

Visit for a Funeral

Father Isaias, the priest of St George's, Beira in Lebombo, Mozambique, died unexpectedly on 2nd April 2010. This article was written by Father Paul Walmsley-McLeod, the vicar of St John's Friern Barnet, which is linked to St George's Beira. It first appeared in their parish magazine, "Fulcrum".

On Good Friday evening, heady with the drama and sadness of the day, I checked my mobile phone and found a voicemail message from Chris Hemborough (Project Mozambique). It seemed impossible... Father Isaias had died that afternoon in Beira just after reading the Passion during the Good Friday Liturgy. I tried to get hold of Chris that evening but failed. The next morning, Holy Saturday, early, Bishop Dinis called from Maputo. It was true; Isaias had had a massive heart attack at St George's immediately after reading St John's account of the Passion of Christ... 'Today you will be with me in Paradise.' The funeral would be the following Wednesday in Easter week. Bishop Dinis sounded as shocked as I felt and, as we talked, I recognized a deep need within me and knew that, if I could, I had to be at the funeral.

That Holy Saturday morning we were cleaning at St John's and preparing for Easter Day. We stopped to remember this extraordinary man and I sensed Isaias' presence with us as we prayed exactly on the spot where, last year, we had blessed him – a declaration of friendship and a celebration of our fellowship in Christ on the feast of Corpus Christi, just before his return home after a month spent in our midst. Easter this year was a poignant proclamation of resurrection life.

The Wardens and Standing Committee agreed that I should fly over for the funeral and Janet began to make all the arrangements, searching for fares and the best way to get to Maputo. I hoped that Bishop Dinis would give me a lift to the funeral, where ever that might take place, but he had left Maputo soon after our telephone conversation and I could not get any confirmation of his whereabouts. A decision had to be made and the ticket was bought, in faith, for Easter Monday night, before I had managed to talk to anyone in Maputo or discover when the bishop was leaving the city or, indeed, whether he was going from Maputo! Mercifully I eventually managed to speak to Chris Sengulane, one of Bishop Dinis' sons, who seemed quite confident that his father would both be back in Maputo and willing to take me with him as soon as I arrived Tuesday morning.

So I flew to Johannesburg from Heathrow and then on to Maputo, landing without a visa and wondering if I would be able to get one at the airport? I did. The next anxiety was hoping that someone would be meeting me, but, again, I needn't have worried, a member of the bishop's staff was waiting. I was driven to Bishop Dinis' apartment and this was my first sight of Mozambique's capital city. I was feeling somewhat tired, numb, it seemed almost a dream that I was back in Africa. Holy Week had made its mark and I still could not quite believe that Isaias was dead. The smells, however, the noise, the colour, the water logged roads caked with rubbish and the naked poverty were enough reality. We got to Bishop Dinis' building and I was very thankful that he lives on

the first of fourteen floors as the lift is permanently out of action. I was greeted warmly, immediately given a very quick lunch and then was packed into the front seat of the bishop's four-wheel drive, without time to wash or change. We were to travel north. I had no idea where or how far we were going. There were five of us. It was 2 o'clock in the afternoon. By 11pm, all of us exhausted and famished, we arrived at the place where food and rest were to be had. Sleep was impossible in an airless room in searing temperatures, though there was a mosquito net. By 4.30am we were on the move again. The road surface we'd travelled the previous day was a mixture of reasonable in parts and terrible. What lay ahead was more of the same until we left the main road and hit a labyrinth of paths, dirt roads and open bush country. I would never have made it on my own.

At last, at 8.30am on Easter Wednesday, we arrived at the place where Isaias was born and where he was to be buried, deep in the interior of Mozambique. The bush gave way to a clearing where about fifty people gathered waiting around Isaias' coffin, placed under a couple of trees. Cremilde, Bernadette, Junior and Armando were surrounded by Isaias' mother and her family and members of the Mothers Union, impeccable in their white and black uniforms. The men were standing apart, many of them preparing for the funeral service and others looking out for the constant and ongoing traffic of people arriving, like us, seemingly from nowhere. The only buildings a couple of huts made with local material. It was oppressively hot and humid. The sun was already burning, but the sky ahead was purple and lead. No time for tears. The instant we were out of the car and had greeted Cremilde, who barely noticed anything, the full panoply of the Anglican Church was unfurled, cope, mitre, chasubles, we vested hurriedly and began the most poignant and extraordinary service I have ever witnessed.

