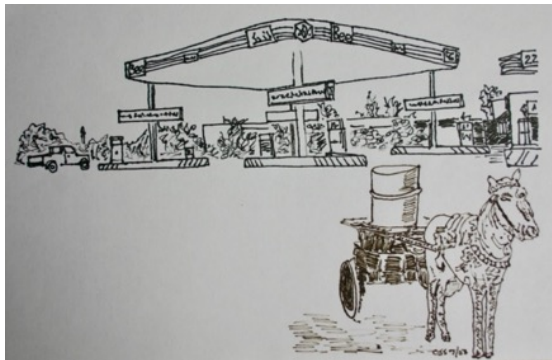


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1. THE HEART OF THE MATTER.

I couldn't believe what I saw recently: a donkey cart filling up it's big oil drum with petrol at my local petrol station! I had to look twice because I didn't believe it first time. I know that donkey carts don't use petrol. They use 'donkey power' which comes from the food the animal eats, not any fuel in the tank!



Looking at the reality behind the appearance, I soon discovered the donkey, driver and cart were simply going to deliver the drum of fuel to someone else. It wasn't what I had first thought it to be.

God doesn't get deceived by outward appearances. The Bible says that God looks on the heart of a person, their real inner-self. He sees us all and understands what we are really like. The most amazing thing is that although God sees us as we really are, he still loves us. His love provided his son Jesus, who died and lives to help us become more and more the kind of people God himself wants us to be.

Don't be taken in by your own outward show. God isn't. Take a second look at him, and take a long look at yourself. The starting

point for change is arriving at the truth, not trying to hide it

2. IT'S ONLY BREAD

Sud. Pds. 1,000 will buy you some bread. Everyone knows that. You can choose from various types. There are long, thin breads sold from the back of a Toyota box. There are large round breads sold from roadside wooden tables in plastic bags. Different shops offer more variety, some even sliced loaves for Brits like me to feel more at home!



God made us to eat bread. Daily bread is something Jesus taught us to ask for in prayer. Twice he miraculously shared the little bread he had with thousands of people - at no cost to them! Some began following him, expecting to be fed like that everyday.

Even today I suspect some folk attend gatherings as much for 'the free lunch' as to give condolences at a funeral, or congratulations at a wedding, or even to learn from a specialist conference or class.

But those people heard Jesus say: "There is more to life than bread". Bread will feed your body, while only the words of God will

feed your spirit. People are not fully alive if they eat physical bread only. Those who live as Christians think about God's word, the Bible, in their everyday lives. As they chew it over in their minds it releases spiritual vitamins as evidenced by their healthy Christian choices.

When you next see a chap on his bicycle, with a five feet wide tray laden with bread, wobbling his way to the sales pitch, remember: people are designed by their Creator, to live on daily bread PLUS. This 'plus' is the much longer lasting and significant 'every word of God'.

Not everybody I see gives evidence of doing it. What about you?

3. BIRDS TEACH PEOPLE IN KHARTOUM.

Many of God's creations can teach us human beings valuable lessons. On the fifth day of creation God made 'winged birds' to 'fly above the earth'.

The weaver bird is one that lives in our city in several varieties. It is yellow and black, around fifteen centimetres long, with a touch of red on its face around the beak.



I was with a group of friends on the Sillette agriculture scheme recently, watching several of these birds 'weave' their nests. They make hollow balls of grasses, with a hole in the bottom for the door. These are suspended from tree branches, almost looking as if they are fruit. Their colonies are frequently noisy. A weaver flies hundreds of journeys backwards and forwards to gather materials and to build its family home. Surely God intends us to learn that we also must work to earn our food, our home, our family living?

We do not have a divinely given right to be fed and housed by our government, by our community or by outside helpers. We do have a divinely given responsibility to work hard. By this method God intends to provide for us. The earliest Christians knew this was true and they made a rule: "If a man will not work he shall not eat".

Our Lord Jesus said to his followers: "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" The birds work hard to gather and God provides for them as they do.

Let's learn this lesson from the birds.

4. FREEDOM AND ROAD RULES

Driving around Khartoum is more fun than driving in England, which is my home country. Here, I am able to start a new lane if my lane is full, even if it means traffic three or four cars wide on the road.

Here, I am allowed to go the wrong side of a roundabout (circle) or a divided road, sometimes I am even directed to do so by a policeman.

