

BAMBALELA-NEVER GIVE UP

Bambalela –never give up

Last summer I was in South Africa, visiting a church in the black township of Gugulethu outside Capetown, with which the Iona Community has a partnership. Above the door of the sanctuary, so that people see it as they leave worship, are the words, 'never give up', and the song I've just sung, Bambalela, never give up, is regularly sung there in worship.

They need to sing it a lot, because this is a church with a huge mission and a huge heart, facing huge challenges. In a population of 300.000 in Gugulethu around 30% are infected with the HIV virus. That's around 90,000 people. In the desperate poverty in which so many black South Africans live, treatment and good nutrition are often not available, There are many orphans and vulnerable children; the figure for the whole country has been put at about 2 million. In the midst of poverty and unemployment, of illness and stigma and suffering, the people in Gugulethu are living every day on the threshold between life and death.

But these are not people who give up easily, and in the JL Zwane Presbyterian Church, they live hopefully. Each day of the week, hundreds of people, all of whom are HIV positive, receive a cooked meal, others receive monthly food parcels. There are numerous support groups, for people with AIDS, for families and children affected by HIV/AIDS; there are counselling groups, and a team of home-carers who visit throughout the community. 150 people living with AIDS and 40 cancer patients receive palliative care through a day hospice in the grounds of the church.

130 children aged 5-16 attend an after-school study programme each day, where they have a chance to have a meal, do homework, and receive additional study support from teachers giving their time voluntarily. . This is essential for children living in hopelessly overcrowded homes with no electricity and often no table at which to work. The centre has trained over 3000 people as HIV/AIDS educators. It runs a clinic in an informal settlement. It's involved in a rural outreach programme in the Eastern Cape, where a bakery, chicken farming, gardening, pig farming, forestry and an HIV/AIDS awareness programme have been established.

It has a sports development programme for under 13s, helping them to develop positive life skills. It started Siyaya, a performing group made up of 12 singers and dancers and four musicians, whose music is a fusion of traditional African songs, opera, jazz and pop. In every concert, Siyaya does AIDS education through music. It reaches 400 secondary school learners and 300 adults from the Gugulethu Community each week on HIV/AIDS education.

During the Sunday morning service each week a person who is HIV positive shares their story. (Can you imagine that happening week by week in your local congregation?) Yet to mention some of the many activities associated with this prophetic ministry, is not to really describe what goes on here day by day. It is the work of the gospel, mediated through women and men who have been touched by the Spirit, and who, wounded and weary themselves, humbly companion the wounded and weary. Almost every person who works there is a volunteer.

You would think that this kind of ministry would find universal affirmation and encouragement. Is it not putting the gospel into practice? I thought so. But in fact, the church has attracted controversy and even disapproval for its work, because it welcomes everyone affected by HIV/AIDS, regardless of how they got it. The minister of the church explained it this way:

It is about people meeting people, listening to what they are going through and attempting to figure out where God is in all this. We have to try to walk with them. As a congregation we consciously decided to invite, embrace, include and engage people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

Like this man, who said: I think I've at least six things going against me these days. I'm poor: I'm unemployed; I'm HIV-positive: I've had my legs amputated; I'm black and I'm gay.

He found a welcome at the JL Zwane church, but this woman in a different church was not so fortunate: *I used to attend the local church but I don't any more. The pastor there believes that you can't be a Christian and have HIV. Two of my friends from the church used to keep telling me not to take any medicines, just to trust in Jesus to heal me. I couldn't accept that. I want to have Jesus and keep taking medicines. So I don't go to church any more, but I pray every morning for my family, for my son, for the doctors and everyone living with HIV/AIDS.*

Within South Africa, and beyond, there is still a huge stigma attached to being HIV-positive and cultural factors work against people being open about their HIV-status. Many pastors in the churches continue to regard HIV/AIDS, which is so much linked to poverty and marginalization, as a fierce judgment from God on human sin and they reject people who are HIV-positive, an understanding which has caused endless suffering to thousands of people there.

Well, we are in no position to stand in judgement on these churches; how many of our churches offer a real, dignified, **unconditional** welcome to people who are poor, unemployed, HIV-positive, disabled, black, gay? A welcome that is not shot through with patronage, judgement, the belief that we know what's best for them?

