

THE BISHOP OF RWANDA FINDING FORGIVENESS AMIDST A PILE OF BONES

In the spring of 1994 the horror of genocide was unleashed in Rwanda. In just over three months more than a million people died, out of a total population of only eight million. The killings were brutal, often preceded by acts of torture. The Hutu population of Rwanda, in a swiftly moving wave of violence and terror, set out to murder every Tutsi in Rwanda, many of whom had been their neighbors and friends. The Rwandan genocide was one of the great human tragedies of the 20th century, and ranks among the worst and most shameful episodes in all of recorded human history

Bishop John Rucyahana, in this important book, tells the story of the genocide, and also tells the remarkable story of how God is healing Rwanda today. Bishop John, a native Rwandan, was living in Uganda with his wife and family, and had a large and active ministry there when the genocide took place in 1994. Two years later he responded to the call of God and the prompting of the Holy Spirit and returned to his native country, to be part of the work of rebuilding and reconciliation which needed to take place if Rwanda was to have any hope of rising from the ashes of despair. He was consecrated a bishop in 1997, and we at Church of the Apostles, an Anglican Mission congregation, are under his authority as bishop in the Anglican Province of Rwanda. Many of us have had the opportunity to meet and to get to know Bishop John and to learn about his far-reaching ministry in Africa. For those who have not, this book tells his story as well as the Rwandan story.

How was it possible for one group of human beings to inflict upon another group such violence, such unspeakable horrors? Where does such a depth of hatred come from? Bishop John explains in this book how the seeds of the genocide were planted by the Belgians who colonized Rwanda, and who by their governance and in their desire to control the masses intentionally fostered segregation between Hutu and Tutsi. Segregation bred estrangement, and the elevation of one group, the Hutu, above the other as superior bred resentment, which developed into full-blown hatred. The Hutu learned to and were encouraged to despise the Tutsi, to desire their eradication, and this progression led finally to the genocide. It is surprising and heartbreaking to learn that the Hutus and the Tutsis lived together peacefully for five hundred years before European colonization began. They were not long-standing natural enemies. They lived side by side and often intermarried. The notion that one group should hate the other was introduced to Rwanda by their colonial masters. This makes the reality of what happened during the genocide, the awful harvest from the destructive seeds sown, even more tragic.

The atrocities that took place during those terrible days in 1994 are described here very graphically and in great detail. Some of the accounts and descriptions are difficult to read, and will most certainly be disturbing to some readers. The actions of those who did the killing are often characterized in the book as demonic, and it is difficult for one to conclude otherwise after reading. How could a neighbor inflict upon his neighbor, how could a friend inflict upon her friend such unbelievable cruelty without being under the influence of demonic control? And yet it is important to read and to understand the extent

of the suffering and the horror of those days if we hope to comprehend the depth of the pain of the victims and the depth of the guilt and shame of those who raped and maimed and killed. These are the traumatized and devastated people to whom Bishop John is seeking to bring the healing message of the Gospel of grace and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Bishop John and those serving and ministering with him today are working not only toward healing the anger of the victimized but also toward healing the guilt of those who participated in the killing. And miracles of reconciliation are happening. Through ministry in the Rwandan prisons with rapists and murderers, and in large conferences and smaller, more intimate gatherings of 10 -20 survivors, victims are being set free from their hatred for those who took the lives of their family members, and those who did the killing are experiencing the mercy of God.

During a recent stadium crusade event, a genocide perpetrator and a survivor shared the platform, each testifying through tears of his faith in Christ and telling of the work of reconciliation God has done between them. These two have become friends and now often travel together to give testimony. Amazing.

Restitution is another side of reconciliation. Prisoners convicted of crimes committed during the genocide who have come to faith in prison have a desire to demonstrate the reality of the change that has taken place in their hearts. In a program called, "Towards Forgiveness" more than 5000 prisoners now work alongside survivors to build homes to replace those of victims that were burned or destroyed. They cannot bring back the ones they killed, but they can rebuild the houses.

The genocide created millions of orphans in just a hundred days. Bishop John founded and oversees the Sonrise orphanage and school, which provides a home and the possibility of a better future for some of those who lost mothers and fathers. The children at Sonrise receive a good education (the school ranked third in all Rwanda in recent national test scores) and experience the love of Jesus through the caring teachers and staff. It is important to note that some of the students at Sonrise are the children of perpetrators in the genocide, who may have died in the jungle or fled the country for fear of punishment. But these children, too, are orphans, and are offered help and love, in the name of Jesus. This is one more miracle of mercy.

Bishop John says this in the final chapter of the book: "The hope for Rwanda does not lie in the hands of the international community. The hope for Rwanda lies in the hands of a God who is capable of changing human hearts." The belief and the principle behind all that Bishop John and those who partner in ministry with him are doing is this: God can and will heal a human mind no matter how much pain it has seen or caused. God can transform that mind.

It is difficult to imagine a people who have seen, and in many cases caused, more pain than the people of Rwanda. If ever there was a place where healing and reconciliation seemed impossible, this would surely be that place. And yet it is happening. How can this be? In the words of Bishop John: "There is no magic here. It's the power of the divine grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the hand of God."

This book helps us to understand how and why the genocide in Rwanda took place. As Christians, as those who are called "to act justly and to love mercy," (Micah 6: 8) we need to know this story, and to weep with the Rwandan people for all that they have suffered and continue to suffer. But we need to rejoice, too, for the signs of hope and new life evident in that country today. Such reconciliation and change is living proof that good can triumph over evil and that nothing is impossible with God.

A limited number of copies of this book are available from the church office for \$10. (I did not know at this writing if proceeds from the sale of the book directly benefited Sonrise or any of the other ministries and works of mercy in which Bishop John is involved. Perhaps Thad or Jan can clarify that before publication)

Dan Fox,
May 17, 2007