

ZIMBABWE

An Advent Journey

DAY 1 – Wednesday 10 December

We gathered at Erik and Gesine Buiten's house at 12h30, a small band of four including myself (Nina Lowes) and Ann Thistlewhite. This gathering came at the end of two weeks hard preparation, many obstacles to overcome and much faith.



Eventually at 13h30 we left Pretoria in a vehicle and trailer generously donated for the trip by a parishioner. Without this vehicle our trip would certainly have been slower and more hazardous, not to mention hot!

As we climbed into the car I asked Ann what had moved her to join the "small trek". Ann said how could she not go when by simply going she enabled R3000's worth of food to be taken to people in need? For myself, I know that when this trip was spoken about in church, I immediately felt "this is for me, I must go". If I am honest, I must say that this decision afterwards raised some doubts in my mind but I received such encouraging words from the Lord in the time before we left that I knew this was right.

To the crooning voice of Van Morrison we climbed onto the highway and set out for our overnight stop in Louis Trichardt, where we would be rendezvousing with the other members of the convoy. As we cruised along the highway, our conversation delved into various areas of spirituality including mysticism and the importance, or otherwise, of liturgy and the hierarchy in the Anglican Church. Very erudite conversation for four simple travelers!

I asked Gesine and Erik how they had come to envision this mission to Zimbabwe. Gesine said that while praying one day for friends in Zimbabwe, she received a "picture" in her mind of her and Erik in a car pulling a trailer full of food. She told Erik about this and he simply said "Well, let's do it". Gesine first imagined that this would be a simple matter of taking food the border where it would be collected by others on the Zimbabwe side. Then Erik asked Gail Blunden, the rector of St Mark's Anglican Church in Louis Trichardt, if she knew of anybody who is driving through with food into Zimbabwe and Gail said no. The very next day Gail phoned Erik to give him the name of a person in an NG congregation in Louis Trichardt who, together with parishioners and other people take food up in a convoy to Harare and other areas. And so the plan became fleshed out and suddenly very real. Money came in so generously and R13,000 worth of basic foodstuffs were bought (mielie meal, flour, rice, beans, salt, oil and sunlight

soap). The logistics of documents, car papers, car stickers and supplies were ably arranged by Gesine and Erik.

And so we set off not really sure of what lay ahead but absolutely sure that God was calling us to do this and that in the words of Julian of Norwich “And God said ‘What is impossible for you is not impossible for me. I shall keep my word in all things, and I shall make all things well”.

We arrived in Louis Trichardt at about 17h30 and after dropping off our luggage at our hosts and grabbing a bite of supper, we went searching for the NG Church where we had been told to gather at 19h00 to meet our fellow convoy pilgrims and to receive last minute instructions. We eventually found the church only to be told that the gathering had already happened as the people had been packing all day and were exhausted, so had departed for their homes to get some rest. However, we met a wonderful girl who was arranging the church’s youth camp and she told us how she had gone on a Zimbabwe trip the previous year and what a wonderful blessing the trip had been to her. She was sure we too would be blessed and that it would be a trip we would not forget. By this time Andries, the convoy leader, had returned and told us the terrible news – we were to depart at 02h45 the next morning!

Well, we encouraged ourselves as we discussed 4 hour border crossing (hah!), stickers, papers, routes etc. We also told us ourselves that this was an important part of our information gathering in preparation for our next trip, by which time we would have mobilized the Anglican community. Amazing what visions one has when exhausted!

And so to bed for a precious few hours.....

DAY 2 – Thursday 11 December

The second day of our journey started at the inhuman hour of 01h30. We had not slept well due a combination of nerves, expectation and excitement. We had been told by Andries to congregate at the NG Church ready to leave by 02h45 sharp. We faithfully arrived to find a group of six people waiting, with others arriving as we did. The people ranged in age from 10 to 70 years and were so welcoming and friendly towards us. There was an overall sense of excitement and purpose prevailing. We were introduced to such stalwarts as Hendrik



Pretorius and “Kleintjie” who just happened to be over 6 feet tall and weighed in at about 120kg! At last Andries arrived and a final panic ensued as missing documents were located. We then gathered in a circle to pray and ask God’s blessing on our journey and the purpose of our journey. It was all very

“voortrekkerish” but there was no doubt of these people’s faith and commitment to God and their concern and care for the suffering people in Zimbabwe. I personally felt quite in awe of their very obvious joy at doing this work.