Here, I have the right of way if my vehicle is the biggest or if I get to the junction first. Here, I can change from lane to lane freely without signalling my intention. I can also push my way into moving traffic if I don't mind being shouted at for a few moments.



The question naturally arises: 'Why have any road rules at all?' The answer is surprising, unless you think about it for a bit. Rules actually give everybody on the road greater freedom.

People often think that rules stop freedom. In fact the reverse is

true. Rules encourage a spirit which gives everybody freedom, as long as everyone keeps them.

I believe 'Christians can obey God's laws if we follow after the Holy Spirit and no longer obey the old evil nature within us'. It is a matter of my choice. Remembering I live in the sight of God: will I choose to do what is right or will I choose to do what is wrong?

On a traffic light red means 'stop' while green means 'go'. Drivers know from experience during electricity cuts, there is little freedom at road junctions when people try to go as they want to whatever the colour of the light! The presence of police at busy junctions, trying to make sure the rules are obeyed, is aimed at keeping all the traffic flowing.

God wants Christians to follow the Holy Spirit's prompting and to obey his rules. The Bible teaches us to live as Jesus did, in the only way which pleases Father God. When we love God and we love our neighbour in the way the Creator intends, we promote God-given freedom in our society.

Both Old and New Testaments urge parents to teach their own children to learn and to keep God's laws. Jesus told us we display our personal love for God as we live by his commandments.

The rules of Christian living, applied by a person keeping in step with the Holy Spirit, are an attractive witness to those who stand by and watch. They speak more clearly than any words we say.

What do people see and hear from your life?

5. A SIGN OF THINGS TO COME?

When did you last see a crowd of people sitting outside a family home in the shelter of a temporary racooba? Perhaps it was a wedding, an engagement, or a death in the family.



My neighbour recently celebrated his younger brother's marriage. For several days a sense of expectancy built up. The family had made plans. The racooba was delivered on a truck and erected by men from the hire company. A guard or two slept in it overnight. Early next morning plastic chairs were delivered. Crates of drinks and pots of food came a little later. For those of us watching, all these things were a sign that something was going to happen.

Our Lord Jesus Christ told Christians to watch for the signs of his

returning to this world. The nearer it came, the more we would hear of civil and international war, natural disasters such as famine and earthquake, the persecution and execution of Christians, betrayal and deception in religions, and large numbers of Christians growing careless in their love for God. Can you see any of these around you today? These signs point out that Jesus is coming back soon.

The setting up of a racooba along your street could mean happiness or it could mean sorrow. For some Jesus' return will be a family celebration of life, acceptance by God and joy. But for others his return will be a family funeral of death, weeping and total hopelessness. Their wrong choices in this life will be reflected in their eternal destiny in the next.

The fact Jesus will return is absolutely certain. The date is unknown. The challenge for us all is to be ready to meet him when he does.



6. LIFE UNDER THE INFLUENCE.

The roadside railings on most of Khartoum's bridges show evidence of past accidents. Each dent, buckle and gap represents a moment of trauma or tragedy for someone.

I remember one day two years ago when a bus plunged from the Shambat bridge near my home, into the river Nile. Over a dozen people tragically died. Somehow the bus had broken out of control. From time to time since then, as I have walked across that same bridge, I have watched soldiers from a nearby camp in training . They appear to be required to jump from the bridge into the muddy brown water below. It seems well supervised, and so far as I know, no-one gets hurt.



There is a lesson we can all learn by noticing the biggest difference between the bus incident and the training soldiers. On one hand the people on the bus were unconsciously committed to a vehicle that went out of control, smashing through the railings, becoming the major part of a tragic accident. On the other hand the soldiers carefully and deliberately climbed on to the railings and jumped when the command was given, under the watchful eye of their officer and with safety ropes to hand.

As I look around I see too many people here who live carelessly pleasing themselves. To me, they give evidence that they are

Christians, whatever they may call themselves. Genuine Christians keep in step with God the Holy Spirit, all through their daily lives. Their life- choices always honour God. Their minds are controlled by the Spirit, who blesses them with the life and peace of Jesus Christ, in whatever circumstances they have to face.

