

Uma carta do Brasil

('a letter from Brazil' - with apologies to Alastair Cooke)

by A.Stewart

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'Jesus te chama' and the meaning in suffering

Last night we wandered into an area of town we had not seen before where the shops, the houses and the cars were all that little bit newer and less dusty than the rest of Arujá. As we walked along a smart white beetle came scudding up the hill and suddenly there was a crack and its back wheel came off and rolled into a sidestreet. The driver peered out the window at the axle sparking along the road and she pulled in to stop. I walked back to retrieve the wheel, smiling in disbelief at what I had just seen, and rolled the tyre across to where the girl stood outside her car on her mobile phone, stamping her knee length boots in annoyance.

Why had I never seen that before? Is it a parable on the value of the great British MOT system? Possibly, but to me it was symbolic of something else I am noticing about life in Brazil. How can I begin to describe it – there is an aspect of vivid reality about living, a 'realness' that makes life in London seem somehow artificial. It's a reality that means life here is not necessarily more fragile but certainly that death seems closer and a much more 'everyday' occurrence - broken down vehicles, abandoned houses, starving dogs, barefoot child beggars. Tragedy – especially death in travel seems so common here, but are people used to it? Not at all, people are devastated, lives are ruined. You cannot remain human and get used to these sorts of things.

In our first week staying with veteran missionaries we heard many stories of successes, of the beginnings and growth of the work, of God's blessings. But I remember almost feeling overwhelmed with the equal number of tales of tragedy and that even the success stories were peppered with seemingly 'hopeless' death. That first weekend we heard that the missionary parents of a lady in the local church were in trouble. They had organised a conference which 20 Indian leaders were attending, and as they converged news came that the small aeroplane carrying three of the Indians had come down and all occupants including the pilot were missing, presumed dead. In British terms we would say that plane crashes on small internal flights in Brazil are 'very common', but the horror of this does not diminish an individual incident for the Brazilians. The chiefs of the dead Indians tribes reacted very badly – the uproar included threats of death to the missionaries and a burning down of the mission station. The news reached us at church on Sunday morning and was repeated

many times as a prayer request for the missionaries and the families of the dead Indians. This was not just another air tragedy – the reaction was heartfelt concern and pain, and a response of fervent prayer.

After two days of much prayer and repeated phonecalls for updates the crisis had passed. Local traders had refused to sell the chiefs the large quantity of gasoline they demanded. One of the chiefs had relented and gone on radio to discourage the other two from going ahead with their threats. The father of one of the dead Indians had attempted to commit suicide but was now receiving counselling from the missionaries. The brother of the dead pilot had become a Christian. Another related couple had re-committed their life to Christ. And so it went on.

This is the other thing I have noticed about tragedy and it's effects - God works through it in a way that is often as dramatic as the tragedy itself. It doesn't diminish the pain and loss, but it does bring some comfort and strength of Christian hope that I haven't found as common in Britain. Here there seems to be a much fuller meaning found in suffering.

Early in our stay I noted that there were an amazing number of Volkswagen cars on the road, and in particular a huge number of Beetles and 'combis'. The latter I was told has a nickname here – "Jesus se chama" which means 'Jesus calls you'. This is a reference to the fact that there is no bonnet on the car, so the driver and front passenger look out onto the road. If you are involved in a crash on the dangerous roads basically you haven't got a chance – Jesus is calling you home!

Maybe this is morbid humour or perhaps a way of coping with the amount of death that pervades life. Many Brazilians have a relative who was killed in a car or bus or plane crash, but they usually have another family member who became a Christian as a result. The humour isn't just to cope, to try and normalise tragedy, their reaction is sincere and impressive to me in its example of casting one's self upon God's mercy. Jesus may be calling you, it seems to me like he calls so many, but that is life, and though full of sadness it can be full of joy because there are always many meanings in suffering.

Hope for fear?

We have one friend here who is teaching me much about this country. Her name is 'Medo' – at least that is what we call her. Let me explain why. I first saw her when I was getting the bikes out from under the stairs last Saturday. There she was, right in the corner on the cement floor, trembling – a little brown and white dog. I took a closer look and realised she was in bad shape. I could clearly see the shape of her ribcage, in fact, most of her bones. Her hair was mangled and falling out in chunks, and one ear had been torn and was healing poorly. Her knees were bald and the pink skin was oozing some fluid; her eyes were half covered with the blue-white film of cataracts. She chewed at her body, probably in pain from ticks, fleas and parasite fly maggots living under her skin. She smelled very badly and above all - she was afraid. Every movement I made towards her caused her to flinch and tremble more. This dog must have been seriously abused, this dog was fear (medo) personified and she was dying on our doorstep.

