

Myanmar Mission Trip 3-10 Aug

It's funny the thoughts that run through your mind when the first thing you notice about the toilets in the Yangon airport is a sign above the taps that says: "This water is not drinkable." I started to wonder how dirty the water was, and if I should even wash my hands. Actually, that pretty much sums up the largest hardship on this mission trip. Clean, potable water was hard to come by. Conserving enough purified water to brush my teeth was a discipline I quickly picked up. We would often hoard bottles of purified water to drink. Their purified water had a few different grades depending on the number of purification processes - reverse osmosis, UV treatment, and filtration. One tries to get bottled water that has at least 2 of the 3 treatments. Water that has been treated with all 3 was very hard to come by. But you knew it was good water because even the plastic of the bottles was of a much higher quality. The first day, we had to drive for more than an hour out of Mandalay just to find a place that sold 2 treatment water (Lucky brand).

The food in Myanmar was good though. Even too good. One of the youths remarked that the food we had was better than the food she gets at home in America. It was no exaggeration. But eating the good food was a bittersweet experience. See, we spent most of our time in an orphanage in Lashio which is in northern Myanmar. The kids there ate what they grew. That is, in the early morning they would go out and work in the fields (most of Myanmar subsists on primary agriculture such as rice and corn). They grew rice, corn and vegetables mainly. And so, the kids had a mostly vegetarian diet. For the mission teams that were there though (from US, Malaysia, Taiwan and possibly other countries), we were served 3 to 4 meat dishes each meal - chicken, beef, fish, pork - and these were very well cooked! In fact, we often could not finish what was served. It was extremely humbling to receive the extravagant hospitality of the orphanage. Each time I ate there, I felt like they were spending a small fortune on us. I even heard that the van that we were driven in was actually rented by them for \$150 so they could ferry us around. Talk about getting the red carpet treatment. I'm glad we had a meal when all the children we invited to eat with us - how they feasted on the meat dishes! One little boy had three full servings!

There were a couple of interesting food moments. There was one time I saw a plate full of giant peas. I knew they had to be freshly picked, so I grabbed a bunch. Who knew that they would be ultra bitter? Eating a bowl full of giant bitter peas and wincing every time I bit into one was hilarious to the youths. Apparently quite a few of the homegrown vegetables were on the bitter side, possibly due to the soil nutrients there or lack thereof. There was also freshly harvested corn. Only issue was it was green, not yellow. Looked totally unripe. But they turned out to be surprisingly sweet! Good stuff. Then there were the snails. The youths joined the kids at their dinner once. I saw them eating field snails, and decided to be the brave one and try one (the pastor must lead by example, no?). But when it came to putting it into my mouth, my hand

refused to move! Talk about hidden fears. The whole room started to cheer me on. After 5 minutes I finally managed to put it in my mouth. How you get the snail out of the shell is to suck very sharply from the back end to loosen the flesh from the shell, then turn it round and suck it out the large front hole. So, that first suck is the worst. It's not exactly the nicest thought that here I was about to suck the bum off a snail... Anyway, after much trying (I couldn't get the first snail out, so had to try a second one), I was finally able to eat one of the snails. The snail itself doesn't taste much of anything. But the broth they cooked it in had an interesting taste... ;)

Myanmar was full of surprises and was not what I expected at all. The Golden Triangle, the military rule of the last five decades, the closed doors, the stories one hears on the news, all led me to think going to Myanmar would be a dangerous affair to say the least. Of course, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi meant that great changes were occurring in the country - what an interesting time to be visiting Myanmar! However, when I got there and I was surprised at the freedom the people had. The military government did not suppress the practice of different religions (I had assumed it did). I saw institutions like the orphanage and even individual homes openly displaying the cross as a sign of being Christian - and they have been doing so for many years. There were in fact many churches in Lashio, though some were more relics of its colonial past than anything. Myanmar didn't look like a war torn country. In fact, it was more like Malaysia than an impoverished and ravaged country. The people there were doing reasonably well, even though they were mostly subsistence farmers. There were internet cafes, universities, etc in Lashio - a town of some 130,000 people. The people were very intelligent and well educated - they generally knew 3 languages (Burmese, Chinese and some English). Even the roads were remarkably well built, though dusty - certainly better than Sydney's roads! I was playing the guitar one evening, when a bunch of kids crowded round and started singing a Justin Bieber song. Now that made me laugh! And talking about songs, these guys love their Hillsong and their Streams of Praise songs.

I was talking to Owen, a young pastor working in the orphanage (named after Michael Owen if I'm not wrong), and he told me that in the last five years there had been a lot of civil improvements. For example, while we saw some houses made of wood and straw, there were much more houses built of brick or cement, even in the poorest parts of the town. Owen told me how many of the roofs of the houses used to be made of straw, but had now been changed to zinc roofing. Many houses were rebuilt out of brick and cement because when storms came, houses were prone to collapse or roofs were blown away. We went to one of the villager's homes in the hills and she had a plastic tarpaulin hanging underneath her straw roof in the bedroom - just so the family could sleep in peace when it rained. I'm glad that the people's lives are generally looking up, and living conditions are improving. Even so, this particular house had a huge wooden box-like "sofa bed" in the middle of the living room. We were asked to guess what it was, and I correctly deduced it was a coffin. Imagine living with a coffin (for you or your parents, whoever goes first) in the living room everyday. It made me think about things a bit.

