

**CONNECTING TO THOSE WHO SUFFER: Women and Children in Sudan Lillian Craig Harris. Beaminster Friends of Sudan. 7 November 2003.**

When Kath Barnett asked me to speak to you she expressed the hope that I might concentrate on the suffering of Sudanese women and children. Although you are a small group, she told me, already you have contributed to Sudanese projects such as teacher training, irrigation in the Nuba Mountains and bicycles for priests working in isolated areas - as well as to the educational work of The Bishop Mubarak Scholarship Fund which I represent. It is clear from this that you are a dedicated group. But I must trust that you are also determined because I have some very painful things to say to you today.

Most people are willing to look voyeuristically on the suffering of others. Human beings are, in fact, fascinated with other people's tragedies - but usually only so long as such knowledge costs us little or nothing. When confronted with the choice which the suffering of others presents to us - will I become involved or not? - the tendency is to turn away. I have done this. We all have done this at various times. Our very human unwillingness to choose positively - for life rather than for death - is why so few wealthy Sudanese (and there are some) and very few of the many foreigners who live in northern Sudan ever venture into the squalid settlements for displaced people which surround Khartoum.

Of course, many of the Sudanese who live in Khartoum suffer, too, for there is anguish in the loss of sons and husbands to war and disease, as there is in watching your children go hungry when you have already sold everything of value from your house, even the window frames. But it is in the squatter settlements surrounding Khartoum, where some two million displaced persons have gathered for refuge from fighting in the south and west of the country, that we discover poverty and deprivation beyond the ability of most of us to comprehend.

In 1998 when it became necessary for me to leave Sudan and it seemed that I might never be able to return, the women with whom I had been working said to me, "Lillian, tell people what you have seen, what you have learned here. Tell people about our suffering! Don't let us be forgotten!" Since then I have tried to do that including by writing:

"Over the past 40 years millions of Sudanese women and children have suffered the effects of a nearly continuous civil war. The women from the southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains have been most dramatically affected. They have been shot, burned, raped, mutilated, humiliated and cast out. They have seen their children starved, kidnapped, enslaved, killed. They have also lost their mothers, their husbands, their livelihoods, their homelands, their traditions, their security.

"Thousands who survive are crowded into shanty towns in the deserts which surround Khartoum, Gedaref, El Obeid, Port Sudan, Kosti, Fasher. They are malnourished, desperate, usually illiterate. They are hounded by the police for engaging in beer brewing and prostitution, activities which for many are the only means available by which to support their surviving children. Many of these women are Christians; others are Muslims or followers of traditional religions." [1]

On my first visit to Sudan in 1988 I was amazed to see these shanty towns from the air spreading out into the brown desert away from the green belt which surrounds Khartoum at the confluence of the White Nile and the Blue Nile. Years later when I returned to live in Sudan I became familiar with those areas, by then much larger, and with the people who live there. Ezba settlement, built on an industrial waste dump, is where you are very likely to find children with fungal and bacterial skin conditions. Mayo, where the wind blows incessantly, is certain to produce people with hacking respiratory infections - and, in the rainy season, malaria. At Jaborona, a waterless waste some 15 miles from Khartoum, all the children are filthy and many adults quite smelly and both young and old die from dehydration. On my first visit to Jaborona in 1995 a priest made me get out of the car and look into shelter after shelter where I found people simply dying. And everywhere in the displaced settlements there is malnutrition, tuberculosis, HIV, illiteracy and enormous grief as the result of loss of family, home, health, possessions and opportunity.

But perhaps we need to ask ourselves why we should choose to get out of the car and look into the places where death and disease, despair and other forms of suffering are most active. In her recent book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag discusses the photographic history of atrocities. There seems, Sontag writes, "a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others...Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which

they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say. This is what human beings are capable of doing - may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget". But what follows this "seeing"? As Susan Sontag also reminds us, "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action or it withers" [2].

In response to that appeal, I have promised my photographs of the 1998 famine in Bahr el Ghazal, southern Sudan, to the Sudan archives at Durham University. I recall in particular one harrowing 20 minutes during which I took three rolls of film before being hurried back to the small airplane. For 20 minutes I lived through one of the greatest nightmares I have ever experienced, dancing around dead and dying people, trying not to bump into the skeletal babies held up to me by their mothers, embarrassed by the voyeurism of it all, trying not to weep into my camera, trying to keep out of the way of grieving parents and of the frantic efforts of the Medicines Sans Frontieres personnel. Those photos are part of the Sudanese historical record which says "Don't forget what war and indifference does to people who are individuals and who love their families just like we do."

