

# Images of Christ, Part 2

Colleagues,

This week we send along the continuation of Fr. Joest J. Mnemba's 23-year-old reflection on how to help hearers in his native Malawi "get" the Gospel. "Who is Jesus Christ for us?" he asks as he wraps things up below; and when he reveals in his footnotes that Robert W. Bertram supervised his doctoral dissertation at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, those of us who were likewise blessed to know Bob as teacher will hear the professor applauding the question. It's one of at least two, he wrote, that theologians with mission on their minds have got to press as they attempt to bridge not one but two great barriers that separate hearers of 2011 from the prophetic and apostolic witness of Scriptures that were penned in the first century and earlier. The first of these is Gotthold Lessing's famous "horrible ditch," the immense gap in time, habit, and conception between then and now. Bertram called this the "horizontal" gap. The second "vertical" gap is the greater one of unbelief, the refusal to admit the apostolic notion that the Christ to whom the Scriptures bear their witness should be of any real use to me in my dealings with God. For much more on this see Bertram's *Doing Theology in Relation to Mission*, to my mind a required piece of reading for anyone who intends to think with any seriousness at all about either theology or mission.

It strikes me that in pressing the "who" question Mnemba is working primarily on the horizontal gap, a gap made wider in Africa by separations in two directions, one from the Mediterranean milieu of the first century, the second from the European imagination of the 19th and 20th centuries. The term "Christ" is itself a first century concept. The missionaries who introduced it to Malawians did so, one guesses, with Sunday

School pictures of an ethereal Caucasian Jesus. Who could blame confused hearers for saying, "What have we to do with that fellow?" Notice, then, how Mnemba works to dispense with the European diversion and connect the Scriptural witness directly to life as Malawians know and understand it. Western readers may be jarred by this. So be it. A taste of the medicine one dishes out to others can be instructive.

Whether Mnemba also makes progress at helping his fellow Malawians bridge that second, vertical gap is another matter. Let me press you to think about that as you read. Is it enough, for example, to ask who Jesus is? Aren't some other questions equally if not more important? One that Mnemba's doktorvater kept pressing is "How is Jesus for us?" See, for example, his masterful *How Our Sins Were Christ's*, another piece that would-be theologians should be obliged to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. Intertwined with this question is another: "Why Jesus? For what earthly reason was the Son of God dispatched to camp out for a time in human flesh that got crucified (John 1:14)? And granting that he did, what difference does that make for me today?" Until one accounts sufficiently for that, there's no reason that anyone, be she a first century Palestinian Jew or he a twenty-first century Malawian Gentile, should pay this Jesus any heed at all.

Observing this, I catch myself wishing that Fr. Mnemba could somehow be with us next month at the Crossings Conference in Belleville, Illinois. It would be fun and doubtless tremendously instructive to push these questions with him. Could be you'll be there. We certainly hope so. (Yes, dear laggard, there's still time to register!) If we do get to see you, let's be sure to push the questions among ourselves. Indeed, if not for this very conversation, why bother to come at all?

In the meantime Christmas descends, and with it the grand

opportunity to offer ourselves yet again to God's service in the bridging of gaps both horizontal and vertical. Again the angel's evangel: "Unto you is born this day a Savior which is Christ the Lord." May we who tell it tell it well. May we who hear it believe our ears and sing the angels' song.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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## **Images of Christ in Africa – Part 2**

### **Christ as the "Lamb who was slain" (Cfwansembe or nsembe images)**

The symbolism of Christ as the "lamb who was slain" is also very meaningful for our people. In the olden times, a sacrificial victim, nsembe was slaughtered mainly to remove evil or sin from the community, and to prevent death. The actual killing marks the peak moment of the sacrifice. A good example is that of the Ngoni custom mpuntho/mtsamiro, having some people killed to accompany a dead chief in the next life. [1] This could be interpreted as a form of sacrifice.