The Bishop, his clergy and I, stood fully robed under the trees embracing Isaias, surrounded by his family and those who had made long journeys to mourn him, looking out on to the bush and planes of Eastern Africa. Isaias, passionate servant of Christ, lay still before us in a wooden box, out of this world. I wept.

Eleven hours travelling, four hours restless sleep, the funeral service began under the trees, around Isaias' coffin. Bishop Dinis read the introductory sentences with a strength I did not share. Tired, hot, robed, sad and tearful, I suddenly saw Isaias' face through a plastic window at the top of the coffin. He smiled, gently, as if in agreement. That was probably the hardest moment. Until then I had half expected to find him in the crowd, organizing, energizing, cajoling, but, here, was proof enough, that death had truly made its mark. All that energy and passion reduced into an ugly box with a tacky window pane to his face. I was angry. But anger was an emotion impossible to sustain in the ensuing powerful proclamation of resurrection life in word, sacrament and inhibition free African exuberance. Then there was the music... Much of what we sang had been introduced by Isaias, vibrant, uncompromising, and if ever sung with less than full celebration throttle, he would stop the singing and demand that God be woken up by a joyful noise, his people giving rightful praise, not murmuring in the dungeon! As he sang, Isaias would swing and shift, move to the music with

hypnotic power, mesmerising. I wonder what he thought of our own music-making? Wisdom 4, Psalm 23, 1 Corinthians 15, John's Resurrection story; as the Requiem unfolded, mourners kept arriving, just as we had, out of the bushy blur into clearance. The constant stream of new arrivals continued for the six hours of celebration, thanksgiving and mourning, until we grew into hundreds.

Bishop Dinis preached the sermon. As he spoke of Isaias, I kept thinking of the measure by which all will be judged worthy of the Kingdom, '...for if you did it to the least of your brothers and sisters, you did it to me,' fed my hunger, satiated my thirst, clothed my nakedness, put an end to my isolation and embraced my suffering. Then came the telling of Isaias' conversion... At 14, he'd left the very place where we sat in mourning, to find his way to Maputo, the capital city, 600kms away; a boy from the bush, unable to read and write whose life was hunting and fishing, surviving. With no money and nothing to sell he soon found himself in trouble as he walked, begged, cadged for lifts and walked more. A little into this epic journey a man of compassion had pity on Isaias and took him into his own home, to his family, where he was fed and welcomed, loved and nurtured. There he stayed, learnt to read, write, heard for the first time the name of Jesus and was baptised. The man of mercy, on the road to Maputo, was an Anglican priest. His eldest son was at the funeral. Isaias, usually preoccupied by others, had never told me this story. So we were fed at the altar and shared with Isaias; for us only a foretaste of the Kingdom. Then came the eulogies, too many to recount, with a common thread: honest thanksgiving for this generous heart who had laboured hard in the vineyard, leading so many into the life giving, healing, transforming, embrace of God. There was another moving, common thread, the utter sincerity with which thanks was given. Then the coffin was opened and the mourners filed past him, kissing, wailing, singing, dancing...

Should anyone have run the risk of dissolving into sentimentalism, the listless, silent, almost menacing, grief of Cremilde was antidote enough. Not until the coffin was shut in preparation for burial did she appear able to utter sound. Then, from deep within, all the pent up feeling and fear and anger burst. At last, the final journey, just a few yards into the grave. He was carried by all, in turn. Finally, the priests, we held him and burdened his coffin the last steps, tripping, jostling, every priest wanting to hold him, some of us moving into the grave itself to receive Isaias as he was lowered into the last resting place for his frail humanity, amidst the melee of ordained bodies paying urgent but tender homage. Hands and feet were the instruments of burial as the dust and earth were returned to place, then seas of flowers were pierced into the mound and watered, the sky now no longer purple and led but jet black, threatening. It thundered.

We left immediately the burial was done, barely time for contemplation or farewells. The long journey back to Maputo was made, much through hysterical tropical storms and torrents of mud, the conversation mostly of Isaias. The storms cleared, suddenly, as quickly as they had opened up and the pinks, reds, oranges and amethysts of a descending African sun ignited the sky.