Torch Trust

Sight Loss 101

in conversation with Ifeolu Akintunde

Hello and welcome to this episode of Sight Loss 101. I’m Tim Jeffrey and I’ve recently become chief executive of Torch Trust. Now as a sighted person leading a charity that's all about blind and partially sighted people, I realise that one of the things I need to do is hear the stories. Hear what it's like to live with blindness and with sight loss. So today I’ve got the great pleasure of having Mr Ifeolu Akintunde - now thankfully that that name we shortened to “Iffy” and and Iffey, I understand that “Ifeolu” means something rather nice.

Oh yes, it means “the love of the Lord”.

Wow! And Iffey is just love, is that right?

Just love, yeah.

What a great thing to be called love. It’s lovely to have you you with us. Now I understand you grew up in Nigeria and when did your sight loss journey begin? What was the start of your understanding of sight loss?

So this is what they tell me, because obviously I was too young to remember. They tell me that my parents first noticed that my eyes didn't behave like my big sister's eyes did, so I’m second in the family and so they started to worry. And my mum was a nurse in a college in the University College Hospital in Ibadan at that time. So she went to some ophthalmologists but they couldn't work out what the problem was. And then when I was about 3 or 4 years, my dad actually came to do another Master's degree in Newcastle. Then I know I saw an ophthalmologist there and they also couldn't work out what was happening and I think it's kind of hard as a 3-year-old or a 4-year-old to talk to ophthalmologists you know - these serious people who keep putting things in front of your eyes and asking you if you can read then and things like that. So what they said or I think they said, “Look, go and try him out in a school and see how it works.” And so I went to a school in Ibadan and it didn't work very well, so I went to a special school for blind people when I just before I turned 6 in Lagos.

And how did that go? What was being at a blind school like for you?

Oh, we were told it was the best school in the world and we believed it because, I mean in Nigeria, actually our school had a swimming pool but it was a boarding school and I as a 5-year-old, I think it was a bit sad leaving home and my dad also told me he cried a little bit, but try not to tell everyone. I don't think he wants everyone to know. It was a boarding school and because it was a boarding school, we learned all manner of things. I mean we learned because we were also told it's not like schools here in the UK where if you go to a blind school and you're there until you're 16. We're only there for just primary school. So we were told that we needed to work in the world of sighted people, so by about 8 or 9 I was learning to touch type and if you wanted to employ me at 10 to be your secretary or something, I would have been qualified because I actually took the typing exams at 10 years old. We also learned how to iron and wash our clothes. We learned how to dance and I didn't do very well with that but we still learnt it. And we learnt also how to use braille and when we went to secondary school we would use a typewriter for our teachers but take our notes using our Perkins braillers and stuff like that.

Did you then go on to secondary school?

Oh I went to a great school in Nigeria called King's College, Lagos and it is actually also one of the best schools in Nigeria, they said at that time. And has produced a lot of top Nigerian politicians and it was set up by the colonial administration in 1909 to produce people for the civil service and so it's got a lot of assets - ex-students - it’s got politicians and business people.

And so how did that go as pretty much a blind person at that time? How was school for you in a regular sighted school?

Well think about it, as an 11 year old. And my friends kind of wanted to know what it was like and they did some things which I suppose 11 year olds do to people - they don't understand. They'd stand in front of me while I was walking. They just did those things as part of natural curiosity and I say that very carefully because we are best friends now you know. Despite the ways that we really are, does that surprise you? But I suspect it was curiosity. And the other thing was, my friends back at home never did that. I joined in games with them, I rode bicycles with them because I could see enough to do that. I played football with them and so because we had grown up together as 6-7 year olds, they didn't have that problem of trying to work out what it was like being blind. But yes, I enjoyed it and I think eventually I did well. Problems really don't start in secondary schools because a lot of the people there finally got to work out who I was and how to relate to a blind person and so we kind of played games together. By the time I was leaving secondary school, we were playing football together and they really used to enjoy taking the ball past us. It was quite great - there were about 6 or 7 blind people in the school and we would play football and they would just make us dance around the field and then they teased us as the ball went past us which was fun in its own way. So we had a great time and I think I liked that because they weren't going, “oh, he's blind we can’t tease them,” so we enjoyed that; we enjoyed the kind of fun we had with our friends and I think that's why we're still good friends now.

