

Mission Impossible

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Charles was no stranger to prison life. This was the third time he had been incarcerated in less than two years. The police knew him well. Sharing a cell with drug users, thieves, rapists, and murderers, Charles was considered, according to Nepalese law, the worst of all criminals. He had been arrested multiple times for converting Buddhists and Hindus to Christianity. If he had been caught actually baptizing a new believer he would have been sentenced to death.

When Charles was released from prison this time he returned to his small house nestled in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains. His American friend Rick arrived as planned. They sat at a rickety table enjoying their bowls of rice with steamy vegetables and gave thanks to the Lord for delivering Charles once more from jail. Then they discussed their next mission to bring the light of the gospel to the darkness of their mountain villages.

At daybreak, the young men drove to the end of the existing road. Then, by foot, they walked to the path's end, through rice fields, up the steep sides of the hilltops, then dipped back down into lush green valleys. This took all day. The following day they walked through three ice cold rivers, holding their knapsacks above their heads until finally they reached the village. Rick and Charles preached, ministered to the needs of the people, and baptized the new converts. At the end of the few days, they went deeper into the country. Charles explained to his friend, *"This next village is going to be the hardest of all. Its stronghold here is a witch doctor the people revere and fear."*

Before beginning any work, the men prayed and fasted in the humble home of one of the few Christians who lived in that part of the country. On the third day, Rajen the witch doctor summoned them. He told them, *"I know you have come to preach and to convert my people. Please, first eat this wonderful food I have prepared for you."* Not wanting to offend him, Charles and Rick ate until their bellies were full. Rajen sat watching them for a long time before speaking again. *"You may tell my people about your God but you must not convert them to Christianity,"* he warned. *"What if they want to become Christians?"* Rick asked. *"You may tell them about your God and how He has worked in your life, but nothing else."*

That night all the village people gathered around the smoky fires and listened to the two young men speak. They were fascinated with the Nepalese man and with how fair the young white American looked. Rick and Charles spoke for a long time about this baby who was born in a far-off country, and how this baby grew up and performed many miracles. The village people were very impressed by this Jesus they were hearing about for the first time.

The next day the witch doctor called for them again. Once more a meal was spread out before them and Rajen pointed to it. The two young ministers sat cross-legged on mats and ate until they were full. Rajen watched them carefully and then said, *"You may tell my people more about your God tonight. If anyone wants to become a Christian it's all right - no harm will come to them."*

Rick and Charles rejoiced. Through prayer they had battled many strongholds; now they prayed for a harvest of souls in this village. That evening they continued telling people about Jesus. They explained that He was the Son of God and that because of Him no more blood sacrifices were necessary, because His blood atoned for all our sins for all time.

When Rick and Charles had finished sharing the gospel, people came forward, forsaking their gods for the one true God. Rick noticed Rajen watching from the shadows, beyond the light of the fires. Charles and Rick prayed right through the night for God to soften the witch doctor's heart.

On the third day they were summoned again to Rajen. They sat and ate, and again the witch doctor touched nothing. But he was quieter and seemed withdrawn. When they finished eating, Rajen in a raspy voice that shook said, *"You may now do whatever you would like to do."*

Once outside, Rick hollered, "Yahoo!" and clicked his heels together as Charles laughed at him. They knew that God had answered their prayers and had now removed the enemy's stronghold from around the village. That night after Charles and Rick preached, nearly every one in the village came forward to accept their Lord and Christ.

The next day Charles and Rick spent hours baptizing all the new converts in the river. Charles explained to Rick, *"This will be known from now on as a Christian village and other preachers will follow us to do more work here."* Suddenly, before them in the water stood Rajen. His cockiness was gone and his eyes were dark and empty. *"I want your God,"* he proclaimed. Rick and Charles prayed with Rajen and he became a new creation in Jesus Christ. Then they baptized him in the cold mountain river. *"When you are finished here,"* he said, *"come to see me."*

This time there was no food spread before them. Just a very serious looking Rajen. He said, *"For the past three days you have eaten my food. With my own eyes I watched you put it into your mouths."* Then from a large box Rajen pulled a huge dead rat. *"I put poison in your food. See, it killed this rat. But it does not kill you. It did not even make you sick. Your God is much more powerful than my magic. And your God loves you and protects you. I want this God and this love inside my heart."* Rick and Charles began to rejoice and thank God for this miracle.