When I was there in Guguletu, a student from one of America's most famous theological seminaries, working in an affluent white Capetown church, came to visit for a day. At the end of the day, having seen all that was being done, he said to one of the volunteers, 'this is all very well, but you are not preaching the gospel here. You are not telling the people about Jesus.'

I cannot tell you how angry and sad this comment made me. Aside altogether from the extreme western arrogance of spending a few hours somewhere and presuming you know enough about it to pass judgement, it made me wonder deeply about the kind of Christianity he believed in.

Two years ago, I visited a place called Elmina in the West African country of Ghana as part of a large international Christian pilgrimage. Elmina Castle is one of the slave fortresses on the coast of Ghana, built by the Portuguese then held by the Dutch and the British in turn, that held those who had been abducted and captured into slavery, as they suffered in dungeons waiting for slave ships that would take them to unknown lands and destinies. Over four brutal centuries, 15 million African slaves were transported to the Americas, and millions more were captured and died. On this trade in humans as commodities, wealth in Europe was built. Through their labour, sweat, suffering, intelligence and creativity, the wealth of the Americas was developed.

At the Elmina Castle, the European merchants, soldiers, and Governor lived on the upper level, while the slaves were held in captivity one level below. We entered a room used as a church, with words from Psalm 132 on a sign still hanging above the door ("For the Lord has chosen Zion..."). And we imagined Christians worshipping their God while directly below them, right under their feet, those being sold into slavery languished in the chains and unimaginable horror of those dungeons. This awful travesty was a very ecumenical one, played out in turn by Catholic Christians, Reformed Christians and Anglican Christians.

In angry bewilderment we thought, "How could their faith be so divided from life? How could they

separate their spiritual experience from the torturous physical and mental suffering directly beneath their feet? How could their faith be so blind?"

Some of us who were there were descendants of those who were enslaved – African Americans from North America, from the Caribbean, from South America. Others of us were descended from those slave traders and slave owners, if not directly, then as citizens of countries which were hugely complicit in it. We shared responses of tears, silence, anger, and lamentation.

When I returned home from Ghana, I read about the involvement of Scots in the slave trade, and discovered that in the 18th century, one-third of the land of Jamaica was owned by Scots, and run as sugar plantations worked by African slaves

Christians have always declared God's sovereignty over all life and all the earth. So how could these forbears in faith deny so blatantly in their actions what they proclaimed so loudly in their words. How could they look at Jesus and see the dungeons of Elmina? Or, how could they look at Jesus and see apartheid? Or, perhaps, how can they look at Jesus and see 500 dead children in Lebanon?

Well, I guess it has always been pretty easy for Christians to overlook Jesus when it suits their interests; not deliberately, for that would be too honest, but more subtly, helped by some very bad theology, and the ability to be deeply, and sometimes quite peculiarly selective in biblical interpretation. Apartheid, for example, drew theological justification for its abhorrent practices from a few obscure verses in the Old Testament, while seemingly oblivious to everything that Jesus said, taught and lived. And hand in hand with the tendency to render Jesus invisible has been the capacity to also make invisible, or disposable, or less than fully human, those whose existence offended, or threatened vested interests. Slavery was promoted and practised by good upstanding Christians who argued that black Africans did not have a soul, were less human than white Europeans, and therefore could be treated inhumanly. Indeed, many argued that it was their destiny and duty to bear the white man's burden and rule over people of colour. This is not a belief that has disappeared. I heard it said in South Africa by white people for whom apartheid lives on in their divided minds: *They don't place the same value on human life as we do.* This from the people who shot down 500 children in Soweto. I hear it said about Moslems; it is implicit in American and British foreign policy.

First they said we were savages. But we knew how well we had treated them, and knew we were not savages.

Then, they said we were immoral. But we knew minimal clothing did not equal immoral.

Nest, they said our race was inferior. But we knew our mothers, and knew that our race was not inferior.

After that, they said we were a backward people. But we knew our fathers, and knew we were not backward.

So then they said we were obstructing progress. But we knew the rhythm of our days, and knew we were not obstructing progress.

