

Kathmandu,
November, 2019.

Dear friends,

"Compared to what's coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack...[The Spirit of God] puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less".

2 Cor.5.4&5, The Message.

It was a bright breezy day, a relief from the usual heat and humidity of August, with air that promised an end to monsoon and the arrival of autumn. In fact we still had over a month of heavy rains to get through but today, with bright white clouds scudding across a blue sky, it felt good to be cycling through the city streets. From our calm residential neighbourhood, I crossed a busy artery running towards the centre of Kathmandu and headed into the ancient streets of Patan. Morning rush-hour had passed and with it the crush of motorbikes, buses, tiny Maruti taxis and SUVs conveying the urban population to their office jobs. Now shopkeepers adjusted their displays and swept dust out of their open-fronted shops into the road, and a variety of women and senior citizens made their way on foot to farm fields, homes, and temple porches for their daily activities. The narrow streets were further constricted at intervals by the seemingly perpetual roadwork for a 20-year old project to bring a reliable water supply to the city, as well as great piles of building materials as the last earthquake-damaged homes are replaced with modern multi-storey buildings. The noise and activity struck me as a stark contrast to the lush green farm fields of Lancaster, Pennsylvania where we had just spent two months on home assignment during the summer. There the roads narrowed only in appearance as over the passing weeks the tight rows of surrounding corn stretched from two to six and then eight feet high, muffling the sounds of the occasional passing car or the clopping hooves of our Amish neighbours' horse and buggies.

Bumping and swerving my way through various obstacles, I dropped down a steep hill to the broad expanse of the Ring Road, eight lanes of smooth Chinese construction which require careful navigation given the speed at which vehicles hurtle down whatever lane suits the driver, irrespective of its designated direction. Twenty years ago, crossing the Ring Road (then two lanes) would bring you into rice fields dotted with red painted mud-and-stone farmhouses, the fields stretching back to the foothills of the surrounding mountains...an environment with many similarities to that Lancaster countryside. Not anymore: the concrete jungle only becomes brasher and more unkempt on the outer limits of the expanding urban conurbation that now fills the Kathmandu Valley. Pulling uphill from the Ring Road, I continued for another ten minutes, passing an ancient grass-covered Buddhist stupa sitting amongst convenience stores and hardware shops. Finally I spotted my destination: a new four-storey building painted bright grass-green, with steel shop 'shutters' pulled down over the front of the ground-floor rooms. A large blue tarpaulin flapped and billowed overhead in the strong breeze, an indication that the residents would be hosting a meal on the roof. Through the open windows the strains of a Nepali hymn wafted down onto the street below: I had arrived for the Christian dedication of Anil & Ramila's newly constructed house.

Parking my bicycle amongst the motorbikes in a side passage-way, I walked to the back of the house where the heavily-built Rakesh was sitting in the yard, relaxing by a huge (now empty) cast iron wok sitting on a large gas burner. Rakesh, our Nepali church's resident cook-for-hire, had just completed the preparation of a large meal for the 150 or so participants. I climbed the stairs leading from the ground floor, occupied by a butcher's and a small shop, past the next floor which would have renting tenants, and up to the family's own rooms. The living room and two adjoining bedrooms were filled to capacity with young and old members of the church sitting in rows on the floor as a church leader led them in praise and worship. Entering the room, I felt the usual warmth of joining this group which keeps a special place for me (and my family), regardless of our strange and sometimes awkward ways as foreigners. I noted how the large midday-midweek gathering reflected the employment culture in Nepal, the many unemployed youth seated side by side with those in regular employment who were quite comfortable to leave their office to attend a friend's house-warming and dedication.

Closing the group worship with a time of prayer, the leader handed over to our pastor for a sermon. He started with a reminder that there was no room for jealousy between Christians, the source of our joy being not our own success, but rather the joy and achievements of our brothers and sisters in Christ. It was a poignant comment: our congregation is divided economically not so much by employment or income as by land ownership, usually relating to whether a family's ancestral home is Kathmandu, or whether they have migrated in from other parts of the country. Owning your own home not only guarantees you accommodation in this tightly-packed city, but also secures you a steady income as a landlord renting out extra rooms and floors. Anil and Ramila had endured a frightening experience during the 2015 earthquake when their inner-city home was boxed in by other collapsed buildings, but they were fortunate that Anil's mother owned this small piece of ancient farm land, and over the last couple of years they had pulled together the funds to build a modern building close to the Ring Road.

Being foreign residents in Nepal, and irregular visitors in our own countries, we are constantly asked where we are from or, in the Nepali literal translation, "where is your home?" When we are travelling in the US or Ireland, we think about going 'home' to Nepal; when we are living in Nepal, we think of our families and favourite places 'back home'. It is a question that is especially challenging for our boys, and one that Zachary in particular is likely to face frequently after he leaves Nepal for college next summer. He learnt at an early age that with his red hair, blue eyes and pale skin, telling curious Nepalis that he was from Nepal (where he was born) only elicited laughter and so was not really the correct answer. One poignant definition of 'home' for those living cross-culturally is that home is always where you are not. There is some truth and sadness in this for there is always a sense of missing something, no matter where you are. But there is also much blessing, and of course hope, in the lack of a definitive or singular home. Our missionary life has led us to being warmly welcomed into many homes, in many communities. This summer Tammy and Jay Metzler confined themselves to the ground floor of their beautiful farmhouse to allow our family with its mix of teenage and middle-age emotions to settle in style into the upper floor. Others in their congregation literally handed us their car keys and welcomed our boys as summer workers in their gardens. Travelling around Pennsylvania and neighbouring states, we were ushered into the best rooms in the homes of strangers, and slept on the familiar beds and couches of close friends and family. Old traditions were relived, and new experiences were tasted. And at the end of it all...we returned to the warmth of friends and colleagues in Nepal.

At the close of the dedication service, we all exchanged the Christian "Jai Masi" greeting and began making our way upstairs to the open roof. Sitting in lines on woven straw mats, we were served dish after dish of traditional Newari foods, placed alongside dried, beaten rice on 'tapari' leaf plates. A simple cowpea and potato dish was followed by goat stew, roasted soyabeans, fermented bamboo and potato, fried greens, tomato pickle, sour radish pickle, curried chicken, curried cauliflower, bitter fenugreek juice, yoghurt, slices of apple and carrot, and finally, an Indian sweet. As the servers repeatedly passed by with huge containers of food, we had to physically cover our plates with our hands to prevent third and fourth helpings. The day was truly a celebration of abundant blessing!

There are several uncertainties for our family in the coming year. Where will Zachary go to college (and even on what continent)? How will he adjust to the major social and cultural transitions involved? At the same time, where will Benjamin go to school for the A-level courses he is due to start in August? And will he find the right opportunities to fulfil his basketball dreams? Where is the best place for Mark and me to be located and where will 'home' be for our family as we support the boys through their upcoming changes? Over our years as a family, we have repeatedly experienced God's abundant provision for us, be it in the face of a sudden eviction from a Nepali apartment, or in answer to an urgent need for accommodation as we started home assignment one wintry evening in Pennsylvania. So we look to Him for answers to these difficult questions, and ask for your help in that. And of course, we rejoice in knowing where our True Home is, no matter on which side of the world we find ourselves.

Sincerely,
Deirdre, Mark, Zachary and Benjamin.