

# GOSPEL AND CULTURE

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## 1. THE PARTICULAR AND THE UNIVERSAL

St Paul in his letter to the Romans (chapter 1.3) speaks of Jesus as one who was 'descended from David according to the flesh'. St John echoes this in his famous statement of the fact of the incarnation: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. And then in 1 John in somewhat polemic fashion it is asserted that every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not (so) confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of the antichrist . . .! (4.26-3a). The opening words of the epistle make the same point by drawing attention to the fact that Jesus was actually seen with human eyes and touched with human hands. The Gospels are accounts of his earthly life and ministry. The New Testament Community remembered Jesus as a particular person, who was closely associated with the band of twelve, and a few other people like Lazarus and his two sisters Martha and Mary, but who also attracted many other people with his vibrant personality, his genuine love for people, his prophetic preaching and teaching, and his authority and supernatural power. Jesus was born a Jew, and brought up in an environment in which particular national customs were observed, certain religious beliefs held, and formal patterns of religious observance followed. According to Luke, he was circumcized on the eighth day, and brought to the Temple where he was received by Simeon. Some of the details about the life of Jesus may of course be legendary, but perhaps not all of them. As recollections of his earthly life, fragmentary though they may be, they represent an important truth about him, namely, that he grew up in a home in which the culture of his people and their religious beliefs and practices were taken seriously. He assimilated the history of Israel, and acknowledged that the holy scriptures were both a product of that history as well as its commentary. And it was as a participant of that history in all its rich cultural, social, political and religious diversity that he had to discover his own particular vocation.

St Paul also speaks of Christ as 'the last Adam', and 'the first born of all creation'. In him the unity of God's creation is achieved and expressed. The gulf which separated man from God is bridged, and the alienation of human beings from each other is shown to be contrary to God's will, and as such, an evil which is swallowed up in his victory on the Cross. Jesus as the second Adam is the man for others in whom God makes it possible for all human beings to discover what it means to be a person. For in him, God reveals that even sinners and outcasts, the lowly and the despised, are cared for. Both rich and poor who accepted the invitation were able to come to

Jesus, and find in him God's friendship. People of other races too like the Samaritan leper who returned to him to give thanks for his healing, and the Syrophenician woman whose daughter had an unclean Spirit, came to Jesus and sought his help. Jesus was a Jew, but his ministry went beyond the confines of his own people. His passion and death is the expression of God's care and compassion for the whole world. At his resurrection and ascension, his life is made available to all mankind through the outpouring of his Spirit. He commanded his disciples at the end of his ministry on earth, to go out and preach the Gospel to all nations, and promised to remain with them to the end of this age. The day of small beginnings had come to an end, and Pentecost would inaugurate the new era in which he would become known by the whole world, and acknowledged as God's anointed One, the New Adam, in whom peoples of all races and nationalities would discover their true identity and common destiny.

In Jesus therefore the particular and the universal exist side by side. He is a man who lived and worked in a particular historical and cultural situation. But he is also the man in whom God reveals and accomplishes his will for mankind and creation as a whole. The incarnate life is a particular historical event which has far-reaching consequences. It is the affirmation of a fundamental truth about human existence. Each person is influenced by his or her own environment, its history, and culture patterns. But the incarnation also opens up cultures to each other so as to enable them to interact and enrich each other. Culture is the expression of group loyalty, a common identity, and shared memories and ideals. These memories and ideals find their expression in the celebration of festivals of a religious or socio-political nature. What God in the incarnate life does is to indicate that the origin and the ultimate destiny of all these human ventures is himself, because Christ as the New Adam has appropriated for himself what is best in all of them. In him there is unity in diversity.

