

TRANSFORMING ALL NATIONS

The Feast of the Epiphany, Sunday January 4th

St. Michael, Cornhill, preached by the rector, the Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

Hanoi, formerly the chief city of North Vietnam, and now the capital of the whole country, is now at the centre of a large and prosperous conurbation of some six and a half million people. At the heart of this thriving city, in Ba Dinh Square, is the impressive and also oppressive mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh, the liberator and founder of modern Vietnam.

Now, let me take you some four thousand miles west south west, to the village of Butiama in Northern Tanzania. Near the centre of this straggling and scattered village of some fifteen thousand souls is the burial place of Julius Nyerere, again, the liberator and founder of his nation - originally Tanganyika until it joined with neighbouring Zanzibar. Nyerere's tomb stands within a modest chapel, set in the garden of the house he built, and no distance from the kraal in which he was born.

Now, I begin today with leaders of nations, since the talk you hear of three kings, often at Epiphanytide automatically takes us there. Both leaders that I have mentioned are still adulated by most of their respective countrymen. Ho Chi Minh fought the mighty forces of the U.S., his nation surviving fierce napalm and high explosive bombing. Nyerere is still known by his people as the mwalimu, an honorific Swahili title meaning simply 'teacher'. On my last visit to Tanzania, just over a year ago, I was given a tiny carved ebony stick, just like that which Nyerere carried; it was meant to be a modest honour - I was a wandering British mwalimu - not in the same category as Nyerere, of course.

There is, however, an irony when one compares the two leaders I chose, in terms of their impact and effectiveness. That irony touches on this feast of the Epiphany. On this feast, we remember Jesus being shown to all the nations of the world. Figuratively that is indicated by the arrival of the three magi, three wise men from the east, from far countries. They are highly mysterious - we know nothing of them. Often they are known as three kings although the Bible never describes them as such. Furthermore we only assume that there were three - on that assumption we have even given them names - Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar. But the only reason we say they were three (St. Matthew doesn't say so) is that three gifts were given by the magi. It could have been two or far more magi offering these same three gifts.

These mysterious worshippers of Jesus are there to show the universal impact that Jesus would have on our world. So, now, in every nation in our world - even where they have to worship clandestinely - there are those whose lives have been fashioned after the manner of the teaching, life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Ho Chi Minh's supposedly atheistic City of Hanoi, in the humble village of Butiama in Tanzania, in the patron saint of Iceland's tiny hamlet of Skalholt and so on - the message of the Incarnate One has touched people. But why did I select those two particular leaders? Well, the answer is, as I hinted earlier, that there is a powerful and ironic contrast between them. What inheritance did each leave? Let's return to Ho Chi Minh. There's no doubting the success of modern Vietnam as a nation. Although still a Communist-led one party state, Vietnam has embraced Capitalism like there's no tomorrow. Undoubtedly the foundations of this lie with Ho Chi Minh and his drive and charisma. His regime brought with it the usual negatives of a

compulsory atheistic, totalitarian regime, but he bequeathed to the next generation a prosperous and successful nation.

Nyerere, in contrast, was a lifelong, devout Roman Catholic. Influenced also by Socialism and early exemplars of intermediate technology, he sought to bring equality and prosperity to his nation. Yet now, fifteen years after his death, and thirty years after his retirement, Tanzania is one of the poorest nations on earth. Yet Nyerere remains a figure commanding the highest esteem in and beyond Tanzania. He was not flawless. His determination to pursue collectivisation was disastrous. His commitment to intermediate technology led to an economy which never thrived.

So, instead, Nyerere's continued repute rests with the integrity, courage and honesty which made him one of the few African leaders to retire peacefully, without scandal or ignominy. He is also one of two or three leaders in Africa who was not surrounded by fear. In a way his tomb is a reminder of this - modest and rooted in Christian faith.

Each of our readings today hints at the universality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Isaiah talks of nations coming to God's light and kings to his radiance. Paul is clear that the gospel is for Jew and Gentile, indeed that it is for everyone. Matthew gives us the message unforgettably in the story of the three magi.

Through the Incarnation, God comes as one of us. Coming in utmost humility, revealed as a child, nonetheless in Jesus he will touch every nation. Second, at the heart of it all is that essence of gift, or to use that beautiful word which is woven into the Christian faith, grace. At the end of his meditation on the Incarnation, John has the Baptist reflect on God's gift:

'From his whole store, we have all received grace upon grace.'

So, going back to one of my two exemplars, despite the failings and flaws, that same message pulsates through the veins of Julius Nyerere. That is ultimately what drove him to seek a better society for his people. So it has been with many millions of others across our world as we remember at this season. But, as with Nyerere, it has often been a path strewn with problems and faltering footsteps. Perhaps that ought not to surprise us, for in essence our gospel is one of failure at its very core. Jesus is crucified and dies - there is no hiding that. But God also raised Jesus. It is this sort of saviour, this sort of *charisma*, or perhaps better, *charism*, which we embrace and give thanks for on this day. So let me conclude with the great Epiphany hymn:

'Gather in the outcasts,
All who've gone astray,
Throw thy radiance o'er them,
Guide them on their way,
Those who never knew Thee,
Those who wandered far,
Lead them by the brightness,
Of Thy guiding Star'

Amen

Readings: Isaiah 60. 1-6.
Ephesians 3. 1-12.
Matthew 2.1-12.