taught that men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other.

[11 : 30] As for those from whom you fear disobedience, you are to admonish them and to beat them.

And that that is taught. Now, I am not under the illusion that a good Hindu or a good Muslim would not look at Christianity and identify probably equally malevolent behavior.

Because I think that the whole problem is as basic as original sin. I don't think the feminists have discovered anything new at all.

I think they've just discovered another aspect of the reality of human sinfulness. So, she went on to describe the position of women in India.

And she used this quotation. She said, they are bent over by the weight of the world, by family, society, church, never allowed to stand straight.

[12 : 42] They are bent over by loads of bricks, of stones, of water, and baskets of wares. And obviously, I mean, in Kenya, it's so typical to see a woman under a burden or a woman bent over hour by hour with a little mattock trying to cultivate the ground.

Bending over the fireplace, the washing stone, the ironing board, the grinding stone. Bent over by racism, class, religion, and caste.

Bent over by unjust structures, social, political, economic, cultural. Never allowed to stand straight. A woman bent over under the fury of a husband's rage, a capitalist's greed, a landlord's lust, and a cruel world's dictates.

A woman is not meant to be bent over. I mean, that is, she's not, she is supposed.

It is supposed that she is not allowed to stand up straight. Spiritually abused and diseased, derided, bullied, beaten, and even burnt to death.

[14 : 06] Depressed, miserable, thinking nothing of herself. Believing that her destiny is her bent over state. Now, that's a very powerful indictment.

And I just want to read you one of the stories from Luke's gospel, which has to do with being bent over.

And I just want you to hear it. I don't want to say very much about it, but I want you to hear it. He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath, and there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity for 18 years, and she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.

And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said to her, Woman, you are freed from your infirmity. And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God.

The ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath day, said to the people, There are six days on which work ought to be done.

[15 : 18] Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day. Then the Lord answered him, You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath day untie his ox or his ass from the manger and lead it away to water?

And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for 18 years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day? And he said this, All his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

Now, the thing that makes my cheeks burn when I read that story is the ruler of the synagogue, who said this shouldn't happen on the Sabbath day.

And I think that one of the points that is being made in this talk that we were given was simply that, that the way men think is, this should be done on the other six days of the week, now is not the time to do it, now is not the place to do it, now are not the circumstances to do it.

And it's a kind of male-structured, male kind of thinking, which I think is pervasive in every society. But it demonstrates it so clearly, and it demonstrates so clearly the importance of the personal contact between the person of Jesus Christ and the person of this woman.

[17 : 09] Well, I think that visiting in another culture, there's a kind of moment in time when you're free of the prejudices and blindness of your own culture.

I think you can only, I mean, I can't, I don't even think I could talk to you about this issue without picking a place on the other side of the world to talk to, because the issues are so hard to deal with within the structure of our own society and produce so much recrimination and so much anger and so much guilt that you can't deal with them.

It's only possible to deal with them objectively by looking at them at the other side of the world. The lady from India led a Bible study on John chapter 4.

You know, that's the story of the woman at the well, the Samaritan woman whom Jesus went to talk to. And I think it would be a wonderful thing if, instead of calling churches, I mean, as an alternative to calling churches St. Mark, St. Luke, St. John, St. Thomas, etc., I would love to belong to a church that said, this is the church of the woman of Samaria, because I think it would be a magnificent kind of pattern for Christian life to have that at the basis of the life and structure of a parish.

But when this lady, whose name was Juliet Thomas, who is an Indian woman in spite of her anglicized name, she said, she led this Bible study in John 4, and I've spent lots of time preaching on John chapter 4, but she brought out things that I found peculiarly striking.

[19 : 10] She pointed out first that the disciples were sent off to buy food because they would have gotten the way of Jesus talking to this woman, that they wouldn't have understood and couldn't have handled it, and so they were sent off to get food.

It's just another example, she said, of the failure of the disciples to understand the Lord whom they are seeking to serve. And, of course, that failure continues.

All the barriers which Jesus broke down in talking to that woman, and it's a magnificent story of breaking down barriers, the disciples wouldn't have allowed him to break down.