I asked Owen about the opium industry in Myanmar and he told me how his own father used to grow, refine and smoke opium (heroin is a concentrated form of opium). But about a decade ago the military government started shutting down illegal opium fields, and many of these growers - who mainly live below the poverty line - were left without a means of survival. Those who continued growing opium despite the ban were imprisoned (up to 30 years) and many are still in jail. Owen's dad was also sent to jail. Owen prayed for many years (7-8 probably) for the reunion of his parents. His father got lost in the prison system, and he couldn't be found for a long time. But eventually Owen tracked him down (he had been transported to a prison in the west, near India, and the paperwork had somehow got "lost"), his dad was released, became a Christian and stopped smoking opium, and his parents got reunited. Lovely testimony of answered prayer. But it also demonstrates the hardship the people face.

We visited many of the Christian villagers living in the hills with Owen. It was a very humbling and sobering experience. Every house or hut we visited had a Christian cross or even a poster hanging on their wall. They were proud to be known as Christians in a largely non-Christian country. We met villagers with various physical ailments, some of which were life-threatening. Others were trying to survive through severely trying circumstances, the likes of which we were unlikely to ever come close to experiencing. There were a couple of villagers with arthritis or similar conditions. For a people whose primary living comes from farming, that's a heavy cross they have to bear every single day. But if they don't work in the midst of their pain and suffering, they die, or worse, their family dies. There was a young man with severe epilepsy. Because of that, he could not drive nor even work. At any time he could suffer an epileptic fit and kill himself if he was not in a safe environment. So the rest of the family had to support him. He just babysat the children - but the children quickly learned how to take care of him instead. :/ Not only that, but that particular family had another son who was in jail in China. I'm not entirely sure of the circumstances, but I think he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. The old mother was in the midst of planning a long and arduous trip to China to bail the son out. And this family is literally dirt poor. They had another son, too. But he had passed away the year before in a traffic accident. Unfortunately, this was not the only family we met that had lost sons, brothers, husbands, fathers. When the men of the family are lost, it becomes very tough for the surviving members. I was very humbled to be able to pray with them. It's an inspiration to see the local Christians banding together as one family to support one another. But in such circumstances of great impoverishment and loss, the only answer is God. And let me tell you, their faith is STRONG. They do not give up on God simply because of a "little" hardship. No! They cling on to Him all the more! When they got saved, they made a commitment. And if anything, these guys are faithful to the faith they profess. They do not take down the cross in their homes simply because they fall sick or they lose a loved one. No! They go to God in prayer. The Christian community comes together to support each other in prayer, or simply in providing a shoulder to lean on. It may not be much, but they are not prone to complaining like we are - spoilt first world whiners. When you walk a while in their shoes, you won't be complaining about your small pathetic problems, I can assure you. It really puts things in perspective.

If there's anything I would love to see change, it would be the nature of their faith. They are a very hardy people. Too hardy, perhaps. So much so that they are able to live with almost anything that comes their way. So I felt that they had not yet fully experienced the God of miracles who longs to give good gifts to His children. If it was trying enough for them, they would persist in prayer. But also may not fully expect it to be answered. The local church needs to start teaching on effective faith, and more testimonies of divine miracles must be shared with the villagers. It was good to see some testimonies of healings and provision at the prayer meeting. But the audience there were the more well-to-do crowd, and not the villagers living in the hills. More can be done to strengthen the faith of the believers there. This is especially so when the spiritual forces of darkness are very active and strong there. Spiritual warfare is a very real thing, and I'm not sure that the people there are that aware of it. There is probably quite a bit of desensitization of the spiritual warfare because they've grown up in that environment - and where monks and temples are a common sight and treated with great respect by all.

Last but not least, I'll remember the kids. They are an amazing bunch, full of wonder and joy. Just the sort of people I love hanging out with. My favourite was a little girl who had cut her hair so short I thought she was a boy for the longest time! Her story is typical of those in the orphanage. She had an inhaler with her, and so I prayed for her healing. I asked her about her asthma. She told me how she wasn't born with it. But when she was very young, she fell into a well and almost drowned. But the time she was fished out of the well, she was already unconscious. They managed to revive her, but from then on she has had breathing difficulties. Even so, it does not bother her one bit. She was still the most beautiful, largest eyed wonder I met there. For the life of me I can't remember her name. But her indomitable spirit that radiates joy is something I hope has rubbed off on me.

Thank you, Myanmar, for giving me an education I won't forget.

P.S. If you visit, be sure to bring CRISP, MINT CONDITION US dollars. Any notes with a single crease or, worse, a tear will not be accepted by money changers there. You'll have a hard time of it if your cash isn't pristine. Just saying.