We left Louis Trichardt in the dark and started towards Musina and Beitbridge, approximately 1 ½ hours away. We had the privilege of watching the sun rise over the bushveld before we made one last stop for petrol and toilets before Beitbridge. While buying coffee at the shop, I noticed one of our convoy ladies conversing with a man, asking him where he was going. He replied to her with a voice and face alight with happiness and expectation, “I am going to Zimbabwe, I am going home”.

Our arrival at the South African side of Beitbridge was a small shock to the system as we had been told what to expect but of course it is always a case of “seeing is believing”! The parking area was crowded with buses, people, cars and everywhere was the activity of people trying to get formalities done as quickly as possible, to “get over the bridge”. Thanks to the super-efficient Andries, who shepherded us all like lambs, we eventually were “stamped out” of SA and were ready to drive across the bridge, 2 hours after arrival. Before leaving the SA side, we decided (wisely as we later found out!) to visit the loos and I was intrigued and amused to read the following sign posted over one of the ladies’ toilets:

“Only toilet paper, No cardboard, No cloth, No Zim dollars”

Official sign one has to wonder?

On reaching the Zimbabwean side of the bridge, the sight that met our eyes was to us initially unbelievable and indescribable. Being warned about how things were was no preparation for the reality – a huge parking area made up of crumbling paved areas, loose bricks and paving stones, dust, dirt, potholes, chaos and vehicles and people everywhere. The vehicles ranged from



ordinary cars to bakkies to trucks to buses and all the vehicles were piled high with goods and basic foodstuffs such as we ourselves carried, with a bicycle or two thrown in here and there.

The long-haulage trucks pull in and out in a non-stop, never-ending stream, adding to the dust and noise filling the air. The bakkies, taxis and trailers were sometimes so loaded that we feared they would over balance as they rocked past us, looking like pack camels. Cries of “Close the doors, watch out for Clive’s car!” rang from our vehicle at various times during our sojourn there.

When trying to take photos, we found that people were not happy about it and so we only managed to “sneak” a few from a distance.

And so the run for document clearance began and we waited.....

Our documents were cleared 5 hours later and in that time unfortunately one of the convoy members had fainted and hurt herself. We therefore had to wait for an ambulance from the SA side to clear all the red tape and come across the bridge to collect her, as it was not advisable for her to continue.

But in all the time that we waited and amidst all the seeming chaos, we never once saw anybody raise their voice in anger or get impatient and irritated. People were calm, patient and in general friendly.

During our wait, Ann started chatting to a Zimbabwean woman who was on her way back into Zim and she got the following story:

The woman and her husband are farmers. Their power has been cut off and they have had no power for ages. At one stage they were running out of food when they got a call to say that a package had been dropped off at a church for them. She said how this was a most wonderful thing and that the work that people such as those in our convoy are doing, is simply life-saving. She said that they feel that people in the world and in SA have forgotten about them.

What a wonderful testimony to the importance of the work that even such small convoys do for the people of Zim.

And so we left the border at about 10h30 on Thursday morning only to have to wait another hour or so further down the road, as one of the convoy trucks had been stopped and was being thoroughly searched, with everything unpacked on the road around it. And this after clearing through the main control point. The point we stopped at gave us our first experience of the numerous police road blocks to come. One of the ladies in the convoy was videoing our group of vehicles drawn up on the side of the road and when the police spotted her doing so, she was told to desist and had to show them physically on the camera what she had been doing, so as to prove that she was not doing anything illegal. Eventually the searched vehicle joined us and it was here that some of the convoy carried on to Bulawayo and we started on the road to Harare with the remainder of the vehicles.



The countryside we passed through is desolate and dry with shrubs, skinny donkeys, some goats and cattle. There is no grass simply red soil and the last rain was apparently in February. The condition of the road at this stage is not too bad but it deteriorated steadily as we drove further north.