Jesus began talking where the woman, right exactly where she was, and was able to identify with her where she was, and it was pointed out that we, in our self-righteousness, make our righteousness so apparent when we're approaching people that they just can't stand to talk to us.

And Jesus, I suppose, was afraid that the disciples might do that too. Jesus, in the course of the conversation, gave to the woman a deep sense of worth.

[20 : 33] And in the course of the conversation, which runs through John chapter 4, he dismantled all the barriers which she had towards him and towards a faith, a personal faith in God.

And Jesus is not compromising, but loving and gentle and confronting the woman. He was able to bring up the matter of her husbands, the matter of her personal religion, the matter of her future expectations.

And he was able to deal in a very positive way with all of those. Read the story for yourself, and you'll know what I mean. The woman was not a candidate to be an evangelist, but Jesus found her to be a woman who was searching, seeking, hungry, and thirsty.

And Juliet Thomas said of the women of India, that describes them perfectly, that they are searching, seeking, hungering, and thirsty.

And when they find what it is that they are searching for, they are seeking, what they hunger for, and what they thirst for, when they find that, they will give up everything in order to possess them.

[21 : 57] They will cross cultural barriers. You know, men, when they try to talk about the difference between Islam and Christianity, or Hinduism and Christianity, or materialist secularism versus Christianity, men are very adversarial, and very competitive, and very kind of militaristic, and take fortified positions, and try and hammer people into submission.

While a woman, Juliet says, can go in and talk in a very personal and intimate way to somebody, and all the barriers come down.

It was very profound, the way she explained this, that women can talk to the heart of people, and have a very special gift within the ministry of the church for doing this.

She was not interested in women becoming priests, or women becoming bishops, since she said most of them have to waste most of their time at administrative things anyway, and she would rather be free to do ministry than to be caught in one of those positions.

And she said, and this was the thing that stuck in my mind, she said, as a woman in India, my status is in Jesus Christ, apart from any other conditioning, cultural, religious, or behavioral.

[23 : 30] Went on to say, when women find themselves in Jesus Christ, remember that's more than half the population of the world, and they are the primary influence among all the children of the world.

So, that was her story, and that was her explanation of John chapter 4, and it was very moving indeed. Again, I remind you, because I'm slightly anxious about what might be said to me in reply to these things, I remind you that it's easy to objectify this in another culture.

It's very difficult to bring it home and to deal with it here. Juliet Thomas said that she had been in Bangalore since 1962, and she said that for 20 years, I had never been made aware of women.

She said, after 20 years, for the first time, I walked into a slum half a kilometer from my home. I had never been made aware of the needs of women in that way before.

And her whole life is now, as she feels, commissioned to working among women that they may find the stature in Jesus Christ, which is available to them nowhere else.

[25 : 06] Well, sometimes by traveling halfway around the world, you can discover realities of another world, which in practical terms may be less than half a block away from where you live.

And the reality of situations that you're up against all the time, but for often sophisticated and perhaps real reasons, you're prepared not to see, even as Juliet Thomas lived within half a kilometer of this slum all her life, or for 20 years of her life, and never saw it.

And I guess that one of the great things about this trip to Kenya was becoming aware in a totally different cultural setting of the place of women in society, being in a sense given a moment when all the blinders and all the prejudices of our own sort of culture were taken away.

Just let me use this for a final illustration. You know the Maasai are a fairly primitive tribe still in Kenya who herd their cattle and are enormously wealthy by reason of the accumulation of enormous numbers of cattle in Kenya.

And they are of the opinion that all the cattle in the world belong to them. And so when they go out to take somebody else's, they're only taking what belongs to them.

[26 : 52] Now that's a cultural blindness. But I don't think it's any different than the cultural blindnesses that we too suffer from when we have a view of the world which is totally unrelated to the reality of the situation.

And I'm sure that the daily and weekly confrontation with the word of God and the scriptures, with the opportunity to worship God, is that we might be given at least a glimpse of some of the reality which in our culture and in our society we are blinded to, if not trained not to see.

and that we might pray that we might have the eyes of Jesus Christ who saw this woman in the congregation on the synagogue, in the synagogue that morning and called her forward.

And she ended up standing straight and praising God, having found her true stature and status in and through Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.