But Rajen wept and then confessed, *"Before I decided I wanted to know your Jesus, I sent a man from the village to get the Nepalese police. The message said you were converting and baptizing. So you must now flee for your lives. I am truly sorry, but I did not realize at the time that your God was the one true God."*

Within the hour Charles and Rick had packed their belongings and were ready for the trip down the mountainside and said their good-byes to the people. As they walked through the clearing, they ran into Rajen. There he stood with a small knapsack, ready to accompany them. *"I want to come,"* he told them, *"I want to learn more about Jesus."*

So the three Christian brothers walked in single file along the dusty path, moving quickly, saying very little. They crossed two icy rivers and didn't stop to change or even to dry off. Charles would be killed this time if he was caught and Rick would be jailed and then expelled from the country.

The road widened and then they saw the troops down the mountain walking steadily toward them. There was no place to run, nowhere to hide on either side. So they began to pray. Suddenly a fog descended on the side of the mountain and covered them and the soldiers. Then Charles, Rick and Rajen walked with their shoulders scraping the side of the mountain as the Nepalese soldiers passed within inches of them on the other side of them, never seeing them through the heavy fog.

This was an impossible mission from beginning to end. But Jesus is a Master of the impossible. All things are possible with Him. Since that time, Charles and his family have had to leave Nepal. But their work has not diminished; instead it has grown.

A Bible school has been established in India and from there young ministers go into Nepal to continue the work Charles started. Where there was once only a handful of Christian ministers - now there are dozens walking through the mountains, preaching and baptizing believers in those icy cold rivers. Rajen, the former witch doctor, is one of those ministers.

We may never get to see the Himalayan mountains. We may never get to meet a real witch doctor. We may never encounter the conditions or environment described in this story. But I felt led to share this story today because I believe God is calling Lismore Regional Mission, and the whole Far North Coast Presbytery, to join Him in facing a challenge that is just as impossible, just as dangerous, just as exciting and just as rewarding. Our calling is the same as it has always been: to embrace the mission of Christ and advance His Kingdom on earth. We don't have a mission – Christ has a mission, and that mission has a Church. We are called into partnership with Jesus, led each day by His Spirit, as He builds the Church He promised to build.

For us here and now that mission requires that we trust in a miracle-working God to bring an affluent, materialistic, humanistic, anti-Christian supposedly 'enlightened' society to its knees before the Lord Jesus Christ. That mission requires us to be salt and light in a society that is confident, self-assured and arrogantly declares it has no need of God. We are called to minister to people who are spiritually blind and morally bankrupt. This truly is a mission impossible and I confess there are days when I would rather take my chances with a witch doctor's poison and the Nepalese police than to engage with a community which ignores and increasingly despises everything I hold most precious and know to be true.

Our culture has hardened its heart to the things of God. The Church has become less and less relevant and more and more tainted with our own sin and corruption. According to most people on today's streets, we Christians are a spent force from a bygone era with an out-dated message which we insist on preaching to a disinterested audience. Truly, the mission of Christ into which we have been called is a 'mission impossible' but with God, we are promised, all things are possible!

In the midst of the spiritual desolation and drought around us, the Word of the Lord continues to sound forth down through the ages, *"If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, forgive their sins and heal their land."* (2 Chronicles 7:14). That call and promise from God is more relevant now than at any time in history. God is telling us that it only takes one little crack in the hardened sidewalk of life, into which falls one seed which finds that soft, fertile place beneath the hard surface. Then God sends the rain and the sunshine and before you know it, new life has emerged from within the coldest, hardest place.

The Spirit of God is currently blowing across our Church and our city with power and purpose. Last Tuesday I had the privilege of once again sharing with the other Ministers and Pastors from across our city in our final Ministers Fellowship lunch. I have to say that in all my years in front-line ministry for Christ, I have never encountered a Spirit of unity, hope and purpose as exists among so many of the Church leaders in this city. God is at work in this place and He is stretching us, challenging us, empowering us and encouraging us to not shrink back as the opposition and attacks grow. We have been commissioned to make disciples and be that salt and light we were always meant to be.

I want to encourage and challenge each one of you who call this Church 'home' to open your eyes and ears and be alert to what God is doing in our midst. Renewal is happening. Transformation is occurring. Lismore Regional Mission and the wider Church across this city and this whole region is being prepared for the next great move of God.

Yesterday, a number of us here got to witness the power of God in action at our Presbytery Meeting in Ballina. The Spirit of God had gone before us in so many ways and miracles happened. To the casual observer it was just a really good gathering of God's people and the spirit of unity and focus on the mission of Christ was evident. To the more informed among us, who knew the history of this Presbytery and the importance of some of the issues before us and the potential for them to divide and not unite, it was a watershed meeting and God achieved what was impossible for that group to achieve.

One of those miracles involved Lismore Regional Mission and this congregation in particular. A letter had been received from our Synod office requesting that our Presbytery contribute to the massive building project on this site. As you know, all the work being done below the flood-line is covered by Uniting Insurance, for which we praise God. However, there is even more work needed above the flood-line following decades of neglect and deterioration and so we have been trusting God to supply those funds from across the wider Church as people's hearts are moved by the Spirit to partner with us in bringing all of the buildings on this site up to a standard which will make them an asset to the next generation and the mission of Christ, not the liability they are at present.