## **2. THE GOSPEL AND HUMAN DIVERSITY**

The Christian Gospel is for all people irrespective of language or race or culture or sex, or age. But then each tribe or nation has to receive it in its own way, and find its own appropriate ways of expressing it and living it out in theology, in forms of worship and spirituality, and in patterns of church administration and of maintaining discipline. The process of receiving and living out the Gospel is the one that gives christianity in any given context a particular character whether it be Western European, or Oriental, or African. Just as God in Christ became a particular person i.e. a Jew who recognized certain Jewish

beliefs, customs, and practices, so God in creating us made us particular human beings who to some extent are circumscribed and influenced by our own environment, culture, and prevalent religious outlook in our communities. The environment of our upbringing is the particularity in which the universal has to be earthed and rooted. The Gospel shows itself to be truly universal when it goes round the world and finds itself a home in every human situation. This is what the incarnate life is all about. God meets people where they are, as they are. And as the Gospel adapts itself to its new circumstances, so it gives a new soul to that community, and in return the community gives to it a new outward expression, a character.

On the face of it, this need for the Gospel to take root by assimilating what is best in every culture, and transforming it, appears to be a straightforward matter which should be taken for granted, and cause no dispute. But when one looks at what has in fact happened in Africa, one sees a different picture. What does emerge, is that European missionaries behaved towards African converts rather like Judaizers in the days of St Paul. Judaizers were those opponents of St Paul's approach to mission, who insisted that Gentiles had to become Jewish before they could be accepted into the fellowship of the church. St Paul rejected this, and even rebuked Peter when he wavered (Gal. 2.11ff). At the end of the day it was his view which held sway, for which those who have interest in the Catholicity of the christian faith must be truly grateful. I maintain, and there is enough evidence for it, that the early missionaries to Africa behaved like Judaizers towards African converts. Instead of accepting them as they were, they attempted to make them in their own image, after their own likeness. Of course one has to admit that there were exceptions to this rule, but the general assumption was that Africans were 'savages' and 'thorough infidels' who had to be persuaded to abandon their own way of life, and adopt christianity with all its Western trimmings, lock, stock and barrel. The outcome of this is that when African christians now look at themselves, they realise that they are dressed up in borrowed robes. We have been made not only to look European in outward appearance by our manner of dress, but more seriously, to think, speak, and behave European. But we are beginning to realise that we are in captivity, and that we need to be liberated in order that we may be ourselves, the people whom God has made, and wants us to be. We are learning in this process of re-orienting and re-educating ourselves how to become African, and what it is that makes us African. And as we 'de-colonize' ourselves, we are discovering that there are riches in our own heritage, and learning to appreciate them. These riches have been by-passed in previous attempts to bring the Gospel to Africa. But they are still available and ready to welcome it, and give it a home and a new character. Christianity must have a truly African character if it is to

remain in Africa, and be the religion of Africa. The words of E.W. Smith are words of great wisdom and should be pondered over and over again:

“What can be done, then, to naturalize christianity in Africa? . . . It is necessary to urge that our religion be presented to the Africans, not in antagonism to, but as a fulfilment of their aspirations. In actual practice this means, among other things, cultivation of their languages, conservation and sublimation of all that is of value in their customs and institutions, frank recognition of the measure of truth contained in their religion. It implies not a paganization of christianity for the purpose of making it easier to the Africans, but the christianization of everything that is valuable in the African's past experience and registered in his customs” (*The Golden Stool*, p. 260).