Were we honest enough to admit it, some of our businesses, our homes and even our churches, may display the damage done by past incidents where somebody has been out of control. Much future trauma and tragedy in work life, home life and church life could be avoided simply, by submitting ourselves to the controlling influence of Jesus Christ, all of the time.

7. A BATTLE EVERYDAY IN MY GARDEN.

Where do you turn for protection when you see danger coming at you? King David wrote in Psalm 7, "My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart". God does not protect everyone from everything. But he does act as a shield for those whose lives seek to honour him.

Most days in my garden I witness a life and death battle. I know when it is happening because dozens of small birds noisily twitter, having assembled in the branches of my large trees. I used to

wonder what they were saying, but I now believe I know.



Looking up into the sky over the trees, I can see African Black Kites gliding in circles, sharp eyes searching everywhere for their supper. I reckon these smaller birds - a sparrow is only a quarter size of a kite - are warning each other. They say things like: "Stay in the shelter of the tree". "Why take risks?" "Flying out will expose you to great danger". "A skilful hunter is up above". "Don't trust yourself". "Your best protection is in these branches".



God has never promised to give Christians a trouble-free life. We are to expect trouble while we remain in this world. But he does offer a twofold protection:

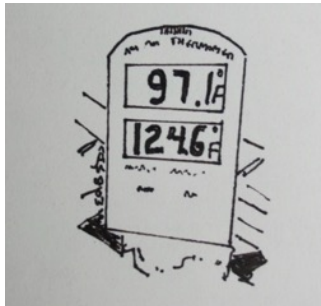
First, being upright and holy in all of our life's daily business will mean no true accusations can ever be brought against us.

Second, God has placed himself as a shield between us and

every enemy. All who would harm us must have his permission first.

8. CHANGE IS HERE TO STAY!

Winter seems to have finally arrived. This week, on my early morning walks across the Nile, I have seen bridge guards wrapped in blankets against the brisk wind, soldiers sitting around their charcoal fires, and I've even been stopped by a friendly man with a gun who asked me (unsuccessfully) for a cigarette to warm his hands!



What a change from summer, when folk were complaining it was too hot to sleep! This week the minimum temperature recorded on my hoash was 21 centigrade, that's six or seven degrees below the average for previous months.

Seasonal change is all part of God's plan for his world. After the flood, God promised Noah, "There will always be cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night. As long as the world exists, there will be a time for planting and a time for harvest". It helps me respond correctly when I know that all changes in my life are brought about by the guidance of my Father God. He is always reliable. He is never wrong. My God is always the same. He can never change for the better because he is already perfect. And

since he is awesome in his own self-sufficient holiness, he will never deteriorate.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. All the time, he is never more than man and never less than Almighty God. With God the Son as our ever-present friend, and with God the Spirit as our always able Counsellor, and with God our Sovereign Father in complete control of all things, we Christians have no need to be afraid of any change whatever.

9. A UNIFORM SCENT.

Most days we can see children going to or from local schools in their pale blue, khaki brown or light grey 'battledress' uniforms. Comboni students wear dark trousers with white shirts, and have a school name badge sewn on somewhere. Unity pupils wear navy, black and white. Kimu charitable school Soba Aradi requests royal blue and white, while 'neat discretion' is the dress code of the American School.



The very first Christians were noticed by those around them, simply

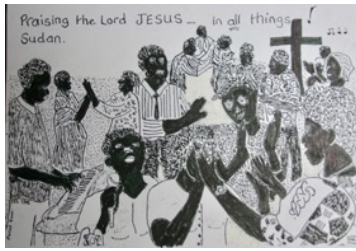
because "they were unschooled men, who had been with Jesus". It was not because they dressed in special clothing.

If you've been working with a smoky fire, the smell clings to your clothes and other people notice it. I turned a heap of composting vegetable and fruit peelings recently, and I could smell it on my person for days - even after several showers! Fishermen get so used to their particular aroma that I'm told they hardly ever notice it, although other people might find them high!

Genuine Christians living among people from other faiths (or none) will emit catching fragrances. Their intimate relationship with Jesus Christ is attractive. Its 'sweet forgiveness', 'gentle peace', 'sacrificial love', and 'solid hope' make onlookers sometimes wish they could they could have these perfumes for themselves.

Compulsory uniforms display to which school a child belongs. Pervading odours reveal where a person has been, or what they have just been doing.

