

May 23, 2013

Sunday morning we began our work in Mponela(the “m” is the sound we make when something is good and we say “mmmmm” like Campbell’s soup is “mmm mmm good!”). So it is “mmmm” “ponela.” Many Chichewa words begin with n or m. A chicken is an nkuku(nnn koo-koou) a cow is a ngombe(nn-gnome-bay) a goat is mbuzi(mmm-boo-zee). Sometimes you can get your tongue wrapped around your teeth.

One of the elders came at about 7:30 to inform us that services would start at 8:30. In another classic example of “Malawi time,” we listening for sounds of singing to tell us the people had arrived. At 8:50 we walked to the building thinking we might be late, but the building was completely empty. Finally at 8:55 we started hearing singing and at 9:00 we walked over to begin our worship with them.

The church in Mponela is very different from what it was in 1999 when I first came to Malawi. Then it had two fine older godly men who both preached and were great examples for the church. After their death, a new generation has come into the leadership, and things are becoming very sad. I began preaching to only 40 brethren. A young lady came forward to be baptized and a young man to repent of forsaking the assembly. At that time there were about 100 in attendance. 45 minutes later when the Lord’s Supper was served, there were over 200.

We were scheduled to leave for Dowa East at 4:00, so we would arrive before sunset, but they did not arrive until 6:45. We then went into Lilongwe to pick up three cases of Bibles and did not arrive at the village until about 10:00. After a quick meal we prepared to sleep. Although I have tried to sleep on a bamboo mat, the days of actually falling asleep on a hard surface and not tossing and turning all night have passed me by. I now bring an air mattress so I actually sleep when I am on the floor.

The day generally begins with a knock and the door and the announcement that “water is ready.” This means a plastic tub of water anywhere from lukewarm to scalding has been placed on the floor of the wash house which in the case of the first two villages were made of brick and grass(see pictures). I forget how stiff and sore I get having to balance on the rocks(placed so you don’t stand in mud) while squatting down, throwing water on myself, soaping up and rinsing off. It works great in feeling clean, but is a far different experience than taking a shower.

The homes we stayed in(see pictures) are typical village houses with brick covered in mud and a grass roof. There is a small sitting room where a bamboo mat is placed and we sleep on that floor. We pack up what we sleep on our sleeping on the mat then sit on the floor to eat our food. In the morning we have “tea,” although they all enjoy “American coffee” with me as I bring an instant coffee. We either eat a few pieces of white bread or a roll made in the villages called a scone. For lunch/dinner it is usually either rice or ground corn, fried eggs(like an omelet), some type of boiled greens, and a “soup” made of friend tomatoes and cooking oil.

The Bibles have been purchased by many brethren. One of the elders announced publicly today that he wanted the brethren in America to know how grateful they were for this wonderful opportunity to purchase Bibles at a price they could afford. The idea has worked just as it did last year. Many brethren who would otherwise not have been able to purchase Bibles now own one. It is such a pleasure to watch them turning the pages to read the verses in their own Bibles. I truly believe this will have a very positive impact on their spiritual growth since they can now take them home and continue to study. More than four hundred are already in their hands.

The reputation for my lesson on the family and the one about worship have gone far and wide. Churches where I teach are requesting them, truly enjoying, them and promising to make changes in their life. Since we have many new readers this year, I will repeat some of the things I said last year about the Malawi family.

The plight of the women in Malawi is grievous. They arise long before day to travel to the nearest pump or well(no running water) and bring the water needed for bathing, washing dishes and making food for the day. I often see them carrying a 5 gallon bucket(40 pounds) on their heads. Many are also carrying a child wrapped in a cloth around her back. They must also gather the wood to heat the water(no electricity). They then cook the meal(no quick fix foods) and do whatever is necessary to get the children ready for the day. After breakfast various tasks must be done. They wash the clothes by hand, clean the concrete floors with a small mop or

maybe a cloth. They pound out the maize(hardened corn), kill the chicken and prepare it(if they have a chicken), find the greens or tomatoes from the garden and prepare for lunch and/or the evening meal. When the rainy season comes they are given the additional responsibility of working in field. They use a piece of wood about three feet long cut from the fork of a branch that creates a large round head, then drill a small hole and attach a small hoe. Then for hours they bend over and hoe furrows for maize, sweet or Irish potatoes, ground nuts(peanuts), turnip greens, tomatoes and other vegetables. These furrows are often a hundred feet or more in length and often takes several days or weeks to complete.

Although with 80% unemployment, the Malawi husband only works to grow the crops, the wife is still expected to join in and often works as hard or harder than he does. After the harvest, the husband does little or nothing for nine months. The women are fed up with this system and show little respect toward their lazy and domineering husbands. This leads to husbands taking a second wife(polygamy), divorce or adultery. Added to this are the traditions handed down from their ancestors. There is no chivalry and there are no gentlemen. The strong domineer the weak so the woman is on her own. If there is only one blanket or bed, not enough food or any other area where a sacrifice is made, it is the woman who is expected to sacrifice with no complaint and even forced to do so if she objects.

So this is the problem I am using the Scriptures to resolve. I first discuss the family as the foundation for the school, village and church. Many problems can be solved if the family is strong. The key to the lesson is the difference between being holy and consecrated to God by doing his will in the family and just following the traditions of our ancestors(I Pet 1:13-21).

Once this distinction is made I take them to Eph 5:22-33 and show that the holy husband/wife relationship is mirrored by Christ and his church. Jesus is the husband who loved and sacrificed himself for the church. I then ask the men if the church carried the cross for Christ or if Christ as the husband did the hard work for the church. The men generally laugh nervously while the women begin to show great interest. I list all the things that women do each day and I ask what they men do. I ask them if Jesus would all his church to be cold or hungry or would he sacrifice so she would have all she needs. In I Pet 3:7 I show the husband that the wife is to be treated like a weaker vessel. I illustrate it with the hoe they throw down after hard day's work and the glass coke bottle(yes they still have deposit bottles I hadn't seen since the sixties), which they carefully set down so it won't break. They have few valuables and eat from metal bowls with their fingers and drink from cheap plastic cups. So I have sometimes have to search diligently for some way to illustrate it to them. After telling them their prayers will be cut off if they don't treat their wives in the same holy manner Jesus did the church they seem to be in a state of amazement.

It is obvious why the women show little respect for such husbands, so I created an illustration from the colonial days. Before the revolution in the 1960's Malawi was a British colony. At that time the people felt they were oppressed by the British. The men hated it and were happy to be free from this perceived bondage. Yet they still oppress their wives as they had been treated then. Because the men are the oppressors they are the only ones with the power to change this oppressive system. At this point the women are overjoyed and the men are very sober. I close by telling both the husband and wife to go home, repent to each other and talk about these things. The husband should offer to help his wives with some of these tasks and the wives should seek to be more submissive and respectful.

I am leaving for Dowa west in about two hours. I will in the villages for two weeks so it may be that long before I can send another report. Thanks for your prayers, your interest, and your help in bringing Bibles to the brethren here in Malawi.

Your brother and fellow worker,

*Alan*