Iffey, you have a beautifully generous approach to that. I can imagine there would be other people who wouldn't have that that sense of generosity towards people in that way, so that's a lovely trait. Where's that come from?

It's difficult to explain. I think in Nigeria, we blind people generally are treated as, I don't know, maybe outcasts or as people who are unlikely to do very well. There's a cultural kind of antipathy towards blindness obviously and so quite a lot of my classmates in the school I went to, came to school very late because their parents didn't think they could go to school. For me it was quite different because my dad was highly educated and so was my mum and they were determined that I would be with people of my age - just as educated as they were. So I kind of grew up with sighted people. I recall once a friend of mine came home and to spend half term with me blind friend and then my friends at home would come and ride bicycles with us, and he was saying, "I can't," and "Come and play football with us," and he was like and my friends were kind of surprised because they were used to playing with me, but we found that other blind people were probably not as free with sighted counterparts as I was. So I suppose it was just growing up alongside them and enjoying their company and they enjoying mine.

That's fantastic and so clearly, you had some sight at that time, if you were riding bicycles and playing football.

Oh yes.

Wat level of sight do you have now? Help me to understand what it's like living behind your eyes.

I think it’s kind of what happened was, although I played football with my friends at home and I only spent 3 months of a year at home, back in school, especially in the school I went to as a primary school student, you know I was made to think like a blind person, so if something dropped on the floor, if I was at home my mum would say, "Look for it with your eyes,” but if I was in school, they'd say,"Look for it with your hands". And I spent a lot more time in school than at home, so gradually I depended less and less on using my eyes and I recall once because my eyesight started to go when I was about 12 years old and my friends in secondary school then had taught me - no, my brother had taught me how to write. But my friends in secondary school, we worked on that and so when I got home someone brought a newspaper - you know the very large headlines on the newspaper - I could read it! And it shocked even me because I never knew I could, so this was me and my sister and brother and they woke my parents up who up, who are having a siesta, Iffey can write in the headlines on the newspaper. I became a superhero at home you know, because I could read the headlines on the newspaper, but gradually that began to go and suddenly I noticed that, as I was leaving secondary school, they would become - it was almost like a party trick with my mum's friends you know - and then they would bring the newspaper and then they take the newspaper away, and I would notice that the newspaper almost made a kind of imprint in front of my eyes and so gradually, that started to become a problem. And my mum then started to notice because I ran into something at home and she said, “But you never run into it,” and I kind of told her, I lied, that I wasn't looking. which wasn't true. It was maybe I wasn't admitting that I was also gradually losing my site at that time.

And so now you have some light perception is that it?

Yeah, yeah.

Iffey, you obviously you grew up in Nigeria. When did you come to the UK? What brought you here?

Well I had finished secondary school and then I went to university to study law and I finished that and I became kind of disillusioned because at that time I realised that there were probably about 3 or 4 graduate lawyers in Nigeria, but none was practicing law, because there were no books, and our lecturers had made it quite clear to us that we would read all the days of our lives. And I knew what the problems were at that point, and so I decided I was going to do something else. So I decided I was going to do International Relations because I like listening to the news. I actually like listening to the world service of the BBC at that time. But I also decided I wasn't going to study in Nigeria because of the problem of getting books and stuff, so I got what's called the Chevening Scholarship now, from the foreign commonwealth office, I think, and came to study for my Master's in Lancaster.

And have been here ever since I understand, is that so?

I finished that and then did a doctorate after a while and then finished that as well, also in politics.

Fantastic, and and how did you find studying in the UK? I mean getting a doctorate is a pretty impressive feat for anybody.