So we informed the college authorities. They shook their heads in pity, and said they would deal with it. Dealing with it meant moving her on. She was an unwanted stray, a wreck of an animal, not worth saving, and not anyone's problem or responsibility.

I don't know where they took her but she seemed to think that under our stairs was safe and so she came back. She was removed. She came back. We realised she was not going to move, and that the authorities could do nothing more, and finally as we watched her we also realised she would die soon. Would we sit and stare? What can we do? Just a couple of naïve gringos, with no means of obtaining help.

We started to feed her, not really thinking about where it would lead. Would we get into trouble? We just couldn't let a dog die on our doorstep – not even 'Medo'. We began with bread and milk – it was all we had. Have you ever seen a starving dog eat? A dog so weak it can barely move? I was humbled. It's four days later now, we leave here in six more days, that's Medo's deadline to get on her feet. She's having three square meals a day now – dogfood, sausages and vitamin drops. It may all be in vain – she may starve after we leave; she may lose a fight with another stray (they're aggressive about territory); she may have chronic worms – are we feeding a black hole? *Is it worth helping the helpless?*

I have fed her many times over these few days and I have had much time to sit and watch her and to think about her suffering, her hopelessness. She's only a dog – strays are

common here, they usually move in twos or threes, hang around towns staying out of the way of humans (to avoid abuse), scrounging for food. Poor people are common too, and in many areas, homeless. After a while you don't really notice them on the streets. Like the strays, they keep a low profile and you look through them or beyond them. There is poverty everywhere in Brasil – people suffering everywhere. Then I think of the Northeast, the poorest part and feel a sickness in the pit of my stomach when I remember the scandal of the drought industry. What do I know of suffering, what have I seen - nothing! And that is why I have no idea what to do when a dying dog turns up on my doorstep.

How many Bible studies have I led on 'The problem of suffering'? How many of them have involved spending time with people who are actually suffering? In this society I suppose the suffering can be more obvious – on the street, in my face – and so much more difficult to avoid than in London. It's everywhere and the scale is *so* big. What hope is there?

All I can untangle from this mixture of guilt and sympathy is the simple answer – there is no hope except what you offer. *You* are the only hope – as much as you give, as much as you are prepared to give – that is the only hope. We are the only hope for 'Medo' - we cannot wait for the groundsman, the missionary, or the lecturer to come up with a solution. *We see the hopelessness and in doing so we become the hope.* This realisation comes with a new worry – how much hope can I give? How much will be asked of me in this particular situation? We sketched, in the vaguest terms, a couple of possible scenarios of how to tell 'Medo' that after next Monday she had to move on, but really we had no idea how to. Our hope can only be offered for today and that's how we've given it.

The other thought I keep having as I watch her eat is 'perfect love casts out fear', in Portuguese, 'o perfeito amor afasta o medo'. Every meal she flinches a little less, and her shivers lessen. Tonight as she was eating, I put my hand on her filthy boney back and the trembling stopped.

It's two days since I wrote the above and 'Medo' has gone. She took leave of her own accord in the end. No clues, just gone. Apparently we had helped enough, we had given all the hope that was required.

Time Zones

A few years ago I went on a short trip to India. I travelled east from the UK and as we landed the first officer kindly instructed us how to adjust our watches, telling us how many hours ahead we had moved. As I watched multiple lanes of traffic in the taxi from the airport the thought struck me that rather than going forward in time it seemed we had gone back several decades. Due to India's tight import/export laws and limited development of technology we seemed to have arrived somewhere in the middle of the 1950s. The old fashioned cars, the lorries and even the buildings covered in reddish brown dust gave vistas like old sepia coloured photographs.

