

Singapore Postscript I

Colleagues, We've been back home for six days. Jet-lag's almost gone. Seems longer this time coping with the eleven-time-zones shift from Singapore to St. Louis. We must be getting old.

Re-entry to the United States is a jolt—even for life-long citizens like Marie and me, now seventy-somethings, and after only 4 months away. It's not just the politics. E.g., we'd forgotten how fat people look (four months ago we marveled at how skinny Asians were). We'd forgotten the all-pervasive addiction to trivia in American culture. Not just junk food, but junk offered—and devoured—that we may have “the American way of life” and have it to the FULL. Hundreds of years ago Pascal (1623-1662) saw trivia-addiction as a primal symptom of original sin. Unable to cope with death, or with God, “chasing the ball and the hare we waste our substance.” And we haven't yet turned on the TV.

But I digress. This is a postscript to Singapore.

There have been three postscripty weeks since our 3-month gig with the Lutherans in Singapore concluded at the end of May. During those 3 weeks we took three trips—each one at the invitation of former students who are hustling the non-trivial Gospel in tough contexts. [Which is not to say that America isn't also a tough, very tough, mission field. Where Christians, surfeited with trivialized Gospels, are even harder to crack open with the cross of the crucified and risen Messiah.]

First one was the state of Manipur in far northeast India (“only” 2300 miles one-way from S'pore) where Roel and Shangthar Moyol, husband and wife, manage a mission center among tribal peoples in that corner of India right up against the border of Myanmar (old Burma). To get there we had a full-day layover in

Kolkata (old Calcutta). Our contact there, Richard Chiu (Chinese pastor trained in Singapore in a Chinese congregation in this umpteen million Indian megalopolis—things do get curiouser and curiouser), took us to Mother Teresa's place. The sisters showed us around. Kids in the orphanage glombed onto us old grandma and grandpa. We stood at Teresa's tomb. We sat on the floor with the novices for evening prayer.

Next day we flew to Imphal, the capital of Manipur state. Since there's armed insurgency in Manipur state, tourists need special permits in addition to Indian visas to get out of the plane in Imphal. Roel had gotten them for us, but, he said as we met him, "It's only for the city of Imphal, and we need to take you tomorrow out to Khukthar, our mission-station village 40 kilometers away, for the big celebration." Celebration, we asked? "Yes, both for your visit to us and for your speech, Ed, at the graduation ceremony of the 22 graduates in our 'Leadership and Church Management Training' program." I gulped, but it was tomorrow so I did have a few hours to prepare. And we wondered about the sticky wicket of travel to a destination outside the limits of our permit. "Not to worry," Roel said.

Somehow he "fixed" something—or maybe he didn't, since he never told us, and we did roll up the car windows every time we passed a government military installation on the way to Khukthar. Anyhow we got there. And when we did, you'd think we were Mother Teresa—or maybe the pope! Our names in a huge banner across the front of the village church at the top of the hill. Church packed, doors and windows open for people sitting around outside, some under an old parachute stretched overhead to give shade. Lots of dignitaries (church and state) on the dais. Additional VIPs in the congregation. The 22 grads—men and women—front and center. Two children's groups from the mission station doing special songs (all in English). Many speeches before and after mine in more than one local dialect. Prayers

now and again. And after the benediction, yet another “prayer for light refreshment,” which we all then enjoyed.

My input – since leadership was the topic – amounted to a Crossings-style walk through Matthew 20 and the “leadership” scandal Jesus commends to his disciples there. Leadership as authority “over” others as the Gentiles do? “It shall not be so among you.” Instead, he says, it’s authority “under,” the sort of authority he exercises, not being served, but serving, and finally “giving his life a ransom for all.” My visual aids were two hastily scissored-and-pasted equilateral triangles (stiff paper)–one with point up and the leader at that point for authority-over, “being served” by the underlings. The other with the leader at point down for Jesus’s upside-down authority–and ours as well who follow him. People are “up over,” leaders “down under,” serving not being served. And yes, you could get crucified. There’s a precedent for that. But following this leadership style, we’re following Him. And the end of that story is upbeat. So go for it, you soon-to-be-diplomed church leaders.

My words were interpreted into the local dialect, so I had to be succinct. So my 30 minutes were really 15. A challenge for a rambling old prof. But pauses between sentences while the interpreter speaks does give you time to think before you speak the next sentence–a wise rule to follow even when not being interpreted.

Gifts were presented during the ceremony and afterwards as well. We had brought one ourselves, an electronic keyboard that Roel had asked for “if possible.” The village has electricity, but nothing for leading congregational worship. Back in Kolkata Richard had found a music shop, so we bought a Yamaha and took it as hand luggage to Imphal. Our gift was dedicated in the graduation service.

