Cambodia – How you can help

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Readings: Acts 8:14-25, Rev. 11:15-19

There was a time in the 9th century when the Khmer Empire of which Cambodia was a part, was the most powerful and wealthy empire in South East Asia. Its capital was Angkor, which is now the venue for thousands of tourists every year who come to visit the many temples that are there, and in particular Angkor Wat, the national icon of Cambodia. Indeed in 2009 more than 804,000 people (0.8 billion) visited the central temple complex.

Despite this history, Cambodia today is one of the poorest countries in the world. How such a wealthy empire could become so poor is one of the tragedies of history.

In 2006, 39% of the Cambodian population were living below the Poverty Line as defined by The World Bank. The definition of the Poverty Line used, uses a method of translating the food intake into a monetary value to achieve a level of 2,100 Kcal/person/day. Using this method, the food poverty line was estimated at US$ 0.45 per person, per day in Phnom Penh, (slightly less in other urban areas) and just US$ 0.35 in rural areas (NIS, 2006).

So 39% of Cambodian people live on less than 35cents per day if they live in rural areas and 85% of the population of about 15 million do live in rural areas.

The rural population faces a number of other problems, including lack of secure land tenure, remoteness from markets and services, lack of productive assets, low levels of education, and high dependency ratios.

There is no social security system in Cambodia and medical care is extremely expensive. As a result, most Cambodian people do not have access to good medical care. In 2009 it was reported that 40% of Cambodian people do not have access to potable water.

Denghi Fever, Malaria and Tuberculosis kill thousands of Cambodians every year.

These terrible facts are largely the result of Cambodia’s recent history. During the Vietnam War, Cambodia remained neutral until the very end, yet during that war, the USA secretly dropped more bombs on the Ho Chi Minh trail through Cambodia, than were dropped on all countries for the whole of the Second World War.

Once the war in Vietnam was finally ended, Pol Pot – a Cambodian national - marched into Phnom Penh with his army of Khmer Rouge soldiers, the majority of whom were mere teenagers, with the intent of returning the country to an agrarian state. The local people literally danced in the street as they cheered him, believing that it was he who had finally brought them peace. Little did they know that Pol Pot was about to conduct
national genocide which resulted in the death of up to a third of the population either by execution, starvation or illness. Although he was only officially in power from 1975 to 1978, his reign of terror continued via guerrilla activity until his death in 1998 – just 13 years ago.

Pol Pot systematically killed all the educated people of Cambodia – doctors, teachers, university professors, lawyers. The elderly and the very young were most vulnerable and huge numbers of them died. What infrastructure was in place was removed.

Anyone you meet today in Cambodia over the age of 30 will bear terrible memories of parents and siblings who died because of the Pol Pot regime. Many of the people still living in Cambodia witnessed things that are so terrible, so dehumanising, that I am not prepared to recount them to you.

In addition, millions of landmines were planted throughout the country by the Khmer Rouge and other soldiers. Although today, most have been cleared, the devastation they left is evident everywhere as you come across maimed people in both the cities and countryside who accidently stood on or touched a landmine.

Clearly, many great wrongs have been committed to the Cambodian people in their recent history - wrongs that can only be described as the result of evil actions by men and women who lived under an evil domain.

A deep theological question faces us here. How is it that men and women made in the image of a loving God can do such things to fellow humans? What drives people to involve themselves with such evil?

The question of course does not only relate to Cambodia. We could look to Nazi Germany, Stalin’s purge of USSR, Mao Tse Tung’s extermination of an estimated 50 – 75 million Chinese in the 20th century. More recently we only have to look at the atrocities in Libya in just the past few weeks where Libyan soldiers have reportedly been ordered by Colonel Gaddafi to gang rape women from amongst those who do not support his regime.

It would be extremely hard for anyone living in the midst of such terror to acknowledge the beauty of life, the affirmation of that which is good and the joy of living in harmony and peace. Where is hope in the face of such hopelessness?

One would not blame a person living in such terrible conditions to lose heart and believe that the God of Love, if he exists, has abandoned them, and of course many do lose heart. Yet this is not the end of the story.

Today is the sixth Sunday of Easter. As Christians you and I rejoice in a risen saviour who came to conquer death and to overcome the powers of evil. By faith we believe that He has conquered that which leads to such evil, yet clearly evil still exists in the world.