As you walk through your everyday life this week, pray that heads around you will turn to look. Pray people will notice you belong to, and have been with, Jesus. This is the attraction all the people of Sudan need to see.



10. INCARNATION MORE REMARKABLE THAN EVOLUTION

Today there are just ten days left until Christmas. We celebrate again arguably the most unique event that ever happened in human history.

An incarnation (with lower case 'i'), is the act of showing oneself in bodily form. Christian theology teaches the Incarnation (with capital 'I'), is the assuming of a human body by God the Son. I believe that God showed himself in human form as Jesus Christ.

Evolution is a theory some scientists believe, to try and explain the gradual changes in plants, animals and humans, which produce today's species from ancestors characteristically unlike themselves.

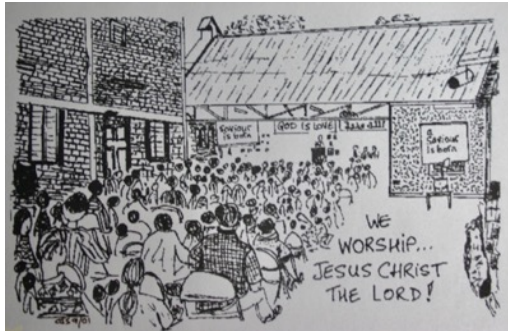
God our Creator knew humankind could never evolve sufficiently to recover everything we lost at 'the Fall'. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, our most important relationship was broken. People are still made to relate to God, but that single disobedience has become a solid barrier which no purely human being can cross by their own effort.

Our ancestors were sinners before the Holy Creator God, and so are we. Like them, we are separated from God. No amount of our praying, fasting, charitable work, or otherwise good living, will ever remedy our situation. And that is how things would have permanently remained for everyone, except God has stepped into our world. God appeared as a baby born in a stable at Bethlehem. His divine Father and human mother named him 'Jesus'. He was the precise representation of God. His nature was God. He was man as God intended man to be.

Don't misunderstand me please. God the Son always existed. Long before this he spoke our world into creation. At Christmas, we Christians remember the fact that this already living God the Son became flesh. He lived for a while among people. This would be unbelievable if it were not gloriously true!

You and I can never evolve on our own into a right relationship with God. God's Incarnation as Jesus provides the only acceptable Saviour. In Jesus' birth, life and death, God himself removes the barrier between him and us.

So the way to a truly Happy Christmas is opened. Ask God the Son to make you a child of God. I have found this Jesus remarkably worthy of my trust. I'm sure you will too.



11. THE STREETLIGHT, THE STAR AND THE SAVIOUR.

The immense miracle of Christmas can be discovered from looking at the streetlights and stars, as well as the angel's message to Joseph in Matthew 1:20,21.

Jesus

The baby about to be born to Mary was her first. He was a real boy, a fully human being, an absolute miracle-birth without human father.

The name 'Jesus' was popular. It means: 'God saves'. Mary's son would be exactly as the angel had told her.

Son of God

This baby was conceived from God the Holy Spirit. The created human embryo enclosed the previously existing God the Son. Like any baby, Jesus would resemble his Father. He would exactly represent God to people. He would help them understand by faith. In Jesus God had taken human form. A Christmas miracle!

Saviour

As both fully human and fully divine, this unique Jesus would be the Saviour humankind needed. He was God bringing us back to a right relationship with himself. Jesus' life of sinless perfection showed God's holiness. His death was unnecessary, as only sinners have to die. Yet at every communion service Christians remember the fact Jesus *did* die. He lived as God's representative and died as man's substitute. He died to save his people from their sins, just like the angel said he would. He made the miracle of personal salvation possible.



Streetlights and stars.

When you're walking along a city street at night you may be able to see electric streetlights on poles about five metres above your head.

Behind those lights are smaller looking stars, twinkling away in the dark sky. The stars are thousands of miles distant, not just a few metres. This makes them appear to be smaller and less bright than streetlights. But reality is not what it appears! Each star is far bigger than our own sun and many times more powerful than any streetlight! Yet from our usual perspective, it doesn't look that way.

Some people have a wrong view of who this Christmas Jesus really is. He actually is 'Jesus, Son of God, and Saviour', to all who believe.