Eventually, they said the truth is that you eat too much and your villages take up too much of the land. But we knew that we and our children were starving, and our villages were burned to the ground. So we knew we were not eating too much, or taking up too much of the land.

Finally, they had to agree with us.

They said; you are right. It is not your savagery or immorality or your racial inferiority or your people's backwardness or your obstructing of progress or your appetite or your infestation of the land that is at fault. No. What is at fault is your existence itself. (Alice Walker)

The loser must deserve to lose. Otherwise we must question the game itself – and who wants to do that when you're the winner?

Next year marks the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade, and there will no doubt be many books, television programmes and articles about this long and bitterly contested campaign. It is to be hoped that the public commentary will not just concentrate on the achievements of the abolitionists, heroic and persistent though they undoubtedly were, but will take some time to reflect on centuries of complicity in slavery by Britain, in the still unaccounted-for profits that accrued to this country from it, and that huge cost that others paid for our prosperity.

And we who are Christians might spend some time thinking about all the times Christians got it hugely, miserably, catastrophically, shamefully wrong. Wrong about slavery. Wrong about apartheid. Wrong about colonialism. Wrong about the killing of tens of thousands of women as witches. Wrong about Galileo. Wrong about leprosy. Wrong about AIDS. Wrong about global warming and the environment. Wrong about the status of women. I don't forget that *'If.. we had to wait for the churches to promote tertiary education for women, the Married Woman's Property Act, the franchise, entry to the professions, equal pay for equal work, the Sex Discrimination Act, and many other measures vital to women's health and wellbeing, we should still be waiting. Indeed, the churches frequently opposed such reforms.'* (Monica Furlong)

The Bible is full of stories of violence against women, dozens of them, they are commonplace, of woman gang raped, subjected to incest, mutilated, silenced, trafficked, enslaved, murdered. And yet....the most frightening thing about these stories is not the fate of the women, terrible though that was. It's that **no one** in the stories as they are told cares about the women; their suffering is not regarded with compassion or regret or even anger. There is no loyalty to them, no care for them, no tenderness towards them. **They do not matter.** The only offence considered is that given to the honour of the men to whom they were attached.

It has taken the Christian church nigh on 2000 years to notice that no one cared about these women. This is our holy book, but we have read it with blinkers. We have read it as if there were no Jesus. We have read it, women too, through the eyes of men, and it has materially affected the ways that women have been treated for centuries.

This disordered relationship with scripture shows up all over the place. I couldn't count the number of people who have spoken to me, weeping in fear and confusion because they have been threatened and terrorized into a literalist understanding of the Bible which is profoundly selective, and which goes against every stirring of conscience and every instinct of humanity and all that they encounter in Jesus. They have experienced scripture as a manifesto to wave, or even a weapon to be used to hurt and maim and exclude. A weapon used variously against indigenous peoples, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, gypsies, and more recently, beggars, asylum seekers, homosexuals, people of other faiths, especially Moslems. The failure to read the scriptures with discernment, recognising what is historical, what poetic, what devotional and what contextual, what is lifegiving and what is simply toxic has done untold damage to millions, and, not least, to the Bible itself. Instead of being the book of life, it has become to millions the book of death, dripping with blood.

You might think that, having got so much wrong so very badly, a bit of humility might not be out of place, a bit of restraint, a bit of willingness to hear the plea...'consider it possible that you may be mistaken'. But not a bit of it. Manifest destiny must be fulfilled. The white man's burden must be shouldered once again. We must polish up the myth of redemptive violence.

I admire the resilience and courage of Londoners after the July 7 bombings last year. It's entirely right that it should have been recognised and applauded. But the city of Baghdad has experienced the

equivalent of the London bombings **every single day** since then. Their resilience and courage have won no awards or honours or tabloid articles. Why should that be? Is it because we truly believe that the horrors they endure are for their own good?