More show and tell around Khukthar afterwards. There are only 14 families in the village. All Christian. We visited the child care center for 17 homeless kids, the school for local children—these constituted the two singing groups at the ceremony. The training center for evangelists and leaders. The mission complex—just one big house—has a day room and dormitory room for the 17 kids, the Moyols' one room home, Roel's parents' one room, the community kitchen outside for Moyols and orphans, the squat toilets (outside of course), the water-supplying stream down the hill, a couple of pigs cooped up, and other sheds roundabout for storage. They do have a phone and a motorbike for transport.

They rented a car and driver to get us there and back from Imphal. Driver's name was Alexander, to which Roel regularly added "the Great." We soon learned how appropriate that honorific was as he navigated the omnipresent potholes through cattle, rickshaws, trucks, people-people-people, all claiming the rickety road as their own with little regard for two-way traffic protocols.

Back in Imphal for the next two days Roel had us working with Christians there. Friday was a "fellowship" with high school and college students. My assignment: Keeping the Faith in the Modern World. That modern world is all there in, with, and under the lineaments of the old ways that Marie kept recording on her digital camera. It was two days before Pentecost. Roel told me that nobody would note that in the basically Baptist ethos of local church life. Even so, I told 'em, and then did diagnosis and prognosis on the Winds of modernity—where are they blowing you these days?—and the wind who is the Spirit of the Risen Christ, that Holy & Healing Spirit. Common denominator of the other winds: they blow you away from Christ and blow you to curve into your own self. Au contraire the Holy "Gust," as dear Doc Caemmerer liked to call her. Philippians 2 got linked to

Acts 2, with the closure that the Gospel's wind is an offer, not an arm-twister, to live from the energy "blowing in This Wind." The dozen-plus students were "educated," so we operated in English.

Next day, day before we left, brought an early morning session outside somebody's house in the shade with 20 folks before they went off to work—such as a customs officer, bank employee, medical person, univ. student, staff nurse, water supply officer, architect, social worker, irrigation project manager. Roel asked for "Word of God and Daily Work." I worked through the paradigm with them of God's double agenda Left and Right hands, and Christians as God's operatives "dedicating their lives to the Care and Redemption of all that you, God, have made." At the end before they went off to work came the required "response speech" by the man hosting us. We cried listening to his Holy Gusted gratitude and blessing.

Overpowering were so many encounters we had in Manipur. We still haven't "processed" it. We many never succeed in doing so.

We flew out the next afternoon after a few hours of being just tourists—Imphal to Kolkata to Bangkok to Singapore—which took all through the night till noon on Pentecost. So we missed church. We did, however, have a semi-secular equivalent at Singapore Symphony Hall that evening: Mahler's 8th "Symphony of a Thousand," with wall-to-wall, and floor-to-balcony performers, blending medieval Latin liturgy with Goethe's epilogue to Faust. That's a theological crossing!

How did the Manipur connection come to pass? you ask. Two-plus years ago, as some of you may remember, I was doing ThTh postings from New Haven, Connecticut while teaching at the Overseas Ministries Study Center. Roel and Shangthar were our neighbors and my students at OMSC. At term's end before they and

we went back home, they came to us and presented their “Manipur Project.” We got hooked. So for the past two fiscal years we’ve been hustling funds to help them do what we witnessed during our time with them three weeks ago. We currently have 25 state-side partners for the project. The annual tab is US\$15K—for orphanage, school, evangelist and leadership training, church planting, social work—and for these past years just that much has come in. Staff salaries in Khukthar are third-world. Roel is the highest paid. He gets \$2 per day.

We walked/talked our way through next year’s budget with the Moyols and committed ourselves to keep on keeping on with support efforts so they can do likewise.

We’re still too close to know what all these four months have done to us. It may be that others of you here at home will reveal that to us.

Back to trivia-addiction. Manipuri Christians are not automatically children of the light. They have their Old Adams and Old Eves spooking around inside too. But many of the new siblings-in-the-faith we now have there, surviving with so little and oppressed by the Hindu majority, live from Christ’s costly grace. We witnessed faith that was the full opposite of trivial. And they are out evangelizing the neighborhoods—including their oppressors. One former Hindu recited for us his faith journey. We were blown away by his account of the “Holy Gust” in his life story. Though we missed Pentecost Sunday service, we had plenty of Pentecost in Manipur.

Next time our five days in Hanoi, Vietnam and our five days in Yangon, Myanmar (old Rangoon, Burma)—also with former students.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

