

## Easter Sunday

### “Jesus, Vincent and the Masai...”

16/4/17

**I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

The Lord is risen.

He is risen indeed!

There are a few books that stand out for me as playing a vital part of my formation as a Christian and a Priest. One of the books that played a crucial part in my formation was *Ritual Notes* by E. Lamburn. Another one was something quite special...

In my third year at Rhodes University, reading towards my Divinity degree, Prof Margaret Donaldson, a one time member of this parish, gave me a book to read under the auspices of my Ecclesiastical History Three Major. The book was a real eye opener and has proven to be one of my favourites for all time. The book is titled, *Christianity Rediscovered*, and written by Vincent J Donovan.

It tells a very real story that I feel is very apt to us all this Easter morning.

The book, which I have in my hand with me, was first published in 1978 in the Midwest of America. It rapidly sold out and is currently recognised as one of the classic works around Christian missionary writing.

The book essentially tells the true story of a Christian missionary, Vincent J Donovan and his Christian outreach to the Masai people in Africa. The book, however also asks some very pertinent questions:

Who is the Christ that I preach?

What is the unique contribution of Christianity when all the cultural accretions of Western civilisation have been pared away?

What really stood out for me in this book is how Vincent approached his ministry with the Masai. I do believe that his mission style and approach has a very strong message for us this Easter morning!

After spending a few years in the mission field with the Masai, Vincent realised that while there was value in the traditional mission approach of providing schools, hospitals, skills and vital supplies, it seemed to detract from the basic Gospel message of Jesus. Missionaries were often merely seen as the provider of “things” and that was all. Vincent decided to approach the mission field in a different manner. He decided to forgo all of the resources that he would normally provide to the mission field and only present himself and the message of Jesus.

This was very challenging for Vincent and there were many days and nights of sleeping alone in his tent outside the Masai village where he wondered if he was actually doing the right thing. Slowly he grew in faith in his new approach. He learnt how to approach the Masai and get the permission of the elders to speak to the people. To do this, he had to leave behind his Western civilisation understanding of culture and societal norms and instead embrace the values and customs of the Masai people.

Over time, as Vincent began to become more familiar with the traditions and protocol of the Masai, he realised that they were already a deeply spiritual people and he even labelled them as a sacramental people due to the fact that they were so engaged in everything they did from a symbolic point of view.

Vincent told the Masai people how he believed that that they knew about God long before he came along, and that they were a devout and very pious people in the face of God. Vincent explained that he believed that God did not love him more as a Christian, nor that God had abandoned them or forgotten about them.

Vincent also struggled. He soon realised that there were no words in the Masai language for grace, freedom, spirit or immortality.

He realised that a good approach would be to ask the Masai their opinion or understanding of a religious theme and then give his own belief of that idea. Vincent was shocked when a young Masai man stood up and said, “If I ever run into God, I will put a spear through him.” This was due to the young man’s experience of pain and suffering with the death of children and loss of cattle.

The Masai believed in one God, *Engai*. This God can be male or female. When he is kind, they call him the black God. When he is angry, they call him the red God. Sometimes they call him rain, as this is a pleasing manifestation of God. Vincent explained how in history the Jewish people also called their God by many names, including fire, breeze and God of the mountain. The Masai struggled with the idea that we generally see God as male.

Vincent explained Christianity by telling the following story about another great people that lived long ago:

“They are the Hebrew tribe, the Jews, the Israelis. They are famous the world over for having preserved in the world the knowledge of the one, true God. But it was not always easy for them... Jesus was of the family of David. He lived long ago, before the first known age group of the Masai...”

Vincent soon realised that he would have to explain and teach crucial concepts like salvation if he was to remain true to the Gospel of Jesus.