I think I got the doctorate at a good time but the first thing I started by presuming everything was paved in gold, so I thought I’d get there and all the books would be waiting. They weren't actually. I preferred braille and it took time for braille books to arrive - maybe about 6 or 7 weeks but the lecturers were understanding and they gave me time, and then they had volunteers in the university who would read to me on tape. I thought, “Wow, these were things that you know we should take to Nigeria,” and the volunteers who read in Nigeria did it because they were our friends, but this was actually organized by the university and this was in 1990 and they were setting up scanning devices in libraries at that time. I was like, wow, these are wonderful things, so when I started to do my Ph.D and they said, “Oh for a Ph.D you need primary material,” this was the big thing and they were like you need to go and interview people and you need to go and look for primary sources. The internet was just starting and I was doing my research on the United Nations and suddenly they started to put their documents online in the mid 90s when I was doing my Ph.D, so I always look at myself and go, everything I studied, it was almost like God was setting me up because if I’d done it 10 years before or even 5 years before, I wouldn't have had the same access to the reports I actually used for doctorate. There was similar things I found in my secondary school and university as well, that it was almost as, in truth, it turned out that I was actually the first person to study law in the university, that I had studied law in Lagos and for my Master's when I got to Lancaster Uni, I remember once when one of my lecturers came to me and said, am I enjoying the course, and I said, yes because I said, why should a lecturer ask, and he said because when I had applied and they had sat down and had a meeting to decide whether they'd have me, because they hadn't had any blind students in the department. It took me about 6 or 7 years to actually work out, that what that meant was, that I was actually the first person to do a Master's in that department but I just took it, but I think later on, as I thought about it, I thought, “Well God really kind of set my time in a way, that it just came in at the right time for things to happen.”

Wow that's amazing and I understand you now work for - let me get it right - the Overseas Fellowship of Nigerian Christians - is that right?

I do all manner of things for them. It's a charity and it’s a voluntary position. I have been national publicity secretary; I’m now director of missions, evangelism and discipleship which means that we do things like organise a programme called “One Soul A Year” which we're trying to tell our members to try and win one soul a year for Christ and to spread it to their neighbours. Just to be like Jesus actually, because in one sense, Jesus never said (I think one of my pastors in the church I attended in Lancaster said something that really impressed me once), he said, “When Jesus was going to heal you he never said, ‘oh you didn't go to church on a sabbath day, so sorry I’m not going to heal you.’” So that's part of what we're saying to people you know, love your neighbours no matter who they are and that way you will draw them to you. You don't actually have to do great signs and wonders but you just have to love them and that way hopefully each person can win one soul a year for Christ.

Iffey, that's amazing and tell me, if there's a message that you as a Nigerian Christian and from the Nigerian Christian community have for those of us who are kind of UK born and bred, what would your message be from sort of Nigerian church to the British church be?

Well I have to tell the truth. When I was in Nigeria I found Christianity kind of difficult because I was a teenager and Christianity came to me as “I’m going to heal you” and when that didn't happen, I actually stepped back and one of the things, although I’m very close with this fellowship of Nigerian Christians one of the most interesting thing is that my growth came when I came into the United Kingdom and that's the story in itself. How it happened was also God's doing an amazing work, but the truth about it is each culture has something interesting that we can bring to Christ and one of the things about Nigerian Christianity which I still admire forever, is the passion and Nigerians are very passionate people normally, but when you bring that to Christianity, it’s a passion for spreading the gospel; it's a passion for loving Christ; it's a passion for doing his will. Sometimes for me, I found that, as I said in Nigeria, it got to the point where the passion for healing got so serious that I wasn't able to connect, but Nigerians are very passionate and we get it wrong as well in Nigeria. When we come here, we just think that we can just export that passion here and but it doesn't work that way. But I have a friend from my church here who went to Togo and she came back. She went on a mission trip and then she came back and spoke about it and she said, what she liked most about it was that passion that you know everyone was so thrilled. Nigerians and Africans don't have very much economically as we all know, but it's good for them to have that dependency on Christ because you can't depend on anything else. Then you don't get proper electricity, you don't get good internet, you don't get anything, so you know the dependence on Christ is a necessary thing. Much more than in the UK I suspect.