We stopped approximately 30 minutes later at a place called the Elephant & Lion, which is very obviously a seedy, down at heel, colonial style hotel. BUT it had a clean toilet, which after 6 hours of no toilets was a blessing for us women! We ordered 3 cokes and 2 cups of tea and our bill when it arrived was ZR\$780 million! We kept the slip needless to say. Basically we paid R15 for each tin of coke and

R20 for each cup of tea. SA Rands were eagerly accepted and it was a delight (of sorts) to watch the waiter doing the conversion on his calculator. The zeros just went on and on...

By this time we were running very late in terms of our anticipated arrival time in Harare and we decided to split from the convoy and carry on to Harare on our own. We wanted to be off the road before dark.

The deterioration in the condition of the road and the number of trucks and police road blocks slowed us down considerably. At one stage we had a white Toyota driving in front of us for at least 80 km's. However, driving is a kind description because weaving was more akin to what he was doing! We held our collective breath as he swung from one side of the road to the other, crossing the (admittedly) faint centre white line with happy abandon and overtaking in all sorts of places where normal people certainly would not go. We decided to give him as much distance as possible, fully expecting to come upon his car involved in a head on collision at some time. We caught up to him at the next police road block where the police had pulled his car over and asked him to get out. He did, with a wide, happy grin on his face and a stumbling gait similar to his driving! I pointed to him and showed the policeman a weaving, snakelike motion with my hand, hoping they would understand what kind of driving we had witnessed. The policewoman who approached our window understood and shouted something to her colleague and even though our happy driver saw us reporting him, he did not seem to bear us a grudge as his grin never faltered! However, we drove on as quickly as possible, not wanting to be near him in case he decided to take revenge on us. Terribly brave!

We hope he was taken off the road for his and others sakes but we don't know that for certain. All we can say is that on our return journey, we all watched for a scrunched up Toyota but did not see one. We did see many car wrecks, especially in the area between the border and Masvingo. Cars so thoroughly wrecked that the accidents must have been horrific and we all wondered how anyone could survive a car accident along that road, being so distant from any habitation and with no rescue services in Zimbabwe at all.

The landscape from the border up to Harare changes steadily – from dry red-dust soil with shrubs to dry



veld with trees. As you approach the extension of the mountains, the rock formations are beautiful and arresting. But the landscape is empty – we saw no wild animals in all the four days we spent there and villages are few and far between. The few roadside shops we passed are dark and the shelves are empty. A few people sit on the stairs and stare at the road. There is no activity. We saw very few crops except for some local small plantings at a couple of villages although there were some tilled fields obviously awaiting planting.

There appears to be no water and the landscape is dry. We observed an old woman walking slowly along the side of a road with a bucket, probably to collect water from the well we saw much further down the road.

We stopped at Masvingo about 3 hours south of Harare to put in diesel. When we pulled into the petrol station we were asked if we wanted petrol or diesel and on replying that we wanted diesel were asked to go “around and to the top” of the petrol station. As we drove there we observed our attendants racing off up the hill and we couldn’t understand why. The next minute they started hurrying back to us carrying jerry cans of diesel, as the pumps were both broken and empty. Erik negotiated with the attendants as to the price we were prepared to pay for 80 litres of diesel and eventually agreement was reached at R11 per litre (we had been told by a helpful Zimbabwean at the Elephant & Lion that any price outside a range of R12 would be outrageous but that some would try to charge us up to R20 per litre) and the car was filled up.

We were very excited to see a sign advertising a Wimpy at this garage and Gesine and Erik decided they would like to have coffee. The coffee was definitely nothing to write home about and the bill amounted to R24 a cup! Erik “not-so-calmly” negotiated this bill as well!

As we neared Harare we saw a few areas which had obviously been farms but had now been left to go wild. We saw only one operational farm which was a dairy farm close to the town of Beatrice. We were puzzled to see a small camp of miniature tents erected in one of the fields and next to each tent was a calf, some with their heads in the tents and their hindquarters sticking out. We did not really want to ponder the implications of these “calf kennels” as we called them – veal or future milk cows? Ann definitely did not want to know.

