

The other day I discovered that I am actually an Alien



The other day I discovered that I am actually an Alien. I know that some of you will not be surprised to hear this news. I was however surprised to learn that in the bible the term has nothing to do with Sigourney Weaver. When reading Exodus 18 I found that the use of this term in Scripture refers to those, like me, who 'live in a foreign land.' I may be wrong, I often am, but I think I may well be the only white man in the village. Everywhere I go people remind me of this by shouting "WHITE MAN." There is no malice in this. They are simply quite shocked to see me – you would be if an alien walked past. You can't go out without people noticing - unless you go out at night (which isn't all that advisable). I have no idea why but at first I felt quite vulnerable being the only person of a particular skin colour in the area. It is an interesting feeling. I first experienced it in Tanzania. After some time I kind of got used to it - but it doesn't go away completely. Somehow you know that you just stick out. As a result of these experiences I think I now empathise with one of my British friends of African descent who tells me that he carries his passport with him at all times - in case of any Wahala (trouble). I really can't tell you how I would feel if a bus went past with a poster saying "IN THE CAMEROONS ILLEGALLY" I'm pretty sure I would cry. I thank God that while I might be the only white man here I don't experience anything like that.

You would have thought by now I wouldn't even notice these things, but for some reason this feeling never goes away completely. Over the summer I attended a conference on the subject of modern day slavery. Though the conference was held in Accra, Ghana on the final day the participants went to Elmina slave Castle. Elmina is a two hour journey from Accra and the bus the conference hired was too small. Though I got on first I noticed that one passenger who boarded last didn't get a seat so I stood up for them to take mine.

Although I've been to the Castle before I didn't really comprehend the wickedness of it all. The majority of the people at the conference were African-Americans and were understandably deeply angered by what they saw and heard about the castle. The inhumanity of the British and other European powers at that time is beyond belief. The cells in the castle where people were incarcerated

are so dark. People were jammed into them for months on end - only let out if the soldiers wanted to abuse them. There were no toilets. No one cleaned the cells. The heat, the smell, the very horror of what they must have endured is so utterly terrible. When the slave ships came to take the people away they were confined even closer together - in order to maximize the profits of the slave traders. Shackled side by side underneath the deck of the ship almost half of the people taken across the sea died. They could remain dead for several days before being removed. For me the most harrowing thing is that women who had been raped would give birth to babies while shackled to dead people.

As our group heard these terrible facts inside the dungeon of that diabolical castle several people were overwhelmed; so much so that they could not contain it. One person fainted. As the only white European present I felt so deeply guilty. You may think it strange to hear that I felt guilty at this moment. I wasn't alive when these things happened. I've married a Ghanaian woman. I am vehemently opposed to xenophobia and racism. I get really angry when I witness it. I've had altercations with immigration removal officials. Nevertheless, when I saw these descendants of people enslaved weeping for what their ancestors had been through in that cell and what they themselves suffer today as a result of racism I felt profoundly guilty. Much of the discrimination that modern Americans endure today can be traced to what my European ancestors started in the darkness of Elmina Castle. ("We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now." Martin Luther King Jr.)

I was also very frightened by the pain my brothers and sisters felt. I had heard of a violent reaction that occurred in similar circumstances whereby a European was severely beaten for coming to the castle. As the people cried I wanted to disappear. If I could have removed my skin, if I could have become invisible, I would have done it. As I shuffled backwards into the corner of the room (to hide) a woman embraced me and said "Thankyou for coming today. You are part of our family." I wept. As we slowly left the cell I recognised who it was - the lady who took my seat on the bus. ("People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other." Martin Luther King Jr.)

Though I know there is no way anyone can undo what happened I do believe we must be vigilant concerning the enduring consequences of it. Though the slave trade was officially abolished. Though Apartheid has officially ended. The consequences of these things continue to place people in captivity. The vast inequalities in wealth, land ownership, and where ones citizenship allows one to travel continues to incarcerate people in poverty. Many more are trapped in poverty because their passport dictates where they are unable to go without a visa. After generating vast amounts of wealth from its colonial empire Britain prevents the descendants of the people it exploited from accessing the fruits of that wealth through excessive immigration policies and inhuman visa regulations. We should be careful. Even if we have forgotten where the wealth (these immigration policies are designed to protect) came from, God has a memory. We must challenge xenophobia, racism and ignorance. ("We must learn that passively to accept an unjust system is to cooperate with that system, and thereby to become a participant in its evil." Martin Luther King Jr). On the way back to Accra I tried to thank the

lady who embraced me in the cell. I wanted to explain to her how, in that moment, all my fears evaporated. Most of all I wanted to thank her for accepting me when I couldn't accept myself. As I looked for her on the bus I couldn't find her anywhere.

Please pray for me, that I can live up to the grand exhortations above. Hypocrisy is so very easy - and immensely comfortable. Being a person of principle. Well. Its costly isn't it. "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land." Martin Luther King Jr. (Died aged 39)

Rev. Andrew Cunningham