When I arrived in Brasil I immediately began assessing the culture. A gringo always cringes when a fellow-gringo compares life here with that back home but in a way the criticism is hypocritical because it's what we're doing in our heads all the time. We continuously try to get our bearings, and figure out how things hang together, and many of us attempt to find similarities between new cultural experiences and old habits from our home country as a source of security. In the case of Brasil, I think life is just too different. I also found myself trying to determine what stage of development Brasil was at – after all it's a developing country, so where has it got to? Upon consideration, this is an odd question – what exactly does development mean and by what standard am I judging it - the great civilised West? I suppose my interest is a more specific one in that I'd like to try and figure out 'where the country is at' and also 'where the church is at' – in order to determine an approach to working here. There seems little point in suggesting evangelistic strategies used in 90s London to a church equivalent to a 50s American Baptist model in a culture equivalent to 70s Britain in moral stance. Let me explain what I mean.

When I talk about development I am not primarily interested in the quality of cars, or housing or telecommunications. It's easy to see that in many parts of Brasil – from the mid regions to the South that such things are fairly up to date. For a country about to celebrate 500 years in existence it obviously has a highly developed and wonderfully rich and variant culture. What I am most interested in is the moral standards of the country's population. Development is a misnomer, as is progress. I am in fact trying to measure Brasil against the continued decline in the UK. In which time zone of moral development or

disintegration have I landed this time? This is very important because if I find Brasil in the past, I will realise that I have in fact come from the future (as in one of those tacky american time travel dramas) and therefore I may have some knowledge useful in helping the society I settle in not to decline in the same way. Of course, I am making a huge assumption that Brasil will slide the same way as Europe and that is obviously a rather crude generalisation, but as we look back at the social and moral decline of the last 20 years in the UK surely there are very basic factors (e.g. fragmentation of the family) that it would do no harm to work to reinforce here 'in the past' in Brasil.

But how do you determine where Brasil is and in what terms do you measure development (or decline)? And if you come across a 'clue' how do you know it's not a red herring? There is no immediate answer, no simple scale to measure or apply. I may make an observation about the culture and think "that's how people thought in England in the early 80s, so Brasil is..." In actual fact I may just be observing a behavioural quirk only found in a particular locale. The only way is to live here – for a long long time. To experience day-to-day life, and begin to move from speculation and rash generalisations to observing possible micro-trends in the society I am working in, and so moderate my ministry in response to these perceived needs. Trial and error city, Brasil.

My first 'clue' on my cultural case was to be found in the Bible college where we first stayed. I noticed over some weeks that a common joke amongst the young men (in their 20s) was to accuse each other of being homosexual. This panned out into a more general church view which was quite strongly homophobic. When I observed this, the first thing I thought was – how odd, that was a joke when I was 13 years old. Next I wondered would a 13 year old in London today consider it an hilarious joke? Possibly not, since the first generation who have been 'taught' the complete normalacy of homosexuality as a way of life are now teenagers. They have an acceptance, only tempered admittedly by the generation above them, that would mean they would be unable to see the humour in this joke. It's funny here because it is ridiculous that a Christian could be gay, could have a way of life which is perceived as foolish, even crazy. So where does all this put Brasil? Is it a clue that they are 20 years behind (I mean ahead actually) in terms of moral conservatism? I'm just going to have to wait and see.

Ser ou nao estar (to be or not to be)

When asked what our first big lesson in Brasil was we would have to say that it arose from a fairly well known aspect of culture shock. Therefore, in one sense it was not an unexpected thing but the particular way in which it effected us was, not a shock, but certainly an interesting discovery.

The aspect of culture shock to which I am referring is the common occurrence of feeling insecure because of 'loss of role'. Crossing culture we leave our home environment where our job, our home and our church life all contribute to defining who we are and forming our role in life. We arrive in a situation where we have almost no role. We have no language (or very little) and so have lost the ability to communicate, which greatly reduces what we are able to do. We become children, or worse, adults trapped in the position of a child, learning painfully slowly how to communicate, culturally and linguistically. For anyone coming from a busy lifestyle in their home environment to the tedium of nothing except obscure verb tenses - having nothing to do can be very trying.

We were aware of the likelihood of experiencing this problem of having 'nothing to do' and expected to feel the frustration and the guilt - at being here at the sacrificial expense of our sponsors, doing nothing. A word of explanation of our background is needed to help elucidate our particular reaction to this experience. We both come from Northern Ireland, from typically religious Protestant families and were brought up to place extremely high value on "an honest days' work". Indeed, I would hazard that the 'Protestant work ethic' is more fiercely alive in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the world. This is probably partly because it has become absorbed into the culture as a definitive aspect of being Protestant, in a society where definitions (Protestant and Catholic) are drawn very sharply, but that's another story. Suffice to say, this 'doing nothing' business hit us pretty hard. We are busy people and we like being busy, our lives in London rarely pause. Our college, church and social life plus part-time jobs leave us with only very rare moments of doing nothing.