We arrived in Harare after dark at about 20h00. We drove into Harare along Samora Machel Avenue and as there is an absence of street lamps, it was very difficult to gauge what the city looked like at that point. However, traffic going into Harare was heavy and all the vehicles once again piled high with goods. We made our way through the centre of Harare on our way to Mandara where we were going to be staying. The centre of Harare was busy with people and vehicles and we expected to hear the kind of noise one experiences in busy cities in SA. But the place was largely silent – no loud voices talking and laughing, no taxis hooting, no loud thumping music such as we are accustomed to hearing. It was subdued and very strange, people hurrying and largely ignoring one another.

And so we arrived safely at our destination to a very kind reception from our hosts, who had supper waiting. We spent time chatting to them and finding out more about the situation and then were very glad to drop into bed, after 18 exhausting hours of travel.

DAY 3 – Friday 12 December

The next morning we had more chance to talk to our hosts and we were told much about the water and petrol situation. Our host Andrew said his borehole is now dry and he had to buy water from a

neighbour at a cost of US\$80 for 10,000 litres. He said that with the absence of municipality water, people with boreholes were making a lot of money selling to people without. Petrol and diesel were very scarce and indeed later in the day we saw long queues at the petrol stations. The Zim dollar is no longer regarded as trading currency and petrol coupons valued at US\$1 each are the preferred currency or SA Rands. In fact Andrew told us that they had paid their last term's school fees with petrol coupons and the teachers at the school had been paid their salaries in petrol coupons. Goods can be obtained on the black market for those who have the money to pay for them.

We had arranged to rendezvous with our Zim contacts, Shingi and Susan, at about 10h30 at a place close to the township Mbare. Erik and Gesine have known Susan and Shingi Mbanje for two-and-a half years and through them we would be delivering our food to their family and to two churches who are caring for the local community.

On our way to the rendezvous point we took a wrong turning and ended up driving through a slum area of tenement buildings. The buildings had either no window panes or broken window panes, the building



walls were filthy and long left to decay. The sewerage pipes emerging from the second and third floors of the buildings were open to the air and raw sewerage was flowing down the sides of the buildings. People were hanging from some of the windows amidst ragged curtains or cardboard. The ground surrounding the buildings was filthy with piled up rubbish and puddles of rain water mingled with sewerage. The stench is terrible and in amidst this filth, children aged 1 and 2 years 'play'. Thin people with hopelessness etched on their features hang

from the corridor balconies or wander the streets or just sit. Some people carry baskets with a few green bananas or a couple of mangoes or tomatoes or a wilted bunch of spinach, intent on perhaps selling or exchanging them for other food or goods.

As we drove through this area we all looked in silence at the faces of the people we passed. I saw one man standing still on a corner, with his hands held together over the bottom half of his face and such a look of intense desperation on his face that I felt the tears well up in my eyes. We passed him by in a minute but his face remains photographed into my mind as the face of the Zimbabwean people. I prayed "God have mercy on your people in Zimbabwe" and it was a prayer I was to repeat many times in my heart over the next few days.

In the midst of the people we saw groups of kneeling figures in white robes who belong to an Apostolic church and they looked like angels scattered across the wasteland.

We collected Shingi and Susan and their beautiful daughter Tinevimbo at the side of the road a few minutes from their home in Mbare township. Shingi and Susan are both unemployed and make their living from selling curios and handicrafts in SA. Shingi was previously employed in an IT position and has an uncompleted degree in Theology. He is a musician and he played us his new CD which he himself composed. He is unable to reproduce the CD for sale yet as he needs R5000 in order to do so. He said that there is a good market for Shona gospel music, as it is popular with people from Mozambique as well as Zimbabwe.

Susan travels to South Africa about every 6 – 8 weeks to sell the handicrafts manufactured by their family and friends. She takes a 36 to 48 hour bus journey down and takes her 1 year old daughter Tinevimbo with her. She has various contacts in SA that she uses for the sale of the goods, including Gesine and Erik. Shingi and Susan lost their house during Mugabe's Operation Murambatsvina and a lady at their church, whom they call Granny although she is no relation of theirs, has taken them in. Granny has two sons, one in the US and one in Botswana. Shingi and Susan have three children of their own – Tendai (16), Munashe (10) and the 1 year old Tinevimbo. In addition they have taken in 4 other children, three orphans and one the child of a niece whose husband died. The niece also lives with them. They have two small bedrooms, a small kitchen and a tiny entrance hall / lounge. There are also other adults and children living in this house, occupying an area that appears to be made up of another 4 rooms and all the people share one toilet. The house and yard are spotlessly clean.

