

Fowey Fables – no.14

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I am writing this letter at 35,000 feet over the middle of Australia. Nick and I are on our way back from Africa to Sydney to attend the wedding of Rachel Reddy and Alex Negrón who have asked me to speak on the subject of 'Extravagant Love'. It will not be a hard topic because of what we have both seen over the last few weeks.

In the service tomorrow I shall share that powerful series of stories which begin in Luke 7 with the repentant prostitute whose tears washed Jesus' feet, whose hair dried them and whose fabulously expensive perfume was poured over His feet. Religious people protested that her sin disqualified her from approaching the Son of God. Jesus explained how her extravagant love was a consequence of His extravagant forgiveness.

Several years later in John 12, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, looking for a way to show her gratitude for her brother's resurrection, and presumably inspired by the first woman's example did exactly the same with another pot of expensive perfume. Judas objected to such irresponsible extravagance. His excuse was the needs of the poor. His real motive was his own pocket because 'his fingers were in the till' of the disciples' pooled resources.

Four days later, in Matthew 26, in another home in the same village, a third woman inspired I am sure by Mary, anticipating Jesus' death for her sin in two more days, went a stage further and poured the same kind of perfume over His head. This time all the disciples followed Judas' example and protested against her poor stewardship. Jesus thanked her for her extravagant love and promised that her example would be remembered throughout history, not just as a moving story but as an inspiration to Christians to show extravagant love for the poor in thanksgiving for His sacrifice on the cross.

Mafudu in Eastern Uganda is a village of several thousand people who are short of almost everything except wildly extravagant love. The simple homes with walls of mud or home made brick, and roofs of thatch or tin, are packed with people especially children. One hundred and sixty kids in this one village are orphaned or abandoned, but without exception someone has taken them in. A couple may be looking after 12 children of whom only 4 are their natural offspring. Frequently the children are in the care of a grandparent because HIV/AIDS has wiped out a large part of the generation in between. Water is pumped from bores and carried on the women's heads to each home which in turn is surrounded by crops of maize, coffee, bananas, cassava and other fruit and vegetables. There are two local primary schools with very little equipment and classes of 150-200 children to each overwhelmed teacher.

As a fellowship we have been involved in Mafudu, through John Wandera, a student at the Lodge from 1999-2000, who returned to plant 24 churches scattered around Eastern Uganda. At present we are supporting 22 orphans who have been taken into Christian

homes. Our help provides for their education, clothes and health care. Another 140 kids are desperately needing the same kind of help.

Nick and I were given an overwhelmingly moving welcome. The children sang and danced for us. In the songs which they had written themselves they said 'thank you' to a God who loved them so much despite the death of parents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters from AIDS. Nick and I were both presented with live chickens whom we left to be eaten in the village! Twelve women who are widows and themselves HIV positive sang of how God's love took away any anger or regret to free them to serve Him.

There is an amazing sense in Mafudu of a Christian community who are centred on Jesus, and committed to supporting one another, even if no-one outside will help them. It is extravagant love in action as we have never seen before. They beautifully demonstrate the way Paul described the Macedonian Christians who 'in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.' (II Cor.8:3)

During our 6 days in Uganda we were based at Mbale, about 30Km south of Mafudu, where we held a pastors' conference and from where we went to a variety of rural churches. The church there is set in 4 acres of land where they dream of building a secondary school, a medical clinic, a vocational training school and a Bible School. Given how much has happened in just 6 years God will make their dreams come true.

On our way north from South Africa we stopped for 4 days in Zambia with Alfred Nsofwa who was a student at the Lodge in 1987-8. He has a similar vision to reach out to Lusaka, the capital city, from his very lively church by providing leadership training to some very promising young people. Time did not permit us to see their outreach several hundred kilometres away in a rural area where they too are providing Christian homes and a school for orphans.

In South Africa itself we visited the base of African Enterprise, an extraordinary evangelistic outreach to all the cities of Africa which has been operating for 44 years under the leadership of Michael Cassidy. As a fellowship they have had a huge impact on millions from corrupt dictators to the hungry poor. For two days we attended their leaders' conference, met and heard from some remarkable people. One dynamic lady, Grace Kalambo, nicknamed 'Amazing Grace', will be in New Zealand during October/November. Don't miss her! Nick had been taking part in AE's outreach to Soweto in the month before I arrived. I have asked him now to describe his experience.

"Soweto is a dramatic place. Its history of political resistance to Apartheid is visible everywhere. As the breeding ground of black heroes such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Steve Biko, the independent minds of the modern generation show pride in their hometown. But spiritually and socially the community of up to 3 million are suffering despite their impressive heritage and talents. Our mission there allowed us to work in high schools, hospitals, prisons, shopping malls and even trains. For one month we formed friendships and shared in the needs of ordinary people in Soweto. The Lord

allowed us to hear their stories and problems. Few outsiders venture in to this place out of fear but in reality they are missing out on witnessing an amazingly gifted people musically and creatively. And they shared who they were through their voices and dancing. 50% of Sowetans are under the age of 20. Between 30 and 50% are infected with HIV. Murders in South Africa are higher per annum than some war zones. More than 18 times more people are killed per capita than in NZ every year. But in Soweto there are no safe gated communities. Crime is the number one fear for young people in Soweto despite the fact that AIDS is killing at an extraordinary level. The youth have no parents because of AIDS and therefore live with a grandparent who may have the disease themselves or is most likely without any work. Where you start socially in this situation would seem a nightmare to many going in from the outside. But the Christian witness of service makes the only difference. Government programmes openly fail. United Nations initiatives struggle through lack of real understanding. But the church, with all its usual failings and conflicts, is showing Jesus every way imaginable. I didn't leave feeling demoralised, but full of hope for what Jesus is doing in Sowetan lives. Please pray for the brilliant young Sowetans who are giving their all for their people in the service of Christ. I plan on returning next year for an African Enterprise outreach to a University taking a group from NZ. If you know of anyone that would be interested in joining us please let me know."

From April to July, first Nick and Pete, then Nick and Christine, were at Muanicula in Fiji to develop the property, minister to the local people and prepare for a programme there which could well be on similar lines to what we saw in Africa. We are looking expectantly to God for the next step in the coming months. Meanwhile there is a lovely two bed-roomed house available to rent in an idyllic setting above the lagoon. The rent will help to fund the ministry at Muanicula. Let us know if you need a holiday.

In between Fiji and Africa we squeezed in a ski camp for 21 teenagers at Mt Ruapehu in the best snow conditions we can ever remember. Best of all was the openness of the young people to Jesus Christ.

We have not forgotten that we have a Bible School at the Lodge which has continued through the year with around 25 students attending either mornings, evenings or both. The Lord regularly brings a steady stream of people from many places, hungry to know Him better. He also brings a flow of teachers, helpers and supporters who by their extravagant love make it all happen. Do ask for our new brochure if you know someone who would appreciate it.

We would be thrilled to hear from you how God has also loved you extravagantly this year.

Our love in Christ,

Tony, Christine, Nick and Pete