Yeah, how right you are. It's been my privilege to travel around a large amount of Africa and live in various African countries and one of the things I found time and time again, is even in the poorest circumstances, the joy that folk have in the Lord and the generosity that they have towards visitors. It's just humbling, so I absolutely echo what you're saying. And Iffey, how have you reconciled your faith and your blindness? What's that journey been like for you?

When I was in primary school it was a catholic school and it was a great school and my parents also went to an Anglican church back in Ibadan, so I kind of presumed that, you know, you are doing everything right and then when I got to secondary school a friend of mine said to me that I wasn't a Christian which caused a big fight because I said, “What do you mean by that? I don't go to church every Sunday, of course, but I’m a Christian.” And he said, “No.” But eventually he spoke to me and I accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour which was great, and then people started to say to me, “Look we could pray.” Actually this was part of the convincing things, if we pray to God and you'll be able to see, and as that didn't happen, I found that, you know how the disillusionment of teenage comes. You go, oh yeah, so I found that I was less and less inclined to be a Christian but I had family and friends who were praying for me and working with me and constantly talking to me about other aspects so when I was coming to the United Kingdom I had 4 or 5 volumes of the Bible in braille which I had used for my exams in secondary school for Christian religious studies exams in secondary school, because we were only supposed to have 20 kilograms of luggage at that time, I just decided I wasn't taking them, So they threw a send-off party for me, almost like they knew I wasn't coming back home and one of my aunties gave me a present. She gave me a box of cassettes - that was such a long time ago - cassettes - and it was the New Testament Bible but I’d also just won a prize the year before and I had been given a recorder because they wouldn't give me a book, because obviously they realised that the book wouldn't be useful. So the person who gave me the prize gave me a cassette recorder, so I took this cassette recorder and I took the Bible in New Testament to Lancaster and when I got here, because I didn't have any friends and I sat down. And I said, well, what else was I supposed to do, so I listened to these tapes because I wasn't doing anything else. And so I gradually began to understand something completely different about Jesus. I think it was the letters of Paul that started to tell me more about grace and about other things and I started to really understand, but one of the things that I realised as well was, my faith needed to come to terms with that business of, will I be healed or will I not be healed. And so you know Joni Ereckson Tada, and while I was in uni people were going, “Oh she's such a wonderful Christian.” I was going well she's not healed, why are you telling me she's such a wonderful Christian and telling me you want to pray for my healing. So all of those things were playing around in my head and then, I think one day I read the gospel of John chapter 9 - (I have written this, actually, for the Overseas Fellowship of Nigerian Christians - the very first article I wrote for the magazine). I read that and I realised because they said to Jesus, there's this blind guy who came and they asked was it the sin of the father or the mother that made him blind? And he said no, no, it's that the works of God would be made manifest in his life and it was like a light bulb moment because suddenly I realised that the test of disability isn't actually whether you're blind, it's actually whether the works of God are manifest in your life. Wow, so that's it and suddenly I began to think that when I looked I started to read the Bible and interesting things started to come out. Jesus healed most people but not all actually. You know, there was this pool at Bethsaida, and there was only one person was healed, and he was the one person who couldn't get to the pool on time. And then I read something else, I read about Samson and Samson actually killed more Philistines when he was blind than when he could see. I was like wow is that so and then I read about Jacob and Jacob was fine until he wrestled with the Lord and he had his hip bone broken. And suddenly I started to realise that things, you know, the kind of natural feeling that anybody who's disabled has to be healed, may not actually be correct and again I always say it doesn't mean that I wake up tomorrow, and tomorrow I might wake up and I might have got my full sight back. It will be glory to God if that happens but I’m going to live to glorify God. The last thing that hit me was once when I went with my pastor in Lancaster to do some evangelism in school. So we went to a local school here in Lancaster and we're talking about what it means to be a Christian and this 12 year-old boy, bold as brass, comes over to me and goes, well you know when they say ask questions, and he says, “You are blind and you're a Christian, so why are you blind and why are you Christian?” And then my pastor gave the answer - the standard answer - I gave the standard answer - and then I went back home. And I said, “Well Lord, you know that's a question actually. Let's talk about this Lord. You know I’d like to know Lord. Can you just explain this to me - you know a 12 year old is asking and I just gave the standard answer, but you know I need to know." And it's like he just sat down and he showed me all kinds of things that I wouldn't have understood if I hadn't been blind - do you know, like even trusting people to do things that normally you just go and do - oh, could you read this letter to me, you know, or even trusting God through some really difficult situations that I have been in or even understanding. And this is true because I noticed this even with my family just understanding what it's like to be blind. A lot of my friends are so thrilled with my family because of how much they understand me and therefore understand blindness, if you see what I mean and so when they come to my house, and it's the same when I go to their house, I see that a lot of people now understand a little bit more about what it's like to grow up with a blind person and how to show them things and how to take them around. I don't think we'd ever have understood that if we hadn't been blind - you see what I mean? Especially in the culture I grew up in where most people would just look at blind people as being less than perfect.