12. OUTSIDE THE CINEMA, INSIDE CHRISTIANITY?

First thing some mornings I meet a group of friends at Burri cinema. As far as I know, none of us has ever been into it. We know where it is. We tell others how to get there. We assemble on the open ground outside, which is also used as a car park by battered yellow taxis. While there we can look at posters advertising which movie is 'now showing' or 'coming soon'. But I don't think anyone of us has ever been inside to watch a film.



My friends and I treat that cinema as some people treat Christianity. We meet outside it. In all our arrangements it is central. But as soon as we have met there, and we've sorted who is going in which car, off we go for a bird-watching expedition around the Sillette, or Gereif, East Blue Nile or the Umm Dom stream. We leave the cinema far behind while we do what we want to do with our own lives.

Some people abuse church or Christianity like that. They talk about Christianity, using the right-sounding words. They meet others by church buildings. They are aware of all the programmes that happen. But they never actually take part in real Christianity. They use the church, or the name 'Christian', for their own agenda.

Real Christianity is only for those who are committed to following Jesus Christ with every part of their lives. Jesus lived, from his Christmas cradle to his pre-Easter cross, totally conscious of the personal cost he was paying to honour God with 100% of his life. He accepted being persecuted without complaint. He did not answer false charges made against him. He always displayed truthfulness in speech. He was integrity in action. He spontaneously showed concerned love for other people. He followed up completely on his Father's plan .

As this old year ends and a new one begins, check up on yourself as I do on myself. Though you say you are a Christian, are you inside or outside of real Christianity? Do you follow your own agenda or the written will of Jesus Christ? Do you use the church for your own purposes or for God's? Do you call people to honour every word Jesus said, or just the selected few which suit your theme?

Real disciples of Jesus Christ are lights that burn brightly outside in the darkness, because inside his holiness sets them on fire.

13. CHOOSE THE RIGHT BUS!

You can travel by bus almost anywhere in our three cities and their surrounding urban sprawl. At major road junctions, buses disgorge their passengers who wish to get off, while the drivers assistants' repeatedly shout the names of the places their buses are headed towards. Where you end up will be decided by which bus you climb on to.



At the start of another year, this is an important thought on a wider scene. There are many directions a person can take in life. Choices we make now will determine our future situation.

My wife and I recently entertained a family for tea. Over Irish cheese, English pickle and crackers, followed by a New Zealand-made Christmas cake, we learned that our 18 year old neighbour wanted to become a medical doctor. Her goal governed her present choices for study at university. Her qualifications and specialities as

a future doctor are being determined by choices she is making now. This is also true in the realm of religion . 'Where you end up will be decided by which you are on' .

A lot of people in the post-Christian west reckon that all religions are the same and ultimately people who follow them will all end up together. This is definitely not true.

Even a basic comparison between an Islamic view and a Christian view of Jesus shows big differences. One takes Jesus to be a prophet, who taught many good things, but who did not die on a cross, and whose teaching has been later superseded. Christian views of Jesus as "the Son from God, the Saviour of all who believe, God's complete revelation of himself", are fundamentally different. A person's eternal destiny depends on which route they chose to take.

There are many improved bus shelters being erected on our city streets. The best of them offer sign boards stating where the buses that pass will take you, as well as giving shelter from the sun for everyone waiting. It's up to the passenger, to decide which bus he or she will take.

The rest of your journey through life begins now. Choose the only Saviour God has provided who will take you to heaven.

14. IS CHARCOAL MORE USEFUL THAN YOU?

Since you want to make your life useful, take a lesson from a humble piece of charcoal.

Charcoal is a black amorphous form of carbon, made by heating wood or other organic matter, in the absence of air. It is useful as a fuel. We see charcoal cooking 'fuul masri' in narrow necked pots along many of our streets. If you are hungry, take your container, and for a small charge you can enjoy a good meal.



The charcoal gives itself away in serving others. Imagine at one time you were a fine tree, growing in the countryside. You lived in one place, getting bigger and stronger. You drew nutrients from the ground to feed yourself. You had some limited use, giving shade to people who sought it, and providing nest sites for landing birds. But suppose the woodcutter came one day and told you of a much greater need. The weather was cold and people needed to be warm. They were hungry and the beans needed to be cooked. Many flies and mosquitoes would be driven away if incense was burned. Would you pay the price of being really useful?

