



The Queen of Mbinga!
Steve Vinton, March 28, 2008

With graduation for our students only a few years away, Godfrey and Emmanuelli and I had a long talk a couple of months ago about priorities and we decided that it was time for me to get back into the classroom, to start teaching again, and to get to know those of our students who are going to be our first graduates. We've been talking with them since the very first year about how we look forward to the day when they will graduate and we'll be able to choose those who will go to this village and that village all around the country and work with us to start new schools as we work together towards that goal that one day every child in this country will get to go to school! The idea that some of them might one day build schools, that they might be teachers and principals, quite frankly sounded to a lot of them like a pretty farfetched dream back in 2005, but now it's getting closer and closer to becoming a reality, so much so that students are actually talking seriously about it.

And so Steve Vinton is back in the classroom after all these years, not just so that I can get to know them, and not just so that I can have my fun at teaching math – but really so that I can have some input into shaping the kind of people they're becoming. Some of that, of course, I can do as I'm having fun with them in class teaching them pre-calculus! But for me, my greatest opportunities lie on Thursday mornings when I get to speak to them in chapel. It's been good as I've prepared my messages each week to talk with Jeff, one of the teachers we have here from America, and to help him understand about what is called "event-speech" and how in cultures like ours here, this fits a whole lot better than the three-point sermon, the nine-part series of messages, the careful scholarly verse by verse exposition. All that has its time and its place, but here's it

different. Here we start with an event, something that has happened that is relevant to the life of the community, and we draw out of that event the relevant point in that reality of our life together here, and then we move into a similar reality in the Bible and we learn together what God would have us learn as a community of people. Understanding that this is the way things are done here is the beginning of being a preacher in this place!

That's why an Easter message in America begins with the event 2000 years ago, the Biblical text, and somehow the Word of God convicts our heart and brings new light and changes our souls. Here, though the Easter message begins with an event here and now, an event that people can understand, one that can then be interwoven with the Biblical text, and somehow the Word of God again convicts our hearts and brings new light and conviction to our souls.

But what event here in our lives can be that even upon which the Easter message can be built? That is the challenge.

In seeking it out, I saw myself truths about the Easter message that I guess I never truly fully grasped before, truths I wanted to share with Josh and Jonathan on Easter morning, truths that I look forward to sharing with all of my students later this week.

What every single student knows, indeed what everyone in the village knows, is that we've got a student here, Festo, who has a really difficult problem. There was an accident in the village this last week. A group of people were pushing a sick man on a bicycle to try to get him to the dispensary, and Festo offered to carry him on his motorcycle. The details aren't all that

important, and as everyone knows, they carry very little weight before the Law. Because you see, Festo's motorcycle was new, it wasn't yet registered, it didn't have insurance and Festo only had a learner's license. The fact that Festo had pulled off to the side of the road was also irrelevant. Because when that other motorcycle came barreling down the hill, left the road at a high speed and crashed into Festo and the old man who was sick, the old man died, Festo got injured, and all of Festo's good intentions mattered nothing before the Law. Festo, the Law says clearly, had no reason, no excuse, absolutely no justification for taking that motorcycle on the road. And so when Festo was injured and hurt and we sent him in the car and he got into town at nearly midnight, instead of ending up in the hospital to have his injuries taken care of, Festo ended up in jail. The Law after all is the Law.

But that's not the part of the story that lays the foundation for the Easter message that I shared with my boys and that I want to share with my students.

You see, the next morning when Godfrey and I found out that Festo was in jail we left just after dawn and drove into town to the police station to bail Festo out of jail – not with any money, because no amount of money was going to do that – but with my word of honor and with Godfrey's signature. Two days later it was Festo's father who came to see me and Godfrey. I have done everything that I know to do here in the village, he explained. I have met with the dead man's family, we have mourned with them for two days, my wife is cooking food at their house, I have paid the death price, we will stay with them until the end of the msiba. But I have no power to do anything in the city. I could never get my son out of jail as you have done. You made two trips into town, you got my son out of jail, you took him to two different hospitals, you have cared for him, and so now I know that you love my son and I know that we are one family.

The next day Susan, Sarah and Janelle came home from another funeral in the village. Festo was one of the many people who had gathered there. Susan said Festo was almost in tears, saying that it was too much for him to bear knowing that Godfrey and Mr. Vinton were spending all of their time at the police station and with the doctors on his behalf and he was so sorry for all of the grief and trouble that he had caused, that he could never repay. *I know now how much they love me.*

And there suddenly was the part of the Easter message that I had never fully grasped. We concentrate on the miracle of the resurrection -- as we well should! – but there could be no resurrection for Jesus if there were not first His death, and He could not have died, if there had not first and foremost been an incredible decision in the heart of God to do the unfathomable. There is no resurrection without there first being the death, and there is no death without God's decision to do the incredible. 1 John 4:9 – This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent His son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Godfrey and I have loved Festo for years now, just as God loved mankind for millenia, but it was in the act of putting ourselves out, of helping Festo in that moment when he was powerless and without hope and in trouble, that his father came to see, and Festo himself came to see, that we truly loved Festo. It was in that incredible act of Jesus coming and giving of Himself, of putting himself out, that we as human beings see most clearly the immense love that God has for us. We focus on the miracle of the resurrection, but in some sense the even greater miracle is that God could possibly love us so much that He would do that for us. I wanted Joshua and Jonathan to understand, and I want all of my students to understand, the incredible teaching in Romans 5:6-8 – You see, at just the right time, when we

were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

What has brought me back to the point of real conviction in my own heart– and what I hope and pray that somehow the Spirit of God will communicate to my students through His Word – is found in the reaction of Festo’s father and in the reaction of Festo himself. Festo’s father didn’t have to walk all the way to our house, bring us a gift of corn, and say what he said. Festo wasn’t required to blink away tears and feel anything in his soul and have those words come out of his heart. He could have just taken what we had done and treated it as a matter of course, said a polite thank you, and rejoiced in his good fortune. It wouldn’t have changed what we had done for him, he would still be out of jail and his body would still be on the mend. But somehow our relationship is different as a result of Festo’s tears and Mzee Lunyali’s corn. I must confess that leading up to Easter my thoughts were so much focused on the miracle of the resurrection that I’ve missed expressing somehow any remorse and any amazement

that God did the incredible. I’m thrilled that I’m so fortunate as to be the recipient of God’s gracious salvation. But I am left wondering if the heart of God would not be more pleased if my heart were truly broken over how much pain and trouble I had caused God, and how great His love was that caused Him to care. Festo’s tears. Mzee Lunyali’s corn. I wonder what is there in my heart that is comparable before God?

Festo sensed his helplessness from the moment they locked him up, and the night in jail only drove it home. His father would do what he could do – right here in the village -- but he knew that as an old man from the village it was useless and pointless to travel to town to say anything to the police. I somehow hope that God will use His Word to convict the hearts of my students to understand not only the immensity of their hopelessness but also the immensity of God’s love.

Josh & Jonathan, I’m sure, will get to hear a ton of three-point sermons in their life. I’m really glad that one of the real blessings Africa gives to my boys is that they get to hear – and live – the kinds of sermons we have on this continent.