



Trouble in Paradise

“Zimbabwe: Africa’s Paradise,” tout the old government tourism posters on my wall, with their breathtaking photographs of Victoria Falls, Great Zimbabwe, the Eastern Highlands, and the Matopos Hills. They are right, at least in regard to Zimbabwe as God’s natural creation. Its beauty is stunning.

On a recent Sunday, at lunch in an outdoor café in Harare Gardens (think of Central Park), I could almost believe in paradise again. The juxtaposition of bright purple jacarandas and brilliant red flame trees startled the senses, especially when accompanied by the almost intoxicatingly sweet aroma of the frangipani. Even the young couple smooching in the bushes seemed just about right.

But there was trouble in paradise—strikingly symbolized by two things: First, during the entire lunch hour, I *was* the clientele in that restaurant. In a country where most have no work and where those who do (my waiter) must work three days to buy a loaf of bread, there aren’t a lot of local people flocking to restaurants. Second, and more bizarre, as I walked in the park after lunch, I came upon the blackened carcass of a single stately palm, still standing but burnt to a crisp along with a ten-foot circle of grass at its base. How do you have a forest fire involving one tree? Answer (as I learned from the young entrepreneurs selling pictures of the event taken even as it had unfolded): lightning, which a few days earlier had zapped and incinerated this centerpiece of the garden. Oh, my! A wound in the center of Eden. A tree of death, no less. A sign? A parable? God’s gigantic black exclamation point, signaling broader disaster?

Whatever the tree “meant” (all signs require explanation!), the disaster is real. “Our country is finished,” said my waiter—a longtime friend from my many visits there. And this time, it seems, his apocalyptic rhetoric might be right—at least, penultimately. That morning in church an official of the Lutheran Development Service, recently returned from the rural areas, told me, “There is no food. And people are beginning to die.” Another good friend, living in a “high-density suburb” (black township) of Harare, told me that her friends were eating leaves because they had nothing else. This in a country that was once “Africa’s breadbasket”—and, by all counts, could and should still be. For here, it was not God who failed. The disaster derives from greed and corruption, mismanagement and ideological tyranny. Thus, the justification, perhaps, for seeing that terrible dead palm as God’s own mark of disapproval. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these....”

A local columnist that same week noted, “The veneer of normalcy hanging over Zimbabwe is rapidly disintegrating.”* She is right, I think. At first glance, the veneer holds: people are up and about, lights go on (mostly), kids play, and, well, no, the buses *don't* run on time, since they can't buy fuel. The government polishes the veneer, though, assuring tourists that there is no threat (while curiously at the same time announcing a special police force to deal with crime against tourists and, by the way, illegally stopping them and seizing their foreign currency) and insisting that all the country's problems are caused by evil forces from without who just don't like the expedient but destructive “land reform programme.” (The government recently claimed that this program has “benefitted” over 300,000 families—certainly an exaggeration—somehow omitting reference to the 1,000,000 black farm workers expelled from those same farms and now forced into poverty.) But quick conversation with anybody reveals the rot beneath the surface and the despair of a once happy and prosperous people. Their mood is, in fact, apocalyptic.

The violence of veneer: papering over the faults, creating scapegoats, reaping the benefits of power while covering up the terrible consequences of its unjust use. We have our own veneer, I suppose: the veneer of bread and circuses that covers some deep problems in our own society—but at least there *is* bread. There is physical violence in Zimbabwe, too—most recently the government's heavy-handed response to a peaceful protest by the trade unions while I was there—and the fear is that unless the present troubles are honestly faced and unless there is some return to a just order, the physical violence will erupt in ways that will turn the whole country into something like that lone burnt palm. God forbid. If God did the palm, maybe God can do something positive for these people. But, as usual, that will involve human participation: interpreting the signs, telling the story, feeding the poor, bringing liberty to the captives. There's work to do.

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*Cathy Buckle, “Zimbabwe fast retreating into the dark ages,” *Zimbabwe Independent*, 14 November 2003, 16.