But there is another reason for looking on the pain of others. By acknowledging those who suffer, by seeking to assist and to uphold them, we find a door to a fuller understanding, a deeper relationship with God who agonises over neglected, forgotten and marginalized people everywhere. And the correlative to this truth is that to reach out to those who suffer is to become more fully connected to ourselves, to become more fully human. Archbishop Rowan Williams has written that, "I cannot make sense of myself without others, cannot speak until I've listened, cannot love myself without being the object of love or enjoy myself without being the cause of joy." [3]

Whether we accept it or not, we live in community with all other human beings. As the world grows smaller, the effects of globalisation more severe and the gap wider between developed and underdeveloped worlds, it is more imperative than ever that we recognize our responsibility to reach out in whatever ways possible. But it is not only that God needs us to do this and that our sisters, our brothers and our world perish if we do not do it. The whole truth is that by looking at and listening to others and by reaching out to help them, we act to reclaim our own personhood as children of God. That is their gift to us.

Meanwhile, the needs of the suffering Sudanese are enormous and because none of us has done everything we could to help we have no right to expect the Sudanese to be grateful. Mother Teresa of Calcutta admonished people to "Give until it hurts." But even that is not enough. Sometimes when the pain of my own inadequacy becomes almost overwhelming, I have consoled myself with the knowledge that God does not expect us to minister farther than our arms and our prayers can reach. Then, as I have also experienced, when we begin to reach out, our arms begin to grow. This is grace, God's gift to us.

Instead of concentrating our attention on the causes of war and suffering in Sudan, we need to use our energies to seek creative solutions. People who have suffered and are suffering do not need us to help them rehearse the reasons for their bereavement, poverty and disempowerment. What they need are friends willing to reach out to them, accept and encourage them, listen to them, work with them, console and uplift them as though they were our sisters and brothers - as indeed they are. All those who are concerned for the suffering people of Sudan, for stability, justice and peace in the largest country in Africa, for Christian-Muslim reconciliation, can contribute in some way or another to those who have suffered more greatly and in more ways than we can imagine.

The Bishop Mubarak Scholarship Fund for Nuba Women and its sister charity Together for Sudan believe that women's education is the keystone to civil society. The Bishop Mubarak Fund brings "Power to the Powerless through Education". Together for Sudan, which facilitates this educational work through feeding, medical, solar lighting and other projects, is "Building Peace through Service". But widespread illiteracy and the disempowerment of women are only two among the many problems I have described and not the only areas which need to be addressed. People of good heart, Sudanese and non-Sudanese alike, can work together to find creative solutions to the multitude of problems which the Sudanese now experience and will experience for years to come as they rebuild their lives and their country. No one owns the work of peace, rehabilitation and reconciliation. Rather, participation is a gift shared by those in genuine partnership.

I would like to conclude by considering the impact upon individuals of nearly half a century of violence, insecurity and lack of development. For southern and western women it has been a story of the breakdown of social and family structures with consequent changes in traditional roles as women, wives and mothers and of loss of access to traditional

means by which to create change. This has resulted in mounting insecurity and disempowerment, loss of home by displacement, increasingly poor health, loss of family members including male providers and protectors and, for many, constant hunger and watching their children die.

The best way to describe the results of nearly fifty years of conflict is to share a few brief stories. Telling their stories, speaking out their pain, in one way Sudanese women have helped themselves and their sisters to survive. We each have a story, of course, and some of the Sudanese women's stories have become interwoven with my story as through them I have learned and shared. Allow me to tell portions of other women's stories as filtered through my interaction with them.

\*A Nuba Mountains story. My story began to intersect more directly with the stories of Sudanese women in 1996 during my second visit to the Nuba Mountains. At the remote village of Delami, Bishop Mubarak of the Anglican Diocese of El Obeid invited me to speak to the ragged and sickly women who ran to their straw church to greet us. At first I refused for I had nothing to give them and I could think of nothing to say which they might wish to hear. But, feeling compelled, eventually I did speak, telling the women that God is like a loving mother who is most concerned for those children who are suffering and abused. The women then came up and hugged me and because our only common language was tears, we wept together. Those women — and Bishop Mubarak who saw me on the edge of greater awareness and pushed me over — are the founders of The Bishop Mubarak Scholarship Fund for Nuba Women.

\*A story from southern Sudan. In late 1997 while walking through the ruined southern city of Rumbek, I discovered several abandoned women living together in a crumbling school building. In one room were a starving old woman, a second woman with advanced leprosy, a simple minded and crippled young woman, and another young woman who lay face down weeping into a filthy pallet on the floor. One of the fourth woman's legs had been amputated and she had an enormous abscess at the base of her spine. There was no hospital anywhere near and all I had was a bag of antibiotics. Later the Catholic priest spoke to us in a voice which I am forever expecting and which I still sometimes fail to recognize: It is the voice of the abandoned and the mute, the voice of those who suffer alone, unassisted, degraded and unheard. "We are looking at you," the priest said, "but you are not looking at us." He said it twice, slowly and carefully, as a rebuke but also as a

blessing so that I would never again be able to get away from it.