As we began to think this through here in Brasil we were forced to ask the question, to what extent is our faith defined by what we do, as opposed to what we are? Is the substance of our faith embedded in our works for the church or in what we are before God? Two things need to be clarified, I am not suggesting that we believe that

our works are in any way salvific and equally I am not suggesting that it is not imperative that we carry out, with joy, the works God has prepared in advance for us to do. To put it most concisely, as Judith usually does, we realised in a new way that being a Christian is about *being* rather than about *doing*. The substance of our faith needs to be found in who and what we are before God, not what we do. If our ability to do things is removed where does that leave us? What is the quality of our personal relationship with Him? What is our understanding of what He requires of us? Does He want us 'to be' more than he wants us 'to do'?

In Portuguese there are two verbs which mean 'to be', one which refers essentially to permanent states of being, like 'I am English', and the other which refers to temporary states of being, like 'I am thirsty'. At first this can be quite confusing. Several times I have claimed permanent hunger or professed temporary nationality to the amusement of Brazilian listeners. But the complexities of this verb seemed to be saying something to me about this issue of being versus doing.

Our faith needs to have its substance in the permanence of our relationship with God, of our 'being', like the permanence of the verb 'ser' - to be. The verb 'estar' is used to supplement temporary actions - 'I am writing; I am working; I am leading; I am preaching; - all of these may be good works but there are not what makes us a Christian. It is being not doing that really counts, and being will lead to the right type of doing and at the right time. This is our first big lesson to begin to understand that we need 'to be' and that it is okay not 'to do' - to have almost no role yet. The truth is we do have a role, not characterised by busyness and significant works for the church, our role is simply to be Christians, today.

How to choose your ant.

My bathroom here is fairly basic – the showerhead points almost directly down the toilet so you have to stand in front of the toilet and lean back or to the side to take a shower. If you stumble you must be careful not to grab the showerhead to steady yourself as it gives of quite a sharp electric shock – Brazilian wiring is often ‘casual’. The other curious thing I have noticed is the little ants’ nest inside the vertical light fitting on the wall by the door. I know they are ants because every morning some of their excavations have fallen over the rim of the fitting and into the sink and occasionally a not so sure-footed ant has also tumbled down and as I begin to shave is scurrying around the sink looking for the exit.

This always brings me to a dilemma as I have a strong policy on living creatures. I only willing kill mosquitoes and everything else I try and send on its way in peace and prosperity. But maybe this morning I’ve got up a bit later and do I really have time to save this ant? As I chase it round the sink bowl with a piece of paper and it flees I think ‘you don’t want to be saved and frankly I don’t have the time’ – I turn on the water and the ant goes to a watery grave. And I don’t even feel guilty anymore.

As this morning’s intrepid ant spun to his death I thought of that cliché about people looking like ants from the top of tall buildings and it set me thinking again about the problem of need and how to deal with it. Who do you help, which ant do you save? How do you choose your ant?

Last night when we left the two young builders (who are working here at the boys’ home) home to Nova Contagem (the suburb slum) they took us to the house of a lady they try and help occasionally. They themselves are very poor, but she is often desperate. Her house has two rooms, one about 8x10 feet – a kitchen/living room and the other 8x5 feet – bedroom. She has six children but two are ‘gone’ which probably means they are living on the streets. The four that were there were thin, dirty and half-dressed. Her husband collects and sells cardboard for a living, that’s just one level up from collecting coke cans and not sufficient to support a family. I could see that the ‘bedroom’ where the four children sleep had no bed just a few sheets on the hard dirt floor. Suddenly the small box of food, some rice and beans, which we had brought, seemed hopelessly inadequate. I stood there with nothing to say, what do you say when there is *nothing* positive about a situation? I

wanted to say ‘look here, we’ve got to get you out of this mess, you’re a human being living in sub-human conditions, let’s get your husband some training at the centre, let’s...’ But I said nothing and we left.