The myth of redemptive violence, the notion that hurting and killing people is good for them, has exerted, and continues to exert huge power. This myth authorizes the beating of children, often by religious people, 'for their own good', the subordination of women, because they are 'weaker', the oppression of whole peoples because they are 'inferior' or 'uncivilised', occupation, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. It is the authorization for British and US policy in the Middle East. Just as much as Islamic terror, it depends on the myth of religiously-sanctioned redemptive violence

This myth saves people from having to engage with the central humanitarian value that people are not expendable as a means to an end, and leaves fundamental abuses of power unchallenged. That is why it is necessary. It raises violence to the status of a virtue. It justifies hateful and unjust means. It instrumentalises young people as weapons. It serves the killers, not the killed. It is particularly useful when other interests are at stake as well – markets, resource flows, arms sales, political campaigns at home.

The myth of redemptive violence relies on being able to blur the distinction between a just cause and a just war. It matters to countries going to war that it be seen to be a moral war, a just war; otherwise, what authority is there for it, and in what way are we different from and superior to those we fought. But the classical theory of the just war underlines much of the ambiguity about that distinction. The conditions justifying a war have been established as follows: the war must be defensive and a response to unjust aggression; all other methods of resolving the conflict must have been exhausted; there must be a realistic chance of success to justify all the wartime sacrifices; there must be some proportion between the moral and physical costs of the hostilities and the peace and better social order sought afterwards; only military targets, not unarmed civilians, can be the targets of military strikes; force may never be used as a means in itself or to brutalize the social order and the military personnel. I do not think it now possible for modern warfare to meet these conditions. It certainly didn't in Iraq or Lebanon.

We are in mortal danger of repeating the same sin of those slave traders whose blindness we decry. For the world is still divided between those who worship in comfortable contentment and those enslaved by the world's economic injustice, ideological violence and ecological destruction, who still suffer and die. The world is still under the shadow of an oppressive empire. By this I mean the gathered power of pervasive economic and political forces across the globe that reinforce the division between rich and poor. Millions of people, including Christians, live daily in the midst of these realities. Meanwhile, millions of others in our Christian congregations live lives as inattentive to this suffering as those who worshipped God in the room above slave dungeons.

This goes to the heart of our confession of faith. How can we say that we believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord of life, and not stand against all that denies the promise of fullness of life to the world? Or is our faith one of Christianity for dead people? Is it a matter of adhering to a series of rules and propositions, an insurance policy for the hereafter? Is it about embracing a feelgood, lifestyle spirituality that allows us to live accommodated to our death-dealing world order, that lets us sing hymns in our upstairs chapel in the fortress deaf to the cries from the slave dungeons below? Do we think the gospel call to mission is answered by signing people up to the Jesus club while leaving the door of the dungeons firmly locked, by telling them that what's really important is what happens to them once they're dead? Well, it certainly lets us off the hook of any kind of responsibility for their **lives!** Christianity for dead people!

Or is it perhaps that we are the enslaved ones as the divisions in the world between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, grow sharper, are characterised by increasing violence and insecurity and seek to isolate us from one another. Perhaps that's why it's easier to turn away from confronting all of that to bread and circuses, to chemically-induced oblivion and Big Brother, or, if we are religious, to the huge threat to human society apparently posed by gay people.

But is it not the case that the spirit of Jesus requires and invites us to belong more deeply to one another, to challenge and overcome those divisions through that spirit? Is this not what the call to conversion, to transformation of life is all about?

We are all born into complicity, part of an oppressive, dehumanising world order into which we have been born, and for which we did not give our permission. This is original sin, our separation from one another and from God. But by the grace and generosity of God, we are forgiven and set free to be responsible; responsible for the complicity we **do** have a choice about. We can say, 'this is the way things are - but I beg to differ.' Jesus invited his followers to do things differently.

Of course that's very, very hard, because it's not our default position, and it's always a minority position. But it's no harder than it was for the few people who started the campaign for an end to slavery, who were also up against powerful vested interest and the love of money. It's not as hard as it is for the people in Guguletu. There are ways for every one of us, even small ways, to be dissenters. Greenbelt is full of suggestions for ways to be nonconformist. We can make a noise, and refuse to say prayers while beneath us people rot in dungeons – and we can tell our political and church leaders so.

In 1967, Martin Luther King called his fellow-Americans to *move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a firm dissent based on the mandates of conscience and the reading of history.* And he spoke these words:

A time comes when silence is betrayal...that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam. The truth of these words is beyond doubt, but the mission to which they call us is a most difficult one. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover, when the issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do in the case of this dreadful conflict, we are always on the verge of being mesmerised by uncertainty. But we must move on.