Cut down, split apart, choked in an airless fire, broken into small

pieces and sold off in small amounts to a variety of people. Taken throughout the city to many areas you've never been before. Set into braziers, ovens and barbeque fires. Being really useful to a lot of people. Helping to feed some, keeping others warm, and protecting more from insect borne disease.

It costs to be of maximum use to God. Remember the words of Jesus: "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple". Fiery trials refine Christian faith. They prove the genuine Jesus Christ to others. His love is seen as we lay down our own lives for the benefit of those around us.



15. TIME TO WAKE UP!

What wakes you up in the morning? It could be a prayer call from the local mosque. May be it's an alarm clock. Perhaps the approaching daylight, a nearby cockerel, or you've simply had enough sleep!



Do you like getting up in the morning? On these cold winter days, it seems nicer to stay wrapped up on the bed. Under your sheet you may think immediately of the challenges and difficulties of the day ahead. It could be easier to stay in bed and let the world just happen. 'Do I really have to get up'?

Jeremiah was one of God's people in the past. He suffered a lot because of what he believed. When he was feeling 'down' - and it seems that was quite often - he always tried to look beyond the events of his world. He wanted to see what God was doing behind the scenes. He knew that the Sovereign Lord God was far more important than any earthly ruler and could even make their oppressive actions serve to advance his own overarching purpose.

Jeremiah accepted darkness, weariness, hardship, obstacles and painful experiences, as all coming, directly or indirectly, from the hand of God. He responded with faith, not in fatalism. He saw that running through all of his sufferings was the rich seam of God's grace. 'If I'm alive enough to grumble at what's happening, God has at the very least saved my life!' Wake up and be thankful.

I hear a number of people complaining about life. "My employer has done this". "The government has done that". "I don't have enough work to meet the bills". Our newspapers trumpet this every day.

Perhaps we need to call to our minds Jeremiah's secret of confidence?

He wrote: I remember my bitterness. My soul is downcast. Yet, "I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is his faithfulness".

Daily life is much better when your first two thoughts on waking up are: 'God has given me another day here to live for Jesus. And I'm going to make the most of it, to honour him'.

16. THE OLD WAYS DIE HARD.

It was during May 1992 that our Sudanese authorities converted the main denomination of our currency from 'the pound' to 'the dinar'. Yet still today many people I meet tend to use the old currency, at least in their speech.

It was in the year 2000 that our government changed the time by a one hour period. A few folk I know continue living on the old, they say "the real", time.



When you shop, do you buy bread for one thousand pounds or one hundred dinars? Are Pepsi's 500 or 50? If you are arranging to meet someone, do you set the appointment for 4pm Egyptian Standard Time or East African Standard Time? Perhaps 'insha allah' covers both anyway?

All of us find it hard to let go of old, familiar things and embrace new. If we are not convinced in our minds of the need for change, we make it even harder for ourselves to do it.

The early Christian believers had problems leaving their old ways and learning to live Christianly. I think modern day believers do too! Leaving behind selfishness, hard-heartedness, bad habits, rigid traditions, greed for personal gain or self-satisfaction, is not easy. Every human being has a natural bias towards pleasing ourselves. Our skin colours may be different, but our blood colour is all the same. We all naturally sin.

The few real Christian believers today who have learned to 'put off their old selves and put on the new', stand out from the rest. They show they have learned a life-changing secret. By letting Jesus'

thoughts control their own attitudes, their daily lives are different. They exhibit truth, forgiveness, honest work, kind consideration of others, and speak only pure talk.

Sadly, some Christians hang on to their pre-Christian ways of life. There is no attractive holiness, and no outward evidence that God has made them brand new people inside. My guess is that he probably hasn't been allowed to!

The next time you spend 'pounds' in the suk, ask yourself the following question. "What old things are still in my life that I should ask God's help in order to change?"

17. WALKING IN THE DARK.

The future sometimes seems to be gloomy and threatening. Life is being endured rather than enjoyed. Is there anywhere we can turn to be safe in the darkness of uncertainty?

Early most mornings I walk across the Shambat bridge towards Omdurman and then back to my home in Bahri. I pray as I walk. This morning it was totally dark. There were no lights working at all on the bridge. There were no visible stars and the thin, crescent moon was hidden behind thick clouds. It was very hard to see where I was walking.