We engage in this search for our true being, and the culture which has contributed in making us what we are, as christians. I want to emphasize that this is not a romantic exercise, but a listening to those suppressed voices within ourselves and in our community. We have come to recognize that we are a people whose heart is divided. For we are torn apart by loyalty to our faith on the one hand, and loyalty to our culture and history on the other. I want to tell you a story to illustrate this. Some years ago I was doing some research into the problem of relationship between christianity and Xhosa culture. I came to a village in the Cape Province in which there was an old Presbyterian Church, a witness to the fact that christianity had been in that village for about a Century. The resident minister with whom I stayed, entrusted me to one of his elders in order to allay any suspicions of me which people might have, and make it possible for them to speak to me openly and honestly. As we went from house to house, the elder began to show signs of impatience with christian people's adherence to the old traditional beliefs and practices. Matters came to a head when he could not contain his disappointment any longer. At the end of an interview which was honest and frank about our host's continuing observance of traditional festivals, the elder burst into a triade, the substance of which was, that people were being obstinate and resisting the Gospel by indulging in these 'heathen' practices. At which point our host cracked out laughing and said “not to worry Mfundisi about Mdala's structures, he knows all about this, and he attends our festivals”. Now this story illustrates what I mean when I say that our heart is divided. The elder, as an officer of the church, was trying to maintain the position of the church. But the other side of him had to live with the reality of where people are, and where he himself is, to some extent. We African christians are torn apart and seek wholeness. So we begin this exercise by looking at the One who

alone can give us that wholeness we seek, our Creator and Redeemer. We look at what he has done for us in creation and in the act of redemption, and we see ourselves reflected in him in whose image we are made.

### 3. THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

I want to suggest to you that there are four theological principles which constitute the framework for our discussion, and on the basis of which we can do our future planning for action. This, I believe, is not an armchair or ivory tower exercise, but a seeking to apply theological principles and convictions to pastoral situations which face us, and to deal with our own inhibitions, the result of past prejudices. Let us begin with our belief that God created the world and us human beings in it, and saw that it was good. What this means in practice is that there is basic goodness in the important human values which African people hold, and which we ourselves as African Christians embrace to some extent. Those values have to do with the common life which binds us as families, clans and their ancestries, with the key concept of *ubuntu* – the recognition and respect of other people's humanity, and the demands which their humanity make upon us as fellow-human beings. Those values are an expression of human solidarity. Arising out of those values, are the traditional ceremonies observed at certain times – child-birth, puberty, when preparations for marriage are being made, and in the marriage ceremony itself, at death, and on those occasions when the deceased members of the family are remembered and honoured. Of course creation has been spoiled by our fallen condition. So African culture as any other human culture has its own strengths and weaknesses. But to reject it because it is a mixture of good things and bad ones is surely to throw away the baby with the bath water.

The second principle is implied in the affirmation that God in Jesus Christ became flesh. God, through his incarnate life, affirms our humanity and its particularity. He becomes to us of Africa, our own flesh and blood. In practical terms this means that God affirms what is good in us, and claims it as his very own. God in Christ tells us that we need not be ashamed of ourselves, our blackness, our modes of thinking, our norms and values, and our traditional culture because we are the work of his hands. Instead we ought to be proud and thankful and not take ourselves for granted as other people have done to us, but should receive ourselves and our condition as given by him.

And as the particularity of Jesus became at his resurrection universally significant, so too when we are truly ourselves we shall be able to contribute something precious to the common wealth of nations, and to the Catholic Church.

Thirdly, the death and resurrection of Christ is the moment of truth for us and our culture. In and through it, the tares in us and in our environment shall be sorted out and cast into outer darkness, while the good harvest shall be collected into the barn. The thought which is often in people's mind is that when the two traditions are allowed to come face to face the result will be a syncretism, a kind of fusion which is neither the one nor the other, and that such a co-mixture would adulterate the Gospel. It could be argued by some people that just as christianity had to break away from Judaism in order to become universal, so it has to take people out of their cultural environment, so as to remain untarnished by any human culture, and thus retain its integrity and universality. Such an argument would of course fly in the face of the facts. Christianity has been influenced by the culture of the West and had to be in order to be Western. There is another reason why the syncretism bogey must not be allowed to deter us from this pursuit. And it is the fact that the Cross of Christ is God's victory over demons in any culture. The resurrection is the ultimate expression of God's sovereignty. God can sort out African culture just as he has sorted out so many others, the results of which we see in the church after so many centuries, with a faith alive and vibrant in many parts in spite of the adverse conditions it has been through.

