

BLESSED ARE THE EYES THAT SEE WHAT YOU SEE

Sesqui-Centennial Sermon

(Deuteronomy 31:1-8 and Luke 10:17-24)

Canterbury Cathedral 2nd October, 2010

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I bring you greetings from “the land along the river Shire and Lake Nyasa”! The land to which Bishop Mackenzie and others were sent off from this Cathedral 150 years ago today. Where today they are gathered at Magomero to celebrate as you are.

In 2003 I was privileged to preach at the Silver Jubilee for SOMA in this Cathedral and I happened to preach on the same Lucan passage as today (on a different theme) and I over shot my preaching time. Today I will try not to embarrass myself and all of you!

Another of my most cherished celebrations was the one we had in 1997 during which I was honoured with giving the sermons, at both the University Church, Oxford and Great St. Mary’s Church, Cambridge. We were then celebrating 140 years since David Livingstone gave the challenge which led to the formation of the UMCA. What a time it was! I am still energized and awe struck when I remember it. Be that as it may the Lord seems to say (then and now), “You aint seen nothing yet”!

Yes, Celebrations! I seem to be so privileged to be asked to preach at them. I wonder if there is something God is saying to me in this? Nothing beats being a witness to God’s saving power on earth with and through his people. It is even an honour beyond measure that I have been so blessed as to be asked to mark some of these times as a preacher. Thank you for this honour. This is the day that the Lord has made and we will rejoice and be glad in it!

In 1960 at our centennial celebration we marked the passing on of the Mission to local Church. It was the end of an era. It was like Moses passing on the next phase of the journey to Joshua. The UMCA handed the baton to new generations of leadership. I was two years old then and little did I know what was happening.

In 1997 as I stood on that high pulpit in the University Church at Oxford I felt history flowing in my veins. I stood where some of the great preachers and teachers of the faith in the English Church had stood and I was literary being numbered among them by that honour. I felt the continuity. I was part of the journey that began a long time ago. I stood where some of the Oxford Movement leaders had stood and preached from. The remnants of that movement became some of the leaders of the UMCA. Of note being Pusey and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce of Oxford who gave the send off sermon 150 years ago today. At Cambridge I stood where the leaders had stood and I stood at the very place in the Senate House where Livingstone gave his speech from. Not only did I stand in those “holy places” I mingled with the remnants of the UMCA missionaries; the ones that were still living, the ones the celebrations were in honour of, the ones that are not here today. On that day I felt the passing on of the baton in a particularly poignant way. From that time on the UMCA was “going to be history” and we were their successors. They had won the land along the Shire and Lake Nyasa, all of Tanzania, and big chunks of Mozambique and Zambia. They, however, knew that there was still more to be accomplished and so

charged us as Moses had done to the Israelites of old, to go and take possession of the land across the Jordan!

“I am now a hundred and twenty years old”, said Moses, “and I am no longer able to lead you... The Lord your God himself will cross over ahead of you... you will take possession of their land. The Lord himself... will be with you, he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”(Deut. 31:2-8).

Just like Moses they knew this to be true from their experience. They had done and seen it all. They had come through thick and thin. They rejoiced in that day. I could see it in their eyes. I suppose if Jesus were physically present they would gloat like the 72 disciples did about their successes.

During that tour, at Oxford, I visited Mrs Hunt at a nursing home. She was the Rev. Andrew Hunt’s widow. The Rev Hunt had been my headmaster at Bernard Mizeki College (a church sixth form college) in the Diocese of Harare. I am not sure if she remembered me but she was very happy to receive and visit with one from her husband’s headmaster days. I was one of the many fruits of their labour in the mission field.

A few years later (after I had become bishop) I visited Sheffield. There I met face to face with Bishop Kenneth Skelton (former bishop of Matabeleland) who had confirmed me when I was ten years old! As we talked, it turned out that I was the third person he had confirmed who had become bishop! In less than a year he was dead. But what a joy it must have been for him to see some of us now leading the church he had once been a leader in.