We still have a choice today- non-violent co-existence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace in Vietnam and justice throughout the developing world, a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality and strength without sight.

Now let us begin. Now let us dedicate ourselves to the long and bitter but beautiful struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the children of God, and our brothers and sisters wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them that the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full men and women, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message- of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.

These words seem as appropriate today as they did in 1967.

When the women went to the grave of the crucified Jesus and could not find his body, the angels said to the women, 'who do you look for the living among the dead. He is not here. He is alive.' It is a paradox of the good news that fullness of life is found in embracing those very realities that we fear most, in confronting our fears, in dying and rising into the glorious freedom of the children of God. But I think that freedom, and the joy and hope it brings, are not to be found in intellectual assent or theorising, or in better techniques for prayer. They are found in engagement, in the midst of people, in the midst of all the hurt and shame and vulnerability we share with all human beings everywhere.

One South African living with AIDS said this: "We cannot escape our grief or the losses we have experienced. But we can act to minimise this suffering, to prevent further deaths, to open our hearts and hold in them those who, now, are afflicted with illness and its isolation. We cannot allow our bereavement to inflict a further loss upon us: the loss of our own full humanity, our capacity to feel and respond and support. We must incorporate our grief into our everyday living, by turning it into an energy for living, by exerting ourselves as never before. AIDS beckons us to the fullness and power of our own humanity. It is not an invitation that we should avoid or refuse."

And here is Spiwo Xapile, the minister of the JL Zwane Church where they have accepted that invitation.

There are many things to celebrate here in Guguletu. There is LIFE here. There is talent here. Sometimes that life and talent lie dormant. There is a temptation to concentrate on death and dying. But we also need to help people to embrace life in its fullness. There is not only life in Guguletu, there is also a lot of love and respect in this community. I tell people here how wonderful and good they are and that affirms them to move forward. There is enough judgment around, not just in the churches! We can touch into the vibrancy of this local community. There are many stories we can tell. People who are so alive to everything around, even though they are weighed down in other ways. I like being here in Guguletu because the people are great. That's a fact. Even in hard times. Our worship also reflects what we can celebrate as a community. And our singing.

I wanted to send this prayer, written in Xhosa by a member of one of the HIV/AIDS support groups, to the theology student. I hoped it would help him to understand. I invite you to listen to Noma-lady's words, and to walk with her and many others as a sister or brother. We belong together.

GOD IS LOVE TO ME, AND GOD IS AMAZING EVEN THOUGH I AM NOT STRONG PHYSICALLY IN TERMS OF MY HEALTH. EVEN THOUGH THINGS ARE DIFFICULT I CONTINUE TO GO DOWN ON MY KNEES AND PRAY, AND FROM TIME TO TIME I SEE GOD RESPONDING TO MY PRAYER. I DON'T KNOW HOW I COULD PRAISE GOD'S NAME IN A WAY THAT IS BEFITTING GOD'S GREATNESS. I DO NOT HAVE THE INSTRUMENTS APPROPRIATE ENOUGH TO MAKE THE MUSIC THAT WOULD TRULY EXPRESS HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN I HAVE SLEEPLESS NIGHTS AND WATCH TV TILL MORNING, BUT I ALWAYS FEEL COMFORT WHEN I GO ON MY KNEES AND PRAY. I AM SOMETIMES UP AT 3 A.M. TRYING TO SLEEP ON THAT SIDE OR THE OTHER. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN THE PAIN IS SO HEAVY; MY HAND WITH CRAMPS: MY FINGERS TWISTING. HAD I NOT BEEN CONNECTED WITH GOD I WOULD BE ACCUSING PEOPLE OF CAUSING THIS PAIN, BUT EARLIER IN MY LIFE I CHOSE A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, THOUGH I AM POOR. GOD IS WITH ME IN THE MORNING WHEN I WAKE UP: GOD IS AROUND DURING SLEEP, AND IS WITH ME AS I TRY TO WALK AROUND. I JUST CRY KNOWING THAT GOD HAS HEARD MY PRAYER. I LIVE WITH GREAT HOPE. AMEN.

Bambalela, never give up.

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