

John Martin discovers beacons of hope in Kenya

On Safari

I've just spent ten days in Kenya, my third visit but the first for nearly 20 years. I'll never forget flying from the capital Nairobi over Kenya's luminous tropical green countryside, the breathtaking Rift Valley, seeing Mount Kenya, and moving on to Marasbit, an oasis town amidst a huge desert region bordering on Somalia.

It was a special privilege to spend half a day with local evangelists who had come in for a training school. These valiant local Christian leaders lead one of the toughest lives imaginable. Most cover huge distances on foot or bicycle, sharing the gospel with nomadic cattle herders. One of their inspirations is the late Andrew Adano who had a unique take on 'tentmaking'. As a 'camel doctor' he conducted an itinerant ministry via camel transport, supporting himself and his work by treating ill or injured camels among the communities he visited. In the same way now, some of the evangelists I met keep themselves on the road by offering bicycle repairs.

A spectre that haunts Kenya is the collapse of its famous coffee-growing industry. Small-scale Kenyan growers cannot compete with the low prices at which larger scale growers can produce their coffee beans and unlike other economies, there is no government protection for them. This in turn is accelerating the drift of people from rural areas to the cities, leading to the growth, especially in Nairobi, of what are euphemistically called 'informal settlements'.

I had the privilege of spending a morning walking through one of them, named Kibera. No one knows exactly how many people live there. It's not necessarily in the interests of the politicians to take an accurate census. But it's a place where hope has not died. I found it a whole lot friendlier than the London underground.

Kibera is hardly the archetypal secular city. Dotted throughout are churches of all shapes and sizes. Kiosk-sized shops carry signs telling that a church community meets there on Sundays. The great majority are indigenous, homegrown African churches and their worship is lively and enthusiastic. What they struggle with most is

being able to offer something tangible in the here and now to people who, like Dick Whittington, have come to the city full of hope only to realise they are on the lowest rung of the economic ladder. Many of them will see their hopes crushed.

It was heartening, therefore, to see in the centre of Kibera a simple building that serves as a clinic as well as a church. Its main source of support is not some distant NGO but Nairobi Chapel, a large city centre church. Here mothers can bring their babies for lessons in nutrition and basic healthcare. Here people can get advice about Aids prevention and the drugs and medicines they need at a price they can afford. It's a real beacon of hope and it demonstrates yet again why healthcare has such a crucial part to play in God's mission.

Seeing it reminded me of a comment from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He once said that it was far easier to be a Christian in his native South Africa than in the West. The reason, he said, was that the issues that defined what being a Christian was all about were much sharper and clearer in his home community.

Kenya certainly has its problems but it's not the basket case that the propaganda of the aid agencies has prompted many of us to believe. And there are Kenyan Christians who have on their doorsteps communities like Kibera that beckon them to offer practical love in the name of their Lord and Saviour. And they are, generously and with great enthusiasm. I felt just a little envious of them.

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V.T.C. Clinic, Kibera.