The book of Revelation, part of which we read as our second lesson, was written at a time when the Christian church was suffering in a focussed way at the hand of
persecutors. Time does not allow us to explore the whole of the book, which is sadly often very misunderstood. There are many both within and outside Christendom who do not recognise its genre and try to force it into a genre to which it does not belong.

Most scholars agree that Revelation is apocalyptic writing, although perhaps not in the absolute and strictest sense of the meaning of that word. Yet nevertheless there is much in it to justify such a classification. It abounds in symbolism, much of which is difficult to interpret. It is, if you like, full of picture language where words cannot always be taken at their literal meaning. To do so ties you up in knots. How does one literally interpret the idea of a rainbow like an emerald? Yet looking through an apocalyptic lens, such an expression is full of meaning. Like all apocalypses, it purports to be a revelation from a celestial personage – in this instance Christ himself.

It is written in the belief that what is revealed gives the expectation of the setting up of God’s kingdom when all things are made new. Here the book of Revelation differs from other apocalypses in that it is not totally pessimistic. The current age is not seen to be totally hopeless and totally dominated by evil. Although evil is seen to still be active for a time, the writer sees history as the place where God has brought about redemption. A new heaven and a new earth are seen and God and people live together in total harmony in much the way they were seen to live together in the Genesis accounts of the Garden of Eden.

Evil is finally dealt with.

The message of Revelation is a wonderful message. It recognises the battle between the powers of good and the powers of evil but its underlying message is that the victory of evil over good has been won. Christ, the crucified Lamb of God has done what no one else could do.

And so, in tonight’s reading we heard that in this heavenly vision, as the seventh trumpet is played there were loud voices in heaven, saying:

\[\text{“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.”}\]

Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God, singing,

\[\text{“We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.”}\]

What a picture! This is wonderful news for the people of Cambodia, the people of Libya and all those people of the world who have suffered at the hands of evil men and women.

\[1 \text{ Revelation 11: 15b - 17}\]
God has not forgotten them. The Lamb who shares in their suffering, died on the cross and rose again, to bring redemption and salvation for all. Ultimately God will put right the terrible wrongs that have been done by the wrath of the nations.

But what should be our response now – today as we long for the Day of Lord to come?

What can you or I do to help?

Certainly we should pray for peace. Certainly we should urge our governments to bring pressure on those who do evil, to cease to do so. Certainly we should live as Christ’s own people bringing his life and light into the dark places of the world.

The same Christ who lived on earth as God and Man and who died and rose triumphantly on that first Easter, also told his disciples that whenever we act to put right the wrongs we see around us, we do it for Him.

Jesus said:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory … All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, … 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you (like this)?’ 40 And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.’” 2

Friends, in November this year, a group of our residential college students will be travelling to Cambodia to work amongst the poorest of the poor there, amongst those who have experienced terrible wrongs. In doing so, they will be adding their support to the many others who have been sharing in the task of putting right the wrongs of the recent past. They will be teaching English to some orphans – a wonderful gift because truly in Cambodia, English is the language that opens doors to employment and opportunities. Through a totally Khmer NGO called Tabitha Cambodia, they will also be assisting a local community to build ten houses in a village, for folk who have absolutely nothing and whose current “home” is no more than a lean-to made from bamboo and banana leaves. These folk live with no electricity, no running water, no sanitation, no furniture and little more than the clothes on their back. Yet through Tabitha they are learning micro-economics and how they can better their standard and quality of living.

Roslyn and I have been working with Tabitha in Cambodia since 2005. We know that the work of our Res. College students in Cambodia will be life changing, life affirming and life-giving to the folk for whom they will be building.

In order for them to do their task, they need our help. Simply, they need $17,000 for the educational and building supplies and to pay local contractors to assist with the construction of the frame of the houses.

Can you help? Some of you may be in a position to give enough money for a whole house ($1500). If you are, can I urge you to do so? Others may be in a position to give a smaller amount. Any amount, no matter how small will help in the overall task, and again, if you are able to help, I urge you to do so. Some may not be in a position to give money, but hopefully all of you will be able to share through prayer and the support of goodwill.

Can I urge you all to consider the need carefully? Your assistance will make you partners in the task of the life-affirming work of the kingdom of God as with the writer of the book of Revelation we look forward to that day when all things are made new.