One day Vincent found a man who was always on the outskirts of the village and he asked the man if his people can bring forgiveness of sin. It turned out that this man had committed a great sin against the taboos of the Masai tribe. The sin, in the eyes of the Masai was unforgivable. He was destined to remain outcast for the rest of his life. The Masai tradition regarding sin, if it was at all able to be forgiven, was to use spittle as a sign of forgiveness, as this was a very sacred element of a living and breathing human. So, for example, if a son sinned against his father, after a time, the community would ask the father to forgive the outcast son. The father would then pray to their God for spittle and if it was given to him, the son would ask his father for forgiveness and the father would then spit on him. He was then forgiven and there would be great rejoicing.

Another example of forgiveness that Vincent was able to learn about the Masai was if one family had offended another. In this case the two families would meet in the centre of the village and exchange food. This was seen as holy food. Vincent realised that it would be easy to draw parallels with Christianity.

Vincent also began to understand how the Masai understand faith. One day a wise old Masai man explained to Vincent that for a man to really believe is like

a lion going after its prey. “His nose and eyes pick up the prey. His legs give him the speed to catch it. All the power of his body is involved in the terrible death leap and single blow to its neck with the front paw, the blow that actually kills. And as the animal goes down the lion envelops it in its arms and makes it part of himself. This is the way a lion kills. This is the way a man believes. This is what faith is.”

Similarly, Vincent realised that it would be easy to explain the concept of baptism and water. Life-giving water was sacred to the Masai long before the Christian missionaries arrived. Their word for God also means rain. Vincent was experienced enough to realise that liturgy is part of a culture and that he had done his part by sharing the Gospel. How the Masai people went about doing their baptisms was their choice. Vincent noted how the Masai people brought in their own symbols, like passing on the burning embers from one to another, all lit from the same fire. The anointing with sheep fat at various life stages was the norm (warrior hood/motherhood/elder hood etc) so this was also naturally adopted during the baptism ritual.

Teaching and sharing the Eucharist with the Masai people had its own challenges. Traditionally, Masai men never ate with Masai women. Vincent realised that here was an opportunity for unity amongst the sexes. Vincent writes, “They did accept it, but it was surely a traumatic moment for them, as individuals and as a people, that first time when I blessed the cup, or gourd in this case, and passed it on to the woman sitting closest to me, told her to drink from it, and then pass it on to the man sitting next to her. I don’t remember any other pastoral experience in which the sign of unity was so real for me.”

Vincent also learnt the Masai tradition of scooping up a handful of grass before entering a village. He would then present it to the first elders who greeted him. Grass was a sacred sign amongst the Masai, like spittle. Since their cattle lived off grass, it was a vital and holy sign to them, a sign of peace, happiness and well-being. So Vincent learnt to pass on a piece of grass with the words, “the peace of Christ.”

Many of you may be wondering why I am sharing the experiences of Vincent with the Masai with you this Easter morning.

My prayer for you this Easter morning as the Christian Church celebrates our Risen Lord Jesus, is that in the same way that Masai came to know Christ from within their culture, may Jesus be awoken in your spirit afresh too. We have a message to learn from Vincent and his work with the Masai. We too, just like the Masai, are by nature a sacramental people. Our souls yearn for the rain, the grass and peace. Jesus fulfils all of this in our lives. He is the rain. He is the grass. He is the peace. He is the Son of God who died for our sins and rose again to ensure that we all enjoy the privilege of everlasting life, everyone, including the Masai. The kerugma of the Gospel is all around us. We only have to look at the beauty of nature, the depth of the sacraments and love to be found within our Christian communities to realise that we all worship a loving God, full of forgiveness and grace.

I would like to close off this message this morning by sharing a creed written by and for the Masai people.

***An African Creed:***

***We believe in one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word, the bible, that he would save the world and all the nations and tribes.***

***We believe that God, made good his promise, by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in a grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.***

***We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptised in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love and share the bread together in love, to announce the good***

***news to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive.  
He lives. This we believe.***

***Amen.***

The Lord is risen.

He is risen indeed.

May God bless you this Easter Sunday as you rediscover His promises anew in the days that lie ahead.

Amen.