

Easter 2006

With the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

A journey back in time

*A pilgrimage led by the Rt. Revd. Michael Jackson, Bishop of Clogher
and the Revd. William Taylor, Chairman of the AECA.*

So this was Ethiopia 1998 - where the 13-month year commenced in September and the day at 6.00 am. (We stayed on GMT to avoid total confusion!) This was Ethiopia, where Semitic, Asian and African traditions blend together and where the people are proud to retain their own unique Amharic script. This was Ethiopia - the home of coffee, where the berries were originally chewed by the monks of old to ward off sleep during lengthy devotions and where, today, the aroma of pounded beans roasting over a charcoal brazier mingles with the heady scent of incense and spices.

It was early on Maundy Thursday and excitement mounted as our plane hovered over Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's sprawling young capital city, surrounded by aromatic eucalyptus groves - a bustling and culturally diverse diplomatic centre, home to the African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

I was shocked to see women bent beneath back-breaking loads of firewood and young adults bearing in their body the legacy of polio and trachoma. Animals, pedestrians and traffic jostled together along the crowded streets, filled with the chatter of the 80 plus indigenous language groups and immigrants from Somalia, the Sudan and Uganda.

We were greeted by Abba Solomon, the ecumenical officer of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, who was to be our companion for the next eleven days, and headed for Holy Trinity Cathedral and the Patriarchal Liturgy and 'foot-washing' (men only - decorum substituted 'hand-washing' for women). Here we were shown some of Ethiopia's treasures: dazzling illuminated ancient goat skin manuscripts and icons.

We touched base with St Matthew's Anglican Church and were reminded that, plagued by coups, border conflicts, wide-scale drought and massive refugee problems, Ethiopia has increasingly had to rely upon external aid to survive. World Bank GNP rankings in 2002 put Ethiopia second to last in the world, with an annual income per head of only \$100 (compared to the sub-Saharan average of \$460). However, remembering that in the 1970s only 7% of the population could read and write, Ethiopia can be justly proud of its recent progress. We heard something of the impressive work being done by St Matthew's church, with its significant presence in each of the major refugee camps in the west of the country - (you can find out more on stmatthewaddis.org).

Close to the Eritrean border, the ancient northern city of Axum, capital of the Axumite Kingdom, lies at the meeting point of Africa and Asia. Early in the fourth century, Christianity became the official creed of the Axumite Kingdom - making Ethiopia one of the oldest cradles of Christendom. Ge'ez, the language into which the Bible was originally translated, emerged as the official language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church - a Church which, to this day, remains truly inculturated with a rich monastic tradition and profoundly influenced by the Jewish OT ideas and values.

Ethiopian history has it that, Menilek 1 was born to the Queen of Sheba from her union with King Solomon. As a young man, Menilek traveled to Jerusalem and returned with the fabled Ark of the Covenant taken from the Temple. According to Ethiopian belief, the Ark has remained in the ancient capital of Axum ever since. The Ark is kept in a chapel annexed to the church of St Mary of TSION in the care of a single monk, who after his appointment to the post of Guardian, never leaves the compound.

It was to the small town of Axum that we journeyed early on Good Friday morning. We flew over the parched mountainous landscape, with its deserts and lakes and the mighty Blue Nile, to join the Good Friday Liturgy with Archbishop Isaias at St Mary of TSION, the most important church in the whole of Christian Ethiopia. We joined the hundreds of *natala*-clad fasting worshipers inside the church surrounded by many more non-fasting worshipers outside, all with a quiet reverence, sitting, standing, sleeping or leaning on prayer sticks. The six hour liturgy was occasionally punctuated by cross-carrying priestly

processions beneath ornate brocade umbrellas and ended in clouds of dust as triumphant shrieking worshippers beat the ground in symbolic victory over the devil with cries of "it is finished" - an almost carnival atmosphere followed. Perhaps we were sharing in an expression of faith that is truer to its original forms and precepts than any branch of more recent European Christendom?

A casual observer will notice certain similarities between Ethiopia's two great faiths: Christianity and Islam. In many towns the cry of the muezzin, calling the faithful to prayer, five times a day, can be heard often blending with the broadcast Christian liturgy emanating from near-by churches. Inside both church and mosque, worshippers stand or sit, bare foot, on splendidly carpeted floors and frequently engage similar bodily actions in their prayer routine.

As the Kingdom of Axum eventually declined, Lalibela emerged as the next capital - the 'New Jerusalem' built by King Lalibela in the 12th Century with remarkable speed and "the help of angels". With its numerous rock-hewn and cave-hewn churches, Lalibela forms a living-sculpture to the glory of God. It stands as a testimony to the faith and vigor of the early Ethiopian Christian church - a faith which endures to this day.

It was to the remote mountain town of Lalibela that we flew for the liturgy of Holy Saturday. Livestock was much in evidence: hump-backed longhorn cattle, sheep and goats and chickens. Ethiopia has probably more livestock than any other African country, though on Holy Saturday much of it was heading reluctantly for the Easter cook pot as people joyfully walked (often bare-foot) home from market. Later that weekend smoke from innumerable cooking fires spiraled up to mingle with the gathering darkness and the air was filled with convivial conversation and laughter. No wonder, because this was a feast day (and rumour has it that, for clergy, there are some 256 fasting days in the church's calendar!). Tragically water shortage prevents the cultivation of much of the available land and vegetables do not feature much in Ethiopian diet, the staple food being *Injera*, a brown pancake-like bread which doubles up as plate and cutlery.

