

Palm Sunday in Malawi
Another story from Butterfly Space
(www.butterfly-space.com)
Registered charity:1148162
by Gill Leaper

This year I ventured down the road to St Mary's church on my own for the Palm Sunday service as Chris, my husband, was busy building the NAYT set. The rain was bucketing down and I struggled to keep my umbrella from blowing inside out in the persistent wind. All very different from the Palm Sunday service I attended in 2012 at St George's church in Nkhata Bay, Malawi.

Alice's Mother-in-law, Kumbu's Mum is an Anglican and worships at St George's. Our ability to communicate with each other is extremely limited but when she arrived at Butterfly Space one time wearing her Mothers' Union chitenge (the traditional wrap around cloth) we had a revelatory break through and ever since I have been able to take her MU items and magazines to look at. Consequently she invited me to accompany her to church on Palm Sunday, 2012. Alice and Kumbu were away on their belated honeymoon. My Grand-daughter, Ezmeekie, then 4 years old was persuaded to join us and told to change into a dress before we left. A cousin, also called Alice, came too and thank goodness because she was an invaluable help later on.

Chris stayed behind at Butterfly Space working on an art project. Neither of us realised it would be nearly 6 hours later when met again by which time he was rather worried.

Kumbu's Mum, duly arrived around 9.00am to escort me to church. I had a vague idea where it was situated but did not anticipate how long it would take us to get there. This time she was wearing her blue and white chitenge choir outfit with white bandana. It was hot and sticky as we walked up and down dirt tracks, some on very steep inclines, some still boggy from the seasonal rains. Monkeys chattered, birds squawked and twittered in the trees. The undergrowth was thick and verdant thanks to the ongoing rainy season. After an hour and a quarter we arrived at St George's in which approximately 800 people were worshipping. The building is brick built, about the size of half a football pitch. All the congregation were seated on wooden benches listening to the 3 leaders reading from pieces of paper for over half an hour. The service had already been in progress a couple of hours whilst the 300 strong Sunday

School children were fashioning Palm crosses out of palm branches just lopped down from nearby trees. These were distributed later.

The altar was a simple table covered with a cloth on which candles were lit, blown out and relit frequently. A wooden cross was the centrepiece. There was incense wafting from swinging thuribles and bells were rung throughout the service. 2 choirs sang individually: the women and the youths. I was brought to tears as the women sang whilst gently moving to and fro. I frequently find myself spiritually uplifted and reduced to tears in Malawi. It is not in the Malawian culture to cry so I must be quite a spectacle for those around me once I start blubbing.

I understood very little but more clarity came when we all said the Peace and greeted each other warmly. Giving the collection was a very energetic moment in the service. All the men in the congregation began the giving by dancing, clapping and singing around the church dropping their notes into the Offertory plate as they passed by it. The women, including me, followed later doing the same. Remember please that Malawi is the poorest country in the world but these people were nevertheless giving. Straw mats were placed in front of the altar for communion. The Sunday School group came first to be blessed by the vicar and then the rest of the congregation steadily approached the altar to take communion.

All in all the service lasted 3 and a half hours whilst I was there, remember though it had started long before our arrival. Straight after the service the congregation set to and formed a chain gang to move bricks from one location to another to build some foundations for a new church. Young Alice, Ezmeekie and I left Kumbu's Mum in church doing some committee work and we trudged back to Butterfly Space. Young Alice carried Ezmeekie on her back in typical Malawi style, wrapped in a chitenge, and she was lulled to sleep.

(Alice is now building a full Primary School at Butterfly Space. Can you help? Please contact me on 01454-411910)