Fourthly, there is the principle of unity and fellowship in the Spirit. Because christianity is able to claim all cultures as God's gift while it is not the prerogative of any one of them, it follows that they all have a share in the common life of the body. Unity in the spirit is unity in diversity because it takes into account the variety of God's gifts to his people. Fellowship in the spirit is therefore reconciled diversity, a truth clearly enunciated on the day of Pentecost. Because it is one Spirit in whom all members drink, in the body, peoples and cultures are meant to interact, correct as well as enrich each other. The African, we must understand, has nothing whatsoever, to contribute to the common life unless he discovers his true personal and culture identity, and finds a way of identifying with it.

#### **4. SOME SPECIFICS OF THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

Before we come to the end of this discussions I would like us to turn to some of the specifics of our African context, and en flesh the dry bones we have had thus far, in the hope that that will liven up our subsequent debate.

First, there is the matter of marriage and polygamy. In the African tradition, marriage is both a contract and a relationship between two families, clans and ancestries. It is a contract in so far as it has legal

binding, and is meant to be permanent and life-long. But it is more than a contract in so far as it brings about a network of relationships between the living and their members in the ancestral realm. Marriage therefore is a deeply religious exercise, and this fact must be borne in mind when people discuss polygamy. When a male convert to christianity is advised to put away some of his wives and remain with one of them, it is not realised that such a step involves the putting asunder of all the relationships which have been carefully built up, and give that particular person a sense of well-being. The procedure calls for the disruption of family life, and destabilisation of the community of which he is a member, and cannot but remain one. The question which needs to be asked is whether monogamy is in itself a central feature of the christian Gospel, or one of its variable consequences. If it is an indispensable part of the Gospel, then we have to account for the fact that divorced and remarried persons are admitted to communion, and even remarried in church in certain circumstances. It would appear that the church needs to come clean and admit that it does draw a distinction between situations which are ideal and ones which are not so ideal, and then in compassion extend its ministry even to some of its less fortunate members, e.g. slavery is an evil institution which dehumanizes people. But the church lived with it for many centuries. At no period in the history of the church do we hear that slave masters were barred from the fellowship of the church.

If polygamy is not an ideal form of marriage, it seems unjust to isolate it from other comparable human situations which the church is prepared to treat with compassion and understanding.

Secondly, there is the matter of ceremonies in respect of the departed. These are many and varied. But the central truth expressed in all is that God is with the departed in the life hereafter, and continues to make them his gift to us in this life, as we are to them. God holds the two worlds together. However, one must point out that a lot of sorting out of ideas and practices needs to be done in this area as some of its aspects bristle with questions, and raise serious difficulties for people who have come to accept Jesus the High Priest as the only Mediator between God and man. It should however be pointed out that culture is not a static thing, but a thing in process, during which new forms of expression emerge, and begin to replace old ones, as certain emphases become obsolete. It should also be noted that for many christian people who keep traditional festivals, that process of change is already taking place, and will no doubt continue as christianity takes a firmer root in their lives, and as education and urbanization give them a new orientation to life. There are at least two examples to show how people have adapted traditional custom to changed circumstances. In South Africa,

amongst Xhosa people, the custom observed at child-birth as a way of introducing the newly-born to its living family and ancestry is sometimes associated with the baptism of the infant. The other is the 'ukubuyisa' festival by which the deceased head of the family is formally and ritually declared an ancestral Spirit. Some christian families will now observe this ritual at the time of the unveiling of the tombstone, a form of service recognized by the church.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

All these are samples of the specifically African material which has to be carefully explored. The entire African environment has to be opened up and exposed to the light of Christ, and not allowed to remain underground as an alternative to the Gospel. We must recognize that christianity remains foreign to many African people because of its aloofness to their culture. What we should be striving for is complimentarity instead of rivalry between the two traditions. The particular has to find fulfilment in the universal, while in turn the universal can only be earthed concretized and indigenized through the particular.

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