In Lalibela, we waited within the cool dark tomb-like walls of the Bete Maryam (House of Mary) rock-hewn church for the Easter Vigil to begin and to witness the joyous celebration of Christ's resurrection. Just being a part of that tangled seething mass of humanity- young and old - fasting, sitting, standing, dancing, sleeping, drumming and singing was all that was needed. In Ethiopia, truth is lived, not read. It was enough just to 'be there', for hours into the night, watching the carefully choreographed dance of the priests, and passing on the light from the paschal fire with our flimsy 'home-made' candles. A hasty exit through the distant doorway was not realistic - it appears that health & safety legislation has yet to reach the Tigray district of Ethiopia!

The following day some from our group mule-trekking up steep and narrow pathways high into the hills above Lalibela with its monastery buildings clinging precariously to the mountain sides. Others stayed 'home' to enjoy the clear invigorating mountain air, the profundity of flowers and the colourful bird life which parallels the diversity of the Ethiopian landscape and peoples - and there were many more of the rock-hewn and cave hewn churches to explore.

Though still places of active worship and a focus for thousands of Christians converging from the surrounding area, subsidence, water ingress and erosion have taken their toll on the rock-hewn churches. For some, protective canopies (thanks to UNICEF) have now been erected. Religion lies at the very core of Ethiopian creativity and civilisation and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is a store-house of the national culture. The nation's many treasures: crosses, vestments, illuminated manuscripts, wall paintings and dazzling icons, lie dispersed in churches and monasteries, largely uncatalogued and often stored in the most unsuitable conditions. They become objects of neglect, theft and destruction - easy targets for the unscrupulous souvenir hunter or those wanting to make a quick buck - to say nothing of damage by damp, mice and termites and constant turning of the pages of the precious illuminated manuscripts.

Our next flight took us southwards to the modern city of Bahar Dar, on the edge of Lake Tana, where we saw something of the work of the Jerusalem Children's and Community Development Organisation among people with HIV/AIDS. Impressively, the word

'dependency' does not feature in their vocabulary. They aim to enable communities to take care of their orphaned and vulnerable children and to become more self-reliant. The women are trained in bio-intensive horticulture to provide food for their families in miniscule backyard plots, using household organic waste and a minimum of water and labour input.

Tana is Ethiopia's largest lake and monastic retreats can be found on some 20 of the lake's islands. Visitors are welcomed (though in some cases, men only have access) to the island monastery churches with their sense of timelessness and permanence which the passing of years can not erase. Biblical stories, depicted in the dazzling paintings which covered every inch of monastery church wall, were vivaciously retold by our young and enthusiastic local guide. On some islands the monastery is part of a local community with its children anxious to sell small models of the papyrus boats which ply their journeys across the lake.

The decline of Lalibela was eventually followed by the emergence of Gondar, founded in the 17th C. by Emperor Fasiladas, as the political centre. The road to Gondar stretches around the edge of lake Tana and was littered with rusting tanks and trucks, reminders of recent conflict. Here we toured the castles of Emperor Fasiladas and his descendants and visited the church of Debre Berhan Selassie with its remarkable murals depicting the crucifixion of Christ, the Trinity and the story of George and the dragon and its famous painted ceiling covered by the faces of angels. Gonda remained the capital of the realm until mid-19th C. when it was finally overtaken by Addis Ababa. We bade farewell to Gonda watching the 5am Sunday dawn break over the city and listening to the Christian and Muslim calls to prayer wafting across the valley.

As we flew back to Addis, we looked down on the blue Nile, prayerfully contemplating that river's remarkable journey from Lake Tana and the wild and inaccessible regions of Ethiopia, on through the plains of the Sudan and eventually on through Egypt to the Mediterranean. Back in Addis we realised that there were vast areas to the south and east of the country which we had yet to explore and were reminded of the more recent rise of

an 'urban monasticism' which has led to a Sunday School movement for adults as well as children.

As we journeyed fast-forward to London HR and the year 2006 we reflected that perhaps one of the most attractive aspects of Ethiopia today is the way in which the drive towards modernisation harmonises with the traditional values of a rich and ancient culture. Here, one has the sense of a settled, mature community that will never lose sight of its own unique identity. A mood of continuity links past to present, and present to future, suggesting that this country will take what it needs from technology, but will not allow itself to be overwhelmed by the technological ethos - or at least not yet. An old society engaged in rediscovering and reinterpreting itself, Ethiopia has about it a tranquility and a certitude that are rare in today's world.

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*Perhaps it would be good to re-visit Ethiopia in September 2007 for their millennial celebrations? Alternatively you might like to read the insightful novel: *The Chains of Heaven - An Ethiopian Romance*, by Philip Marsden (Harper Collins).*

*This article first appeared in the house journal of **Christians Aware**, an international and inter-denominational organisation, working to develop multi-cultural understanding and friendship. Christians Aware offers varied opportunities for listening and encounter between Christians and with those of other faiths. It seeks to work for understanding, justice and peace, locally, nationally and internationally. For more information go to <http://www.christiansaware.co.uk> or email barbarabutler@christiansaware.co.uk*