

Kathmandu, March 2011.

Dear friends,

*“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord”*

Hebrews 12.14

In a country where 95% of the population is Hindu, we live in an environment where almost all our Nepali neighbours, colleagues and friends are Hindu. Although we are in the unusual position of waking each morning to a church bell (Kathmandu's only Catholic church is located just behind our apartment), the first morning light is punctuated with the tinkling of handbells and the chants of Hindu rituals from our neighbours' rooftops. Walking to the corner shop to collect our daily milk, I meet women with small brass plates carrying home the remains of their offerings after worshipping at the nearby temple. I step from the sunny street into the dark shop, where the gloom of lengthy powercuts is intensified by heavy draughts of incense from sticks set in front of a miniature altar, complete with Hindu idol. The shop keeper serves me, a fresh 'tikka' (a mark of Hindu worship) glistening on his forehead. Outside, fruit and vegetable sellers hoping for an 'auspicious' start to the day, take their first earnings and wipe them around their wares with a series of ritual chants and movements to encourage the blessings of the deities. Vehicles at the main intersection slow as their drivers nod and genuflect in the direction of the temple idols.

This weekend was Holi, one of the multiple Hindu festivals that punctuate the calendar here on an almost weekly basis. Like many such festivals, its origins vary greatly, but in Nepal it is associated with the god Krishna who is known for his playfulness and his charm with women. The festival usually coincides with the arrival of spring, following on from the festival of Shiva Ratri just a few weeks prior, when the god of destruction is honoured with bonfires and "vision"-inducing marijuana on a night which is supposed to be winter's end. Holi, appropriately known as the festival of colours, is celebrated by showering friends and family with water and coloured powders. With bright spring sunshine already lifting daytime temperatures above 20 C (70 F), it is a very popular festival with young and old alike. Excitement builds as brightly coloured water pistols of different sizes appear in the shops. Many find it hard to wait for the day itself, and for up to 2 weeks beforehand children and teenagers will delight to throw water balloons at unsuspecting passers-by. Our boys were thrilled when visitors left a gift of two waterpistols for them. We were less thrilled at having to face the issue as to whether or not they should be allowed play Holi, even as several other missionary families from school planned water parties for the day.

With Holi falling on a Saturday this year (Nepali Christians' day of worship), traveling to church was not going to be without risks. When we left at 10 am, the neighbour children were already covered from head to toe in red powder and were busy hurling buckets of water at the vegetable seller and his cart. However, they simply paused to wave and laugh at us without any further threat, while our boys made noises about getting back from church quickly so that they could join the fun. Out on the main road, a group of youths were pelting each other with plastic bags filled with murky solutions, this 'modern' version of the rubber water balloon creating non-degradable waste that will remain on the streets for weeks to come. From the roofs of four or five storey buildings, whole binfuls of water cascaded down on unsuspecting pedestrians, the remaining wet road a warning to those who followed to keep their eyes up and alert. Even the most staid housewives could be seen shrieking with delight and running up and down stairs, chased by family wanting to smear their faces, hair, clothes, hands, everything, with the coloured powders. Occasionally, a troop of motorcycles roared by, each carrying several young men with their faces painted in threatening silver or black and white masks. As the day wore on, and other residents retired to clean up and wash clothes, these groups fueled by alcohol and bang (marijuana seed) would break into minor gang fights and skirmishes needing police intervention. But all in all the day would pass by uneventfully, and we traveled to and from church on our bikes, for the most part remaining dry.

These festivals however raise serious questions for many Nepali Christians. Their frequency and their interwoven-ness with social life here are a significant challenge to separating oneself from Hindu religious practice and ritual, something the church feels is essential to its identity. Hinduism is a religion that embraces multiple deities, religious teachings and practices, and many Hindus are happy to include Jesus Christ in their pantheon of gurus and leaders. The church feels it is important to take a stand that clearly reflects their faithfulness to Christ as their one and only Saviour, without the confusion of practices that may have Hindu origins. Weddings are an example of an occasion that is steeped in Hindu rituals, and thus it is that Christians not only marry in a church ceremony, but that the brides also generally wear a Western style pink or white gown. The fear is that the traditional red and gold wedding sari may carry some significance for Hindu observers and prevent them from clearly distinguishing the Christian faith. Dashai is the largest Hindu festival in Nepal, lasting several days and involving much animal sacrifice and the exchange of Hindu tikka between family members. Associated with long holidays and much socializing, non-Christians tend to liken it to our Christmas (we beg to differ!). But for many Nepali Christians, it is a time of real conflict, feeling isolated from their community and being torn between their family and their faith. To borrow the allegory, imagine if you as an individual had to choose not to participate in any aspect of the Christmas festivities your friends and family enjoy: the parties, decorations, meals, gifts, let alone the religious ceremonies. The church is aware of the immense pressure and sense of isolation that many feel at this time, and so usually organises several days of events at churches for Christians to attend and enjoy together, including meals served with meat (butchered, not sacrificed) as a treat.

Some outsiders criticise what they see as the church's inability to distinguish between cultural and religious practice, and its failure to explore a truly Nepali expression of Christianity. They fear that this attitude only reinforces the concept that Christianity is a foreign religion and that Nepali Christians are not truly Nepali, an accusation frequently made by Hindu fundamentalists. At present the church is locked in an argument with the government over the provision by the state of land for Christian burial grounds. They refuse to consider the cremation of Christians because cremation rites have huge significance in the Hindu faith and are a bedrock to Hindu beliefs about proceeding to the next life. It is disconcerting for us to read in the local newspaper that a Christian committee has stated that cremation is not part of Christian tradition, and we wonder if this is a stand the church really needs to put so much energy into. But I am not sure that any of us non-Nepalis can fully understand their experience as a minority (at times, persecuted) faith in this country, nor their struggle for recognition in a land where the 'secular' government provides massive subsidies for Hindu sites and festivals. Many Nepali Christians report very tangible experiences of oppression by Hindu forces, such as headaches if they visit a Hindu temple, illness and conflict within their family at times of Hindu festivals, bad dreams when Hindu rituals are carried out in their neighbourhood. Even in this day when Nepal is supposed to have freedom of religion, some Christians experience being cut out of their inheritance, denied land that is rightfully theirs, or being thrown out of their families because they have converted. It is not an easy or light choice that people make, and they usually endure far more than we ever will for their faithfulness to Christ.

So what to do about our boys valid hopes to try out their new water pistols, and join in the water fights and fun outside our apartment for Holi? At church, we referred the matter to our Nepali pastor, who gently but unwaveringly stated that none of the other children from the church would be playing Holi. After the service, the church showed a film and provided snacks for the congregation as alternative entertainment for the afternoon. Our family instead braved the streets again and went home for our 'traditional' sabbath nap. When the boys woke up the neighbour children were already out on the empty lot waiting for Mark to start a game of baseball. Grabbing mitts and bat, the boys headed out, water pistols left lying in our storeroom, waiting for another day.

With thanks for your journeying with us,  
Deirdre, Mark, Zachary & Benjamin.