

**Reflections from Africa**  
**On Death and Dying – An African Story**  
**20.09.07**

Just yesterday I attended a *Zambian Funeral*. Integrating into *Zambian life* includes first hand experience with the reality of the high death rate here, particularly among the young.

Agatha was a beautiful, young woman who stayed with her aunt Theresa in one of the compounds here. Theresa was instrumental in the organization of the Kitwe “Women’s Arise! Conference” earlier this year. Having visited Theresa at her home on occasion and having visited Theresa’s church, I had gotten to know Theresa as a lovely person and a very committed Christian.

Agatha, aged 24, had experienced a lot of sorrow in life and was struggling to cope. Agatha had previously lost both parents and so Theresa had taken her into her home. Agatha had married at a young age, had borne two children but had then been divorced by her husband. The two children were now being raised by Agatha’s previous parents-in-law. Agatha had contracted HIV but was struggling to accept this reality. In her denial, she didn’t seek medical help and therefore didn’t access the medications that could have boosted her immune system. Agatha was living in perpetual fear of death and finally died of meningitis suddenly earlier this week. I visited twice with Agatha in hospital leading up to her death to offer prayer and support with her pastor.

For Theresa, who has opened her home to many of her relatives and a number of orphans, this was another sorrow upon sorrow. The death of her aunt occurred in her home a couple of months ago. Agatha’s mother (Theresa’s older sister) died very suddenly at the same time that Theresa’s husband announced their divorce. He himself died shortly after the divorce. Previous to these deaths, Theresa had already buried many of her other siblings who had died before their time. The death of Agatha fell heavily on Theresa in the wake of these other family deaths and her faith was being tested.

I had already mentioned that I would attend the funeral which led to me being asked to photograph the funeral. This is common here as many family members who are unable to travel long distances to go to funerals are eventually able to view videos and photographs of these ceremonies later. Pushing my initial awkwardness aside, I fulfilled this request and it was easier than what I had imagined because it is a normal part of a *Zambian funeral*. But it’s never easy to bury a young person.

Like most funerals here, this funeral was unashamedly Christian as Jesus was freely and openly acknowledged during the service. Those that attended were reminded of the realities of life and death, heaven and hell and salvation and damnation and were strongly exhorted to put their trust in Jesus Christ. Jesus is often openly acknowledged and exalted in *Zambia* in keeping with her declared position as a Christian nation.

The above picture of death is not uncommon here in Africa as HIV and other diseases ravish the population and steal the young. Nearly every family here has been brushed with the stroke of an untimely death. Even now, just across the border in Botswana, one in every four people are HIV+. What is the answer to this devastating reality? I can only think of what Jesus said as he sent out his disciples in Matthew 10: 7, 8 .....”Preach the gospel, heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons”.

Africa awaits a greater manifestation of the power of God.

Mike  
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The grief that follows the untimely death of a young one