I chose to keep to the south side path going from home, and the north side on my return. I have walked them so often I know where the paving slabs stop and start. I know where drain gullies are. I know where inspection covers are missing, leaving a potentially 'leg-breaking' hole! Familiarity with the routes helps me to walk confidently.



Of course there are variable factors. Where is the 'spare' section of fencing left lying today? Where are traffic cones displaced from the centre of the road by night-time vehicles (or vandals)? Where are the small piles of bricks left by people who have had to change a punctured tyre? Is the long electric cable from one missing lamp-post rolled up and tied to the fence today, or uncoiled and splayed across the path like a trap for an unsuspecting animal? Being aware of the possible dangers does make me walk carefully!

As we face into the dark future of our lives we can take three lessons from my morning walks. First, be confident based on past experience. Use the lessons we've learned before, to help us now. Second, be careful. Expect the unexpected. Be prepared to change course to keep safe. Adapting to changing circumstances is part of

life's excitement. And third, enjoy even the little light we have. Use it to maximum benefit.

Remember that Jesus is the "Light of the world". He offers to be present with those who keep in step with him. With God's presence as our guide, there is nothing, and no-one, we need to fear.

18. THE TEST OF LIGHT.

On the east side of Omdurman, by the Shambat bridge over the river Nile, are two large advertisements. One is for cola to drink, the other is for paint. The former is standing high on its own purpose built tower. The latter is smaller, lower, and only attached to the side of a block of apartments where people live and work. Both the advertisements want people to buy their products.

During the daytime, driving across the bridge going west, the cola advert is most easily seen. It is the first to be passed, closest to the river bank. Its blue, red and white colours make it almost unmissable. The paint advert is there too, but it has to take second place rather than first.



However, during the darkness of the night, the effectiveness of

these two adverts is reversed. The colours of the paint company are bright and clearly seen. The brand name is the prominent centre of focus.

The difference between these two adverts is simple. Only one has the continuing presence of light during the darkness. The cola-daubed water tank almost disappears in the darkness. There are few, if any, lights on it or near it. Yet the paint advert becomes outstanding by the brilliant highlighting floodlights. They make it obvious against the dark sky.

I think this is a good example of a way to compare religious faiths. Some people naively think that 'all religions are the same'. That is simply not true! Other people judge a religion by outward show. They look at the dominance of buildings, the numbers of population, and appearance of visible rituals, to assess who has the truth. I think there is a much better test.

In the darkness of troubles and trials, in the black times of painful persecution, and in the mysteries of suffering and sorrow, ask from which religion does 'the light' really shine? I am not writing of electric fluorescent tubes. I am thinking about 'the light' of mental understanding and of spiritual insight. The Lord Jesus Christ himself is, 'the light of the world'. His light is the light that can be seen

piercing the darkness from the lives of all genuine Christian disciples.

Whoever decides to follow Jesus, and whoever keeps on following when the difficulties of life come along, he or she will never walk in darkness, but will have 'the light of life'.

19. KEEPING THE DEVIL AWAY!

Along many of our main roads, groups of men sweeping the dust can be regularly seen. In Bahri recently they seem to have been issued with smart, blue uniforms. Their supply of brooms as well as their buckets on wheels are interesting to look at. One can notice, by looking carefully, how much work has actually been done with each broom. The dirtiest uniforms and the most well-worn brushes are usually in the hands of the man who is working the hardest.



The aim of these men and their sweeping programme is to keep our roads clear of dust and sand, and therefore make travelling safer - enabling traffic to stop in an emergency, rather than slip and slide into an accident. It surely is a never ending task. Perhaps, like me, you have noticed neat piles of dust by the kerbside awaiting

collection. But often they are blown away by the wind, or scattered by passing cars, even kicked by mischievous boys! Dust left alone does not stay put! I have also seen workmen emptying their buckets over the side of Kober bridge and into the Blue Nile! No wonder the water is brown not blue!

The lesson from life for me is simple. Sin is like the dust. Give it half a chance and it will get in to your life everywhere. Living in a sinful world as we all do, makes it tough to keep spiritually clean. Tough, yes. Impossible, no!

God tells Christians not to give the Devil a foothold in their lives. If he is given an inch he will seize a mile. Tolerated a little bit, he uses that 'little' like the thin end of a wedge to gain more and more. Christians who do not keep up their hard work against sin and Satan will soon have lives as poor as Khartoum's uncleared streets.