On another visit to Oxford I was privileged to be present at the send off of Frank Weston who had just been made Bishop. I know some of you are wondering how I could have been at Frank Weston’s send off in the early days of the UMCA. This was the great Frank Weston’s nephew. The moment was not lost on that occasion to reminisce about Bishop Frank Weston of the UMCA. Another giant of the Tanzanian Church is Bishop Ramadhani, former Archbishop of Tanzania. I was privileged to make his acquaintance in my first year of the ordained ministry when he visited the Diocese of Lake Malawi. A holy man is all I can say in awe of his presence. The Tanzanians have more to say about this man of God and how many lives he has touched. Even though his was this side of the history of the UMCA he is one from the same mould as the great bachelor missionaries of old, totally devoted to his master and his mission. Yet another name from the Tanzanian field is Bishop Leslie Stradling who I got to know in my last parish in Lilongwe. He was the former bishop of Masasi and later of Johannesburg. He spent his last days in Cape Town. For as long as his health could permit he made an annual pilgrimage to his former diocese of Masasi and on his way to and fro he stopped over in Lilongwe and stayed at our parish guest house. We would sit on the veranda and visit. The visits were like mini retreats for me. The man oozed spirituality. Such were the gifts and fruits of the mission. There are more stories to tell and more name dropping but this will suffice for now.

However, there is one more story before I return to the scriptures. Every year we celebrate this event in Malawi on the Saturday nearest to October 2. In fact earlier today your brothers and sisters in Malawi were at an open air festal Eucharist (on site at Magomero) celebrating the UMCA and Bishop William Mchombo of Eastern Zambia was preaching. His Cathedral at Musoro is situated in the area which was evangelized by Leonard Kamungu, the first Malawian UMCA priest and missionary under Bishop Hornby, a former slave, freed from the Zanzibar market. Any way what I want to say here is not about either of these men but of the celebrations at the same place in 2007 and the subject of slavery. One of the very

first acts for the motley band of missionaries of the UMCA was to fight a slave caravan. One of those freed on that day was a little girl by the name of Anne Daoma. As the story goes this girl was left at the orphanage in Cape Town at the abortion of the mission in 1863. She grew up to be a teacher at the very same school and until her death in the 1930s she used to send some money regularly back to Malawi for the work of the mission. Not everyone went to Cape Town or followed the missionaries when they went to Zanzibar. Most of them stayed behind settled in their own villages. These are from the Mang'anja group of people. They are forever grateful for the end of slave raiding among them and the peace that the mission brought for them. In 2007, as part of that year's celebrations, they joined us in a trek in the footsteps of the missionaries in Southern Malawi and Upper Shire and participated in the festal Eucharist for that year. During the Eucharist they spoke thanking the UMCA for saving them from slavery. As you may remember this was also the year the world commemorated the end of slavery. Most of them are not Anglican – some are Roman Catholic and others are Presbyterian. It was some of the earlier remnants that helped the planting of the Church of Scotland's Blantyre Mission. As the Church continues to grow in the south of Malawi the Mang'anja area is one of the fastest growing parts.

This has been a sampling of some of the work of the mission in education, spirituality, leadership formation, evangelism and church growth through some of my experiences. There is more that the church is doing in these parts e.g. active engagement with matters of justice and peace, health care, relief and disaster mitigation. There are many testimonies to give but we are here to remember the first missionaries sent to us on this day. They were under no illusion as to what they were going to face and the preacher of that day did not mince his words about that either

Oh think brethren, of the greatness of the enterprise, of the evils to be put down, of the blessings to be borne forth, of the souls to be won, and pray mightily. This of these going forth, of the great and terrible wilderness before them, of its "fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where is no water; of the beating of the sun by day, of the smiting of the moon by night; of the absence of cheering voice of friends, of the loss of the inspiring sight of the Church visible, of her presence and her power. Think of the rage of the great enemy and of all his vassal fiends, thus invaded in the very fastness of their evil dominion: think of all this, to which we send forth these beloved ones, and pray mightily. (Wilberforce Sermon, 2/10/1860)

We all know the rest of the story. They toiled among hostile chiefs, against slavers, against inclement weather, and among mosquitoes. Malaria decimated a lot of them: The bishop being the first sacrifice. The challenges were myriad and of the triumphs we are witnesses of: both in our experiences and our being. They had cause for joy but of course they saw only a glimpse of the fruit of their work. We have seen more and we know that more is in store. If you may recall, the rationale for the celebrations in 1997 was that some of those who had been used of God in the "mission" would not be alive when USPG was celebrating 300 years and much less here as we celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Mission send off!