\*Olga's story. While living in Khartoum from 1995 to 19981 met a woman named Olga who had lost her home, her husband and her children. Educated, strong willed and broken hearted, Olga never gave up even when she was destitute and living with the Missionaries of Charity. If I were asked to select a role model for service to the poor, I would have to consider Olga. Although she had lost her own children, she did not lost her love for children and eventually started a school in the displaced area of Soba Aradi. In 2000 she wrote to me in London asking if I could help pay her teachers least the school close. At just the same time (nothing happens by chance) Dave Lewis in Trowbridge wrote asking if I knew a Sudanese school where St. John's Church could pay teachers' salaries. 'That was how the Bishop Mubarak Fund's Project to Pay Teachers Salaries began. Today BMF is paying salaries to 53 teachers in 16 schools for displaced children in the Nuba Mountains and in the Khartoum area.

\*A story of 40 women. But Olga of the compassionate heart continues to speak with the voice. Sometime ago she appealed to me on behalf of the many hungry, abandoned, and destitute elderly women in the displaced settlement of Soba Aradi. Last July when I was in Khartoum she gave me short biographies of several of the more than 40 old women whom she and her volunteers are struggling to help. That's how I heard about Virginia who is 65 and blind and lives with a son who beats her, about Kalthum who has been deserted by her children and lives on handouts from the neighbours, about Mary who is 71, ill, hungry and a refugee from massacres in the southern oil fields. Olga also told me about Grandmother Tulish who supports herself and a small granddaughter by chopping firewood and fears that she will one day die alone in the bush and about Monica who bore 12 children of whom eleven have died of war, disease and hunger and one remains "lost" in southern Sudan. When I think about these women, I know there must be a way to help them.

\*Mary's story. A little over a year ago I met Mary at a Together for Sudan facilitated HIV/AIDS Awareness meeting in Mayo displaced area. Mary's husband had died of AIDS and she, courageously as there is intense social stigma, was not ashamed to stand up, admit that she is HTV positive and urge other women to protect themselves and their children. For her own children she asked nothing. But they were the first scholars we enrolled in the Bishop Mubarak Fund's AIDS Orphans Education Project.

\* A tale of three children. Izdihar from our Khartoum office first met Mahieldin when she saw a small apparently legless bundle scrabbling across a busy highway in Omdurman. She stopped the car because I had ask the office to find people needing free wheelchairs, a project which Together for Sudan hopes to begin next year. Intrepid woman that she is, Izdihar soon talked the local school into admitting Mahieldin without charge because he has never been able to walk. Then on a subsequent visit she discovered that his two sisters, age 7 and 10, were carry their big brother the half mile to school even though they themselves could not attend. Now all three little scholars are learning to read. But Mahieldin is still waiting for his wheelchair and so his little sisters are still carrying him to school and back.

\*Elvira and the school girls. In October Elvira, BMF Project Coordinator in our Khartoum office, visited the only girls' secondary school in the Nuba Mountains. There she found all 50 girls malnourished, anemic and chronically hungry as the school has no funding to feed them and neither do the girls' few surviving parents. Now this makes me very angry because I know (and so does Elvira though she is too polite to say so in an email) that young women in this situation often have no choice but prostitution if they wish to remain in school. It happens all the time at universities in Khartoum. But not only are these young women, age 15-18, future mothers, they are also a precious repository of the teachers and Nuba women's leaders of the next generation. I told Elvira to find a way to get monitored feeding to the girls. And now God will simply have to make our arms longer.

\*A nameless woman. I close by recalling a woman I met last year in the Nuba Mountains. Her face comes back to me again and again although I never learned her name. But I have a photograph of her. She is fairly young, a lot younger than I am, and has lost her mind, likely as a result of what she has suffered. In the photo she and I stand side by side, arms around one another, she with her head on my shoulder. She is filthy, inarticulate, glad to be hugged and smiling broadly. I'm smiling, too, even though I'm hurting because I have nothing material to give her and no way to help because I'm just about to get into a helicopter and return to Kadugli. But she is in my prayers and always in my heart as I hope she will be in yours as well.

These are a few of our Sudanese sisters and their children. For many of these women on the margin of life, even a small gesture or an effort to help can be life affirming - for us as for them. We need one another and on their behalf I thank you for listening.

1. Lillian Craig Harris, *Keeping the Faith: Travels with Sudanese Women*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999. p. 8.
2. Susan Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003. p. 102 and p. 90.
3. Rowan Williams. "The Body's Grace", in Charles Hefling, ed., *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*. Boston: Cowley Press, 1996. p. 35