When we arrived we were given an overwhelming gracious welcome and introduced to all the family and extended family living in the house. We were offered tea and given a meal of white bread and



baked beans. We only afterwards found out that there was no food in the house on our arrival and they had to use some of the food we brought in order to offer us hospitality. Before serving us food, Shingi's niece knelt before each of us with a basin, a jug of water and a towel so that we could wash our hands. It was a very humbling experience for all of us. We were brought up to date on all the news including the collapsed state of the hospitals and that the schools had not been operating for a number of months. Photos were taken and we

then proceeded to St Paul's United Methodist Church in Mbare to deliver the food. At the church we were introduced to the minister of St Paul's and to the minister from another church, St Barnabas, which is included in the community. We were told that there used to be a feeding scheme operating from St Paul's reaching out into the community but that due to the cholera people were no longer allowed to

gather in large groups. Part of Shingi's ministry is to go out into the community and ensure that the vulnerable people are cared for and fed.



The trailer was unpacked and we then all went into the church where speeches of gratitude were given and we were assured that we would receive confirmation of which families had been helped with the food donations. We had a time of singing praises and prayers and we felt blessed to share this time with these humble and friendly people.



After leaving the church we returned Susan to their house and after saying farewell, we proceeded with Shingi's help to drive through the centre of Harare to the Anglican Cathedral, St Mary's, which on our arrival there looked completely closed up and deserted. Although we were aware of the non-elected bishop takeover crisis, we were vaguely hoping to encounter a "legitimate" Anglican to whom we could convey our solidarity and prayers. On reaching the

Cathedral we attempted to park in an area just in front of the door, where there was open parking but the area was closed off with a boom. Shingi lifted the boom and we drove in, trailer and all. An elderly parking attendant came to speak to us and informed us that we were not allowed to park there because the people who were parked there (about 4 cars) had paid their parking fee of "20 litres of petrol". We explained that we were Anglicans simply wanting to visit the cathedral and after much back and forth on the subject, the attendant said we could not stay there "because he did not know which side we supported". At this stage things became uncomfortable and we decided to leave. Even then he was reluctant to allow us out the other side of the boom but eventually we exited. Shingi said that the Anglican Church had "collapsed" and people were operating "under the trees".

We left the Cathedral and drove through the centre of Harare on our way to meet with a person who was procuring 80 litres of diesel for our return trip to SA. During the drive we saw long queues of people outside every bank in the city, waiting their turn to draw the maximum daily allowance of R15. In Zim R15 is currently the equivalent of 1 can of coke. It was about 14h00 in the afternoon and we had to wonder how long people would be waiting to draw their money and how many would be able to draw before the banks closed that afternoon.



We arrived at the location where our promised diesel was to be collected but had difficulty finding the right house, the reason being that the numbering of the houses followed no logical pattern – number 2 was to be found next to number 36 etc. It looked like the residents had done a lucky dip and chosen whichever number suited them and in fact when we checked with the “diesel man” later that afternoon, he confirmed that there was no order to the numbers. Whilst there, we noticed a white Mercedes which had parked half way down the road but at the time we thought nothing of it. We contacted our diesel supplier and arranged to meet him later that afternoon. As we left the Mercedes started tailing us and Shingi confirmed that he had seen the same car tailing us from the city centre and that it was probably the secret police, alerted to our presence either at Mbare or at the Cathedral. They tailed us back to town where we dropped Shingi off but we seemed to lose them (or they lost interest in us) later on. We nervously checked for other tails during the remainder of our stay and were told to look out for “men in suits”.

We then returned later to meet as arranged with the “diesel man” and enjoyed a hilarious hour learning how to siphon petrol into a car! Ann and Erik are now experts and can be contacted should any help of this kind be needed in future! For a fee of course!