Shall we just gloat over this story and count ourselves worthy of participating in their joy? In answer and in challenge let's look again at the story of the 72 in Luke. Witnesses and participants is what the 72 were sent to be. On their return as they gloated over their experiences Jesus bade them take a sober look at the situation.

"Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" says Jesus. (LK10:23-24)

Blessed were they indeed. In their own words they said that “even demons submit to us in your name.” They had been sent two by two to preach. They had to go penniless, no change of clothes – basically sent into the unknown without knowing how their needs were to be met: only trusting the one that sent them. They were sent to preach and to heal the sick. The Spirit of the Lord did more with them than they had imagined hence their exclamation at their achievements. Jesus tells them that this was a privilege that not many have had. They accomplished the task and were privileged to see the fruit there and then.

Jesus says three things in initial reaction to them:

1. Let me begin with the middle one. He says that they have done what they have done because he has given them power and authority over the enemy (v19). Gloat they may, but it was not their power that did it: It was God’s doing! Remember always that it is not about you and your skills; it’s about God whose mission it is.
2. The third thing he said to them is that they should rejoice more because their names are recorded in heaven. That is to say that because they were obedient and were used by God they are remembered by God. An assurance into the presence of the Almighty. (v20)
3. The first thing I take last, because I find it intriguing that Jesus would rather incongruously say that he “saw Satan fall like Lightning from heaven”. What is that about?
 - It is possible that he is saying this to affirm them and bear witness to the fact that as they did what they did he saw the defeat of the devil in their works of the word, signs and wonders!
 - It is also possible that it is chastisement. Jesus is warning them of the pride that comes in being held in high esteem by God and so favoured. Satan, in the pre-Incarnation was thrown down to earth after he became too presumptuous for his own good in relation to God (Is 14:12ff). Is it a warning that they need not be presumptuous in their participation in God’s mission? It is easy with such success to forget the source of that success and begin to think that it is all about you and your talents.
 - It may also be that it is a warning that even in the middle of their successes the devil is still at work. A call for vigilance. Remember the other biblical curse about the devil having been banished to earth! “Woe to you or is it beware oh earth and sea for the devil has been hurled down to you”. The work is not done until it is done! We will know that it is done when the Lord comes again. It is only “done” at the consummation. While it is still today we work on even as Christ did. As we celebrate it is also a call to mission: the mission goes on!

I would like to believe that Jesus meant all the three in his characteristic multiple entendre. And so we celebrate the work Bishop Mackenzie and others did. We are witnesses of the success. However, all of us also know that there is more to be done still. The successes in education (with the Church schools being some of the best schools in our countries) have given way to new challenges. The provision of healthcare is suffering from its success and is greatly challenged by the HIV/AIDS Pandemic. Tuberculosis has returned with a vengeance. Malaria is killing us more than it did the missionaries of old even as we respond with primary health care and the provision of long life nets! Our countries are challenged by the

rise in child and women trafficking. Poverty continues on the rise even as we are told of the success on the macroeconomic arena. Unjust trade is the order of the day in the new Global village. In the face of all this it sometimes feels like “Mission Impossible”. The church in “the land along the river Shire and Lake Nyasa” continues to respond to these challenges even as work in church growth prospers. As the Gospel has shown us

- Vigilance in the face of old and new challenges is what it is about
- It’s not about us: it is about God and his mission through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit!
- It’s not over until he comes again. Let’s continue as the missionaries we have been sent out to be!

Can we hear Jesus’ word to the 72 afresh as though they are spoken to us not in rebuke but as a promise, an assurance and a fresh mandate for the next 150 years:

I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, rejoice not that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. ... Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Luke 10:18-20, 23-24)