Again, among some African peoples, an animal, e.g. sheep/nkhosa, becomes symbolically the "scapegoat" for the sins of the community before being slain. [2] People, for instance, touch the animal to dramatize their wish to cast off their sins and to transfer them into the sacrificial victim. Similarly, we could look at Christ hanging on the cross, as the suffering servant, as somebody who has become such a victim. Among other things, he freely and lovingly accepts to bear the sins of the world: "Father forgive them" (Luke 23:34). His death on the cross is thus a liberating action of forgiveness or reconciliation for all people (John 3:14-17; Numbers 21:4-9). [3]

## Jesus as the Healer – the medicine man (sing'anga)

In Africa and in Malawi wholeness is experienced by human beings at various levels: in rapport with nature, in bodily health, in expectation of survival after death, in social and physical integration, in the sphere of human morality and in the world of the cosmic and spiritual forces. [4] For the ordinary villager, sickness is a relational problem. That is to say, one is sick not because his sickness, *matenda*, has been caused by germs or bacteria as Europeans or medical people would have us believe: the root cause of the trouble is that one has not related well with his or her neighbors, with the community, or with the spirits above. [5]

In taking a thorough diagnosis of their clients, medicine men sometimes take very dramatic means to restore the appropriate relations which have been broken. The *sing'anga* and his assistants act as spies or informers, who try to find out what has happened to make the sick person sick. [6]

Moreover, as Mbiti observes, sickness and disaster are themselves religious phenomena. [7] Sickness indicates difficulty in communicating with the deity. Disease is a sign among our people that something somewhere went wrong. Isn't that the impression we get in Jesus' action in the Gospels? Didn't Jesus for example, connect sickness, dumbness, paralysis and leprosy with sin and guilt? (John 5:1-9; Luke 5:8-24; Mark 9:14-25.) Didn't he begin his healing process by saying, "Your sins are forgiven"? Furthermore, it is realized by the ordinary person walking on the street that healing cannot be worked by medicines alone. Healing will be complete if it has some connection with God. That is why today in the Christian Church, through gifted Church leaders like Archbishop E. Milingo [8] and through the African Indigenous Churches healings have become an important element of worship. [9] Jesus is called upon to heal

not only part of the body, say the spiritual, but also the whole person. In this context, the imagery of Jesus as sing'anga, healer, may well prove to be the most popular, and the one with which African peoples can most readily identify with.

### **Jesus Christ as Chief (Mfumu/Inkosi ya Makosi)**

It can be stated without any hesitation that the most important aspect of Malawian traditional society and other African societies is chieftaincy. In particular, the Chewa, Tumbuka, Ngoni, Yao, Lomwe, Nsenga chief was not only a political figure but also religious. An African chief filled a sacred role. His stool, the symbol of his office, was a sacred emblem. It represented the community, their solidarity, their permanence and their continuity. The chief was the link between the living-dead and the living (together with the not-yet born), and his highest role was when he officiated in the public religious rites: initiation rites, spitting blessings on the land or fire, offering sacrifices for rain, leading thanksgiving prayers and so on. [10]

According to this mentality, the chief is at once a judge, a commander-in-chief, a legislator, the executive and administrative head of the community. [11] It was not a case of many offices, but a simple composite office to which various duties and activities, rights and privileges were attached. In Malawian society, Chauta is sometimes seen as a great paramount chief, Inkosi ya Makosi, who is so big that he has to be approached through sub-chiefs and other official spokespersons.

In our African Christology, we propose to think of Jesus Christ as the Mfumu. Just as the chief in olden times exercised a sacred and priestly function, [12] so does Jesus exercise a similar function when he is a high priest between God and humanity. [13] Our specifically Christian emphasis would be that

Jesus' priesthood and kingship are exercised not just on earth as Pilate had imaged (John 18:36), but as performed in the heavens (John 18:35-36; 17: Hebrews 5).

## Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to examine some key African ideas in view of enhancing our appreciation of Jesus, as a local person. Historically, people of all cultures and generations have had to answer for themselves Jesus' classic question: "Who do people say I am?" and the corresponding haunting challenge: "And you, who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:27-30).

In walking the same path in the Malawian context one has to continue to ask: Who is Jesus Christ for us? What are some of the titles that could accurately identify his person and mission? In this paper I have tried to do just that by defining his various titles as Lord of Creation, Mediator, the First-Born of Creation, the Lamb who was slain, the Healer and Chief among many others. [14] It is my contention that the more we believe in African use of our own local titles for Jesus the Christ, the more we shall experience him as our personal savior and master. [15] Thus, we shall no longer accept uncritically or superficially the traditional faith-formulas of the past, as introduced by Western missionaries; we will increasingly appropriate Jesus the Christ of African personal life stories: "No longer does our faith depend on your story [i.e. the version of the missionary]. We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this really is the savior" of the African world (John 4:42).

## Footnotes

[1] K. D. Phillip, *Onani Angoni (The History and Customs of the Angoni-Chichewa)*, (London: MacMillan and Co, Limited, 1965), pp. 62-64.

[2] J. Mutiso-Mbinda, *op. cit.* p. 52.

- [3] P. S. Minear, John: The Martyr's Gospel, (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984), p. 1322.
- [4] A. Shorter, Jesus and the Witchdoctor, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), pp. 1-44.
- [5] J. W. Gwengwe, Kukula ndi Mwambo (Growing up in the African Tradition-Chickewa) (Limbe, Malawi: Malawi Publications and Literature Bureau, 1965), pp. 92-107.
- [6] J. W. Gwengwe, op. cit., pp. 106-107.
- [7] J. S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, (London: Heineman, 1969), pp. 166-200.
- [8] E. Milingo, The World in Between, (Maryknoll, NY:) Orbis, 1984), pp. 73-102.
- [9] B.G.M. Sundkler, Bantu Prophets in South Africa, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 180-273.
- [10] J. D. Mosonhi, Kali Kokha n'kanyama (No man is an Island – Chichewa) (Likuni, Malawi: Likuni Press, 1969), pp. 49-55.
- [11] J. Pobe, op. cit., p. 95.
- [12] J. W. Gwengwe, op. cit., pp. 19-31.
- [13] R. Kysar, John: The Maverick Gospel, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), pp. 98-118.
- [14] Many of these insights were largely inspired when I did my doctoral dissertation under Robert W. Bertram. See J. J. Mnemba, "The Battle For the African Church: Developing a Conception and praxis for the Ecumenical Church in Malawi", Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Chicago, 1986, pp. 220-224.
- [15] C. Bussman, Who Do You Say? Jesus Christ in Latin American Theology, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), pp. 37-47.

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P.S. Just noticed. We promised last week to pass along the tale of how a Malawian Catholic priest happened to land at the intensely Lutheran Seminex and thereafter at LSTC. Here's what Ed Schroeder told us—

Whilst I was in the systematics chair at Seminex I got into

contact with “Third World theologians”—spurred into action by [Missions Prof] Bill Danker— and got them to Seminex for short stints in January. I think we had a total of eight such folks over the years. Thus I finessed getting [Bishop Patrick] Kalilombe [of Malawi] to Seminex for cheap (he was already in the USA on someone else’s plane ticket!) for a January intermester week or two to give us his brand of African theology. He was pioneering grass-roots stuff that undermined the hierarchy—and eventually got him in trouble with Rome. It was that taste of Seminex that nudged Kalilombe to send his whizkid theologian-priest Joest our way.

JEB

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In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

December 29: Jerry Burce, “Justification in Nickel Words,” an essay that uses plain language and sharp image to dispel the clouds of abstraction that surround the idea of justification.

January 5: Bishop John Roth, “How to Disagree Well,” thoughts on how to approach the ministry of building up the body of Christ, even in the face of divisive issues.

January 12: Steve Albertin responds to Bishop Roth’s “How to Disagree Well.”