

‘At the Foot of the Cross’ : thoughts from Dominic Naish

Envisage a hot, yellowish landscape, with huge blue skies above, shepherds on hillsides tending sheep or goats that nibble at shrubs growing in the dry land. This place has a history of political conflict over nationhood and sovereignty over the land, featuring foreign armies from global powers. Not Judea at the time of Christ but East Africa in the present day, specifically the Somali Region of Ethiopia.

For several years I was in the humanitarian industry and in 2016 I found myself working in this part of Ethiopia. At the time, huge numbers of Ethiopian Somali people – some estimated up to a million – were being forced from their homes and their towns by small scale armed conflict, and I was working for a humanitarian agency trying to help them.

The people who had been forced to flee were in many ways refugees, but technically to be a refugee you have to be outside your own country. When people are forced out of their homes but remain within their own borders, as in this case, they are called ‘internally displaced persons’, or IDPs.

In Somali Region the situation was bad. The IDPs had fled into highly remote areas to escape violence, many of them months ago. Many international agencies in Ethiopia were nervous of providing assistance to them for the risk of appearing to favour one ethnic group over another in a conflict that was not well understood. The IDPs that I met they told me they needed food, water, medical care, and clean clothes.

Frankly I couldn’t understand how people were surviving this long. What emerged in the course of my research was that villages throughout Somali Region were welcoming the IDPs and sharing what few resources they had. Little villages in the desert were sharing their precious stocks of food and water with these huge numbers of IDPs who had lost everything, and would continue to do so even when it meant the villagers became destitute themselves, and had to join the IDPs and seek support from others.

This was a challenging notion for me as a so-called humanitarian, with my Land Rover and my salary. More than that, I saw in the grace of the Somali villagers something of the cross. What they were doing was an act of companionship, a physical alongside-ness with the suffering bodies of the IDPs. This is quite different from performing a rescue – the Somali villagers weren’t rescuing the IDPs or ending their suffering, and Jesus didn’t rescue Jerusalem from Roman occupation, as many of his followers expected.

To me the Somali villagers were showing love, laying down their life for their friends. Somalis are, as a rule, devout Muslims, and it would be very wrong to suggest that some sort of latent Christianity was at work here. What I mean is that their act of selflessness for their neighbours, of refusing to turn their backs or avert their eyes from pain and injustice and instead sharing in it, speaks to me of God’s sharing in the darkest of the human experience. What the example of the Somali villagers and the story of the cross suggest to me is that for humans suffering can’t really be rationalised. It resists meaning. What humans can do for each other is not to try to explain it or solve it but perhaps just to demonstrate that those who suffer are not alone.