

[ClarkServInSalone] Tableaux of Hope by Laurent and Joe

Going to Sierra Leone was our first experience of Sub-Saharan Africa. We were not too sure what to expect. We knew to not fully trust the media reports on Sierra Leone as they are often based on “doom and gloom”. Civil war, corruption, Aids, terrible social conditions and an economic desert were the pictures we got from the TV and press. Talking to people who used to live in Sierra Leone it was a totally different picture: incredible nature including heavenly beaches, lively and hospitable people, land of opportunities. But often these pictures were also very selective as a "golden year dream" which is the natural reaction from former ex-pats and missionaries. What would we find when going to Sierra Leone? The only reliable certainty was our friends : Janice and Peter. They know us well and managed our expectations wonderfully.

Some say that the first impression is often the right one. Well, arriving in Freetown is a mini adventure in itself. In the middle of the night, you are stunned by the heat. Then the “organised” chaos of the arrivals. Then dragging your luggage - which in our case included a large volume of muesli - to the bus across dust and sand (not good news for the wheels!). Half the bus is made of white faces who got charged for not too sure what



service. There are two ways to see it. The cynical one: "I just got screwed" or the positive one: "I am supporting the local economy". Make your choice! We made ours. After 20 minutes of a dirt road, the bus stopped at the end of the road to the beach. We were offered safety jackets and sent to the boat, two at a time, as the floating pontoon tends to go under water, if there is too much weight on it. The water taxi drives us to Freetown. 45 minutes in total darkness, with only the noise the boat engine and the “clapping” of the boat hitting the sea waves. Very pleasant, as the speed and the fresh sea air made the heat more bearable.

Arriving to Freetown's Alex's wharf (second stop as advised by Janice) we were reassured to meet the friendly faces of the Clarks. Only two hours late.

This long story is important for Joe and myself as it is our first contact with this part of the world. The heat, the hard working people, the chaos, the colourful life, the lack of infrastructure, the pride were repeated during all our experiences in Sierra Leone.



From the visit to Chimpanzee sanctuary, auntie Hawa 's clinic and training centre, the "touristic high points of Freetown (!)", the HIV literacy project, the Churches, the Krio villages, especially Bathurst and Charlotte, the street markets, the people living on the Methodist compound, leaving the bank with a plastic shopping bag full of bank notes, meeting a priest who struggles with his hierarchy because of his HIV status, all echoed these first hours.

Some other strong pictures stay with us like a human tableau:

Tableau one: The young mother coming to a literacy



course suffering from malnutrition, with a tiny baby empty eyed, hanging on her flat breast, fighting with her "a b c" is a lesson of humility and trust in the future. Why go to learn and read if one doesn't hope? Here it was a lesson of humility and courage for all of us.

Tableau two: the pride of the nurses and the management of the Methodist clinic, the training centre and the Development Department of the church- all taking pride in working for the future of their country and their neighbourhood.

Tableau three: Another strong moment was the aggression of a soldier who swore at us because we took a picture of a statue. Nothing to say we could not do it, but we should have known better. 5 minutes which felt like hours of discussion, to avoid being arrested and moving from being shouted at, to that of a friendly hand shake.

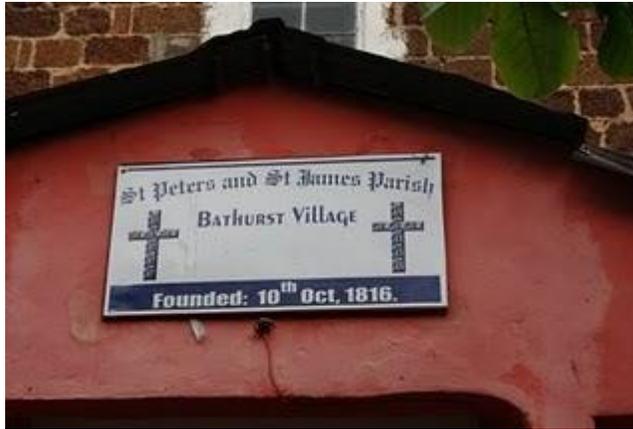


Tableau four: Another strong moment is meeting Father Prince, an Anglican minister from Bathurst who welcomed us, guided us and offered us the fruits of his garden, for nothing more than the pleasure to chat and welcome strangers in his village.

Tableau five: We should not forget the communal meals with



our friends on their veranda, enjoying the grapefruits direct from the tree, looking at vultures, owls and other birds.

Tableau six: meeting with people. Often we noticed that to get a smile is hard work. But it should



not be surprising after the volume of difficulties people have gone through. Once people know who you are and what you want the ice melts quickly. The smile of Mohammed, Adama or Amadu because we ask them for a favour or a small job to be done ... Just the smile.

Despite the past and the obvious struggle to develop a normal social and economic life, people seem to want to manage their future by themselves and avoid the trap of becoming dependent of humanitarian assistance which has destroyed many other developing countries. For us, as first-time visitors to West Africa it was a worthwhile trip we would have not made without the reassurance of the Clark's friendship and base in Freetown. It was an eye opener not on misery but on hopes, humility and courage. This trip was a cornerstone in our human and faith journeys.