“Diesel Man” owns a filling station and told us that he had kept back the 80 litres of diesel for us at the request of a mutual friend, as the petrol tankers had been held up at the border and the filling stations were empty. The petrol tankers had just arrived that day, hence the long queues of cars we saw at the filling stations. However, he gave us some information about shipping goods up to Harare and how this can be done without having to travel up ourselves, which is very helpful.

After filling up we decided to enjoy some last Harare sightseeing and take a drive past Mugabe’s house. It was of course surrounded by soldiers and there was nothing to see except high walls but the trip was made and we say sorry to Fiona Thistlewhite who had requested we get her Mugabe’s autograph. There were signs posted on the street to indicate that all the roads surrounding Mugabe’s house are closed off

after 6 pm in the evenings. We left and returned to our hosts' house to prepare for our departure the next morning.

It was an eventful, informative and emotional day. In Shingi's words "life in Zim is distorted and people have to live in a distorted way". Or in the words of our host "the situation in Zim causes everybody to become a criminal and to use the black market in order to survive".

DAY 4 – Saturday 13 December

We departed Harare at about 7h00 on Saturday morning. The trip down to Beitbridge was uneventful and much quicker than the trip up to Harare. We stopped for diesel once more with our friends at Masvingo but did not attempt to patronize the Wimpy! There was less traffic on the road probably because it was a Saturday but as we got closer to the border, we noticed a number of new car wrecks since our journey up and at one stage a truck that had simply overbalanced at the side of the road and was now lying there waiting for.....? We don't know.

The border crossing back to South Africa was certainly quicker than the entry to Zim and we made it through in about 2 hours. It was noticeable that although there was only one queue at passport control, we as SA citizens were told to bypass the queue and go to the front. The passport control officers were slightly aggressive towards those they were helping and at one stage the man in front of me in my particular queue was whispering to the officer to "please give me...." I could not hear clearly what was said but it was obvious he was trying to gain illegal entry. The passport officer simply told him that he was sorry but he could not do that.

The SA police at border control were noticeably lazy and sloppy about doing their work but we were nevertheless glad to be home and chorused this to the police officer who asked us if we were returning home and were we glad to do so!

On leaving the border control point, we stopped at the first petrol station to refresh ourselves. When Ann, Gesine and I went into the shop to buy coffee, we all three felt quite bewildered by the enormous abundance of food on display. It was as though we had been transported from an alternative universe and we had to leave the shop quickly for it simply did not feel "right". It was an emotional moment after seeing so many people who had obviously not had proper, regular food for a long time.

It was good to be home and South Africa looked so tidy and well-developed after the devastation we viewed in Zim.

Conclusion

But this was a trip that changed all four of us. For myself, I feel that it changed me forever. Even 4 days after returning I still do not feel completely adjusted to my usual life. I keep getting flashbacks to things I had seen almost as though that was my real world and not this. Such an impact in such a short space of time! What I do know is that going up to Zimbabwe to visit with Susan and Shingi and all the people

associated with them, was more important to them than the food we took. In the words of the farmer's wife we met at the border "We feel as if the world has forgotten about us".

This is, of course, not true. The world has not forgotten and God has not forgotten but every small thing we can do towards helping Zimbabwe will make an impact, we saw that when we dropped off our small offering towards feeding many hungry families. Our constant prayers will help to bring to fruition God's will for that beautiful country.

As that young woman at the NG Church in Louis Trichardt had predicted "You will be blessed by going" and indeed, we were blessed by going.

Thank you to the following people without whom this trip would not have been possible:

All the people who generously contributed funds towards buying the food.

Clive Gardner for the very trusting and generous loan of his Pajero and trailer.

The people of St Francis and St Jude who prayed for our safety and Shingi, Susan and their people who prayed and fasted for our safety – we were always intensely aware of God's protection surrounding us.

Our hosts for the night in Louis Trichardt – Gail and Mike Blunden and Kira and Tim Ross

Our hosts in Harare – Andrew, Kim, Daniel, Shannon, Ozzie and Alice.

(And thank you to the secret police for really giving us something to write home about!)