Jesus is our Saviour. He saves us from sin and Satan. Why do so many Christians play dangerously with things Jesus clearly warned us about? It breaks the greatest commandment if we love something else more than we love and honour our Saviour.

Have a good week. But don't give the devil a chance to spoil your walk with God.



20. WASHED UP AND CLEAN.

I have often thought that if only I could find a profitable business for once-used metal soda bottle caps, I'd be a rich man. There are thousands of them lying discarded outside every burger shop, hundreds left on the ground after a wedding party, tens after church committees etc. I do notice that some churches creatively use a few to rattle rhythmically along with their praise songs.



Of course it is only the caps that are discarded. The bottles themselves are recycled. Collected into crates, the lorries return them to the drink factories, where they are sorted, checked for breakages, and thoroughly cleaned using heat and steam. Only after this can they be filled and used again.

A Christian who wants to be regularly used by God must expect to be put through a tough cleansing process. If hygiene is vital to a

drinks company, spiritual cleanliness is even more essential to a Christian. God will not use people who keep on disobeying his commands. He will not choose people who 'say' they belong to him, but who 'live' as if they do not.

The death of Jesus Christ on a cross is God's method of cleansing human lives from everything unholy. Jesus took human sin on to himself and died as its consequence. You and I can receive the holiness of Jesus into our own lives, in direct proportion to our genuine repentance and willing obedience to God.

Many Christians should learn to throw the rubbish out of their lives. Why do we play around with the very things Jesus died to save us from? If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us and purify us through the blood of his son, Jesus.

Only when I learn to be a clean Christian do I share the full riches of God's mercy.

21. WAITING FOR A REPLY.

The growing number of Internet cafes in our city reflect a great desire for knowledge and communication. Email addresses and mobile phone numbers are shared with friends because all of us love people

to be in direct contact with us. Friends from my church who have moved away to work elsewhere have recently sent electronic letters here to us in Sudan. We've heard from Russia, Malaysia, Ghana, Northern Ireland, Malawi, Germany, Austria and the USA.



Receiving such communication brings with it the responsibility of answering it! When your phone rings or if someone knocks at your gate, you have to respond, or else the communication stops.

Around Easter time Christians remember especially that God has spoken to the people of the world by his son, Jesus. Jesus radiates God's glory and represents God's being to us in a way we can begin to understand.

The resurrection of Jesus, after his verified Roman execution, speaks of the forever living God. This God wants all people to share eternal life with him. Human rebellion against God disqualifies a person from entry into heaven. Jesus' death has made a reconciliation with God possible.

If God phoned you particularly, would you answer? If God emailed you would you use your mouse to click 'reply'? Since God has spoken

to you by his son Jesus, what reply have you said back to him?
When doubting Thomas met the risen Jesus he said: "You are my Lord and my God". Jesus ended that conversation with a wonderful promise you and I can both claim. "Blessed by God are those who have not seen Jesus' resurrection physically, but have still believed it".

Happy Easter!

22. ARE YOU READY TO GO?

Between 5 and 7 most mornings the big buses ready for the longer journeys - to places like El Obied, Kost, Shendi and Atbara - turn on their engines to warm up and the drivers sound their horns to let passengers know of imminent departure.

'This bus is going to leave. Take your seat now, or it will go without you. Your chosen destination will be lost'. The bus stations are a hive of activity around this time as bleary-eyed people buy snacks for the journey, before stowing their luggage (usually on the roof) and boarding 'their' bus.



The sound of blaring bus horns is a reminder of an ultimate departure which none of us can avoid. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is going to return to this world. He is going to take believers with him into heaven. He is also going to direct unbelievers into eternity lost.

Wars in our world, and rumours of wars, are signs pointing towards the end of time. Fearful natural disasters and rampant plague diseases are other signs. Jesus himself said people should "look up" when they see these, because the time of his return is fast approaching.

Our radio and TV news bulletins everyday tell us of events which can be interpreted as these signs. Do they make you consider your life after this one finishes? Are you ready for the future God wants you to have?

Now is the time to do what you need to do, and be made right with God, before Jesus returns. It is essential to personally get to know Jesus, who alone is the true way to eternal life.

You may catch another bus, but you will never find a different Saviour.



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