Outside we were high up on a hill and the view was of seemingly endless rolling hills of lights – thousands of houses, how many more ants with so much need, which one do you help? How do you choose? There are 70,000 people in Nova Contagem, but that’s small fry when the figure of 8 million children without homes and families in Brazil slaps you round the face. Who are you going to help? Where are you going to start?

I don’t exaggerate when I say I have had the immense privilege of meeting and talking to two sets of retired missionaries here in Belo Horizonte. Couples who came here in the late 1940’s and early 50’s and have spent a lifetime working so hard amongst the people here. As we have met, these questions have come up and we have asked for the insight of their wisdom and experience. Surprisingly their answers were almost exactly the same. Clotilde (who is Brazilian) said in her still broken English ‘you have to start from the scratch, you have to look for who wants to change and work with them’. But what about all the others, you can’t just focus on one or two families? ‘Yes you can’, she said, ‘and you must, if they want to change they will want to change others and when you have helped them they will turn to their neighbours, family and friends and carry on the work you have started’. It will spread out like a fan, powered by God’s Holy Spirit.

In conversation on the same subject the other couple said, ‘There is no point in taking the person out of the favela* unless you take the favela out of the person and that takes a lot of time and effort’. Yes there are too many ants and I do not have time to save every one of them. So I do need to pray and look for those who want to change and pour, by God’s strength, all the love and care and compassion and mercy into that situation that God wants to give them. Until they are changed, until they are full and overflowing and turn to others and do the same. We added that lady to our list – from now on every Tuesday she will get a ‘basket’ of free food. It’s not a lot but it’s a start.

*favela = slum.

Is grace good for you?

When we decided it might be a good idea to build a house for a poor family in the 'needy' community we worked in at the weekends, our first task was to think through how we would explain it to Tute, to her family, to the local church and to the wider community. There were a number of good reasons for choosing her which immediately stood out – a stable marriage; non-drinkers (a significant proportion of the Buieie community is chronically alcoholic); a hardworking husband; an open response to our Bible studies. Add this to a mud and bamboo house that was falling down – one room for husband, wife and 3 children, a mud floor and 'bichos do pé' (flesh eating bugs) and it looked like she was the obvious choice.

Then we had to ask – why her and not someone else and especially why a non-Christian when there was probably a Christian in the church who could do with some similar help. The best answer I could come up with was – because she doesn't deserve it! Really no one in the community 'deserves' to have a house built for them, just out of the blue. It was to be an act of grace, is there any way you can explain God's grace to a person more powerfully than giving them a really big present which they didn't ask for or expect or really deserve? She was listening well to the Bible studies and had started going to church of her own volition but to build her a house and then say 'Look Tute, this is what God is like!' – what an impact.

We finished the house last Friday and had a little dedication service on the Saturday night. I have not seen Tute smile so much in the last couple of days as I have in the whole short 6 or 8 months I have known her. I have been shocked too at how animated her husband Zé has been – probably risking his steady employment by taking unscheduled time off to be in the thick of the building work. His plans – his amendments and improvements to our plans show that he knows his life has changed and he is determined to make it even better, healthier etc. These are only our simple observations of the impact of what we have done – the deeper impact will take some time to be revealed and we do so hope that it will be an impact of lasting spiritual significance.

So it was a great idea to 'commit' a pure act of grace in terms of how it would impact this family but what about the church and the wider community. This is where I am beginning to

learn that grace in an undistilled form needs to be handled very carefully.

It's hard to know what the church thought – the young pastor fully supported us and throughout the project displayed a wisdom in handling the people both within and without the church that left me stunned with admiration. However the poor attendance of church members at the dedication service perhaps indicates that *their* concept of grace is not as developed as we had hoped.

As for the wider community it's safe to say we completely missed the mark. These English people were either mad/stupid or incredibly rich and the most common reaction was to try and cash in on the good fortune. The 'why her and not me?' question came up and Pastor Marcello said 'They didn't choose her, God chose her, and *he* provided the money'. Perfectly true really. But why? Because she didn't deserve it?

No, it seems that a pure act of grace, when it is not happening to you is just too hard to accept. Our world (and theirs) works along different lines, you never really get something for nothing and what's more life is unfair and unjust and the poor are oppressed and their labour abused by the rich. This is the 'natural' order of things; all has been and always will. An act of grace only jars the wheels of time for a moment and then they steam roll into the future, flattening hope and love and the idea that things might possibly be different. Is grace good for you? Yes - but handle with extreme care.