The power and presence of God in the room yesterday when this proposal was put had to be experienced to be believed. There was not one negative comment, no resistance whatsoever and the overwhelming resolution of the meeting was that \$300,000 from the Presbytery sales proceeds account be re-purposed to Lismore Regional Mission. As always, God's timing is perfect. The builders will finish their work next door below the flood-line in the next 48 hours. Now they can move on to the next job without a break.

The God who worked a miracle in Rajen, the witch doctor, is the same God who was present in that meeting yesterday; the same God who has gone before me in a hundred conversations here and in Sydney over the past six months which has strengthened our partnership with the wider Church and open so many doors; the same God is transforming the destructive power of a near-record flood into a mighty river of blessing; the same God Who will bring this city and this nation to its knees before the Lord of Glory.

So, brothers and sisters, I have a question for us all: are we prepared to pay the price and 'pray the price' to be part of that 'Mission Impossible' - the mission of Christ to save this nation from itself and from the powers of darkness which continue to blind the minds of unbelievers?

There has been a lot of building activity in the natural realm happening next door over the past three weeks in our worship centre. We now have a level floor. That will have an enormous practical impact on the ministry which soon unfold in that place. But it's also a powerful symbolic change and promise from God. We are not going downhill anymore! I cannot think of a better metaphor for what God is doing and will do in our midst and across the whole Church. We are on the level again and Jesus Christ, the Lord of this Church, is going to redeem the losses and restore His kingdom rule and reign in this place as we give the Church back to Him! The decline we have experienced over the past thirty years has come, in my humble opinion, because we all got distracted from our core purpose: the mission of Christ.

It's all about Jesus, from beginning to end and if all our ministries and welfare programs and activities as a Church do not begin and end with Jesus, then we are not part of the Church He promised to build. We are part of a church we are trying to build in His name and that weak, powerless, disengaged institution needs to die - like a seed of wheat - and be replanted by God, watered by God and re-birthed into the Church which not only bears the name of Christ, but also embodies the mission, the presence and the power of Christ!

That Church will never be ignored by the needy world around us. That Church will once again be salt and light and hope and healing to a broken world. That Church will be led by the Lord of the Church, directly and intentionally, through His Spirit moving in and through the hearts of His surrendered people. That Church is the Church we see in the Book of Acts. That Church is the only Church God recognises. That Church should never have been replaced by the institution which followed it and God is leading us back to the simplicity of being surrendered, prayerful, Spirit-led disciples who intentionally and automatically make other disciples. That is the Church Jesus is building and that is the mission into which God has called us all.

In the early hours of yesterday morning I stood in the centre of the new elevated platform from which I will one day preach the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ when our new worship centre opens. It was quiet. I was alone. Then I prayed the simple prayer I pray every day and have encouraged you to pray, *“What are You doing, Lord?”* At that point the Spirit of God Who has been supervising every part of this re-building project, transformed the scene before my eyes and I saw the new carpet and all the chairs and then I heard the thunderous sound of the people of God in worship. I looked across and could not see one empty chair. Our worship centre was full and the worship was glorious. The presence of God was powerful and palpable. Then I focussed and saw many familiar faces which told me that God wants this to happen soon, while many of you are still here. What a blessing it was to see so many of you in that vision. But the vast majority of those faces were unfamiliar to me and that caused me to shout hallelujah at the top of my voice! Those are the people God is preparing even now for you and me and others like us to reach out to and bring to Jesus!

Is that a mission impossible? Yes it is. The whole Christian life is an impossible mission, without the presence, power and leadership of the Lord through His Spirit. We have that. All He needs to find is enough open hearts and willing disciples to work through and that is when we will move out of survival mode and into revival mode. I believe that has already begun! So hang on to your hats – we are in for the ride of our lives.

I want to finish with some words first spoken by the prophet of Isaiah when he pointed to the time when God would step out of eternity and into time through Jesus. These words became the mission of Christ. These words are my mission also. These words are your mission too. Remember, the only mission we have is the mission of Christ, and that mission has a Church!

*“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”*

(Isaiah 61:1-2a)

Come, Holy Spirit of God and release the real presence of Jesus and His mission in our midst, across our congregations, throughout our cities and towns. Let the beautiful name of Jesus echo through our streets and along our highways as His grace, His empowering presence, flows like a mighty river of forgiveness, mercy and healing – transforming and rejuvenating everything and every one in its path – and may that transformation and rejuvenation begin right here and now in our hearts. We pray this in the matchless, the mighty and the beautiful name of Jesus. Amen!