Iffey, that is so inspiring, thank you. Have you got a sort of top tip for me as a sighted person as I work with and deal with and live with folks who are blind or partially sighted? What's your top tip for me?

The top tip I think I’d say, the most important thing is - I think I’ll tell you a story. Maybe that will help you. When I got to Lancaster, a friend of mine (well he hadn't become a friend at that point) and he took me to a bank. So they said, “Okay, do your signature,” and I said, “Yeah I’ll do it.” They said, “Oh do you have a signature guide?” and I said, “No I don't.” The bank said they didn't have any so my friend said, “Well cut a piece of cardboard, cut a rectangular hole in the piece of cardboard and use it as a signature guide.” And it was just the inventiveness of the idea and the whole idea of the problem here is, we can't sign, we need a signature guide and let's find a way around it. You know, he didn't go, oh there's nothing we can do, let's go away and come back tomorrow. So I what I say to people generally is that there is always a solution to everything but the one solution that's not possible is to just say nothing can be done about it. Do you see what I mean?

Yeah, so try, be inventive. One of Torch's Four values is creativity - is being creative.

Yes, exactly like what you're picking up on that, a beautiful example of it. I understand that you have been involved with Torch’s Sight Loss Friendly Church initiative. Out of all the things that you could have picked to be involved with, what is it about that that you've got involved with?

Oh Sight Loss Friendly Church is great because obviously from as far back as I’ve known, I’ve always noticed that there has been that kind of difficulty between disabled people and non-disabled people or specifically between blind people and sighted people. The question has always been, how can we deal with the fact that you're a blind person. What can we do about it? So sometimes and, I must say I’ve been lucky, in my church I’m part of the worship team and just because I’m part of the worship team, they were confronted with the question, what can we do and suddenly you know they start to find solutions. But I found that a lot of other blind people I know have struggled to go to church or to attend events just because it's been kind of difficult for them to settle into places like churches. Even for me I have to say, and you don't believe this, I actually came to church very shy because I didn't know whether people would cope, so what happened was, one day I was in House Group and I just played the piano and I just sang and they said you should be in the worship team and I’m going, no I can't be in the worship team. And eventually I went to the worship leader and I said I’d like to join the worship team - after 3 years of hesitation. And he goes, “I’ve been waiting for you to ask.” It's like, what do you mean you've been waiting for me to ask. he says, "From the back of the hall I could hear you sing." I’m - what I just thought I was being so - what I noticed was, that what people are, is coming out but it needs expression and needs people to hear and to understand and to encourage and to bring those things out. I think that's why I got involved in Sight Loss Friendly Church because I just want a situation where there is a lot more of that kind of understanding between persons with disability and non-disabled persons because actually, this is the truth, blind people also have their antipathies about living in the world of sighted people. They have their worries about that as well, but it's about kind of saying, it's cool you know, we can work these things out.

Iffey. Thank you so much, this has been absolutely brilliant. It's such a joy to meet you. So "Dr Love", thank you for being willing to do this. Bless you, bless you. May the Lord bless you.

And the Lord bless you too and thanks for the excellent work Torch is doing. Thank you so much.

Bless you Iffey.

Thank you for joining us in Sight Loss 101.

For more information on Torch, call 0185 838260.