



26 February 2012
The First Sunday in Lent
Choral Evensong
Nehemiah 2 vv. 11–20
Matthew 6 vv. 25–34

Inspiring Words: Christ Through Literature



“Things Fall Apart...the centre cannot hold” Christ through the eyes of three African literary giants: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka & Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

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Sermon starts here... I have based my address this evening on the title of a book by the first of the three African literary giants, Chinua Achebe's, *Things Fall Apart*, taken from W B Yeats's poem, *The Second Coming*, in which Yeats describes the loss of peace and certainty in the turmoil and chaos and aftermath of the First World war.

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,*

Chinua Achebe is a Nigerian novelist, poet, essayist, professor and critic, born in 1930. His first novel *Things Fall Apart*, is the most widely read book in modern African literature.

Achebe was brought up as a Christian, but he remained curious about the more traditional Nigerian faiths. While he was reading Literature at the University of Ibadan, he became fascinated with world religions and traditional African cultures, and began writing stories.

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His novels focus on the traditions of Igbo society, the tribe into which he was born, and the effects of Christian influence, and the clash of values during and after the colonial era.

His aim is “to help society regain belief in itself and put away the complexities of the years of denigration and self-abasement”.

But he also satirises the corruption and power struggles of post-colonial African leaders who have pillaged economies. Wole Soyinka said of Achebe, “He has never failed to lay blame for the woes of the African continent squarely where it belongs”.

Achebe isn't of the view that either the Old must win or the New must win. As he says: “No single man can be correct all the time, no single idea can be totally correct”. This perspective is reflected in one of his characters in the *Anthills of the Savannah* where he says: “whatever you are is never enough; you must find a way to accept something, however small, from the other to make you whole and to save you from the mortal sin of righteousness and extremism”.

The second literary giant is: Wole Soyinka: another Nigerian writer, poet and playwright, born four years after Achebe. He was the first African to be honoured by being awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, and in 1994 became UNESCO's Goodwill Ambassador for the promotion of African culture, human rights, freedom of expression, media and communication.

The son of a clergyman, Soyinka was born into the Yoruba tribe. Like Achebe, he studied at Ibadan and later at the University of Leeds where he gained a First class honours degree in English Literature, later returning to Nigeria where he became Professor of Comparative Literature at a number of universities.

Soyinka played an active role in Nigeria's political history. During the 60s Nigerian Civil War he imprisoned for his attempts to broker peace between the warring Nigerian and Biafran parties.

He has been an implacable, consistent and outspoken critic of many Nigerian military dictators and political tyrannies worldwide, including the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. A great deal of his writing has been concerned with “the oppressive boot and the irrelevance of the colour of the foot that wears it”. This activism has often exposed him to great personal risk, including the pronouncement of a death sentence on him “in absentia” by General Abacha's government during the 90s.

The third member of this literary Trinity is: Ngugi wa Thiongo, a Kenyan novelist, playwright, essayist, short story writer, children's writer and critic. His family belonged to Kenya's largest ethnic group, the Gikuyu, who were and still are very powerful and influential.

Baptised James at birth in 1938, he later rejected his name because he saw it as part of the colonial naming system when Africans were taken as slaves to America and the West Indies and were given the name of the plantation owner.

Ngugi is widely regarded as one of the most significant writers of East Africa. His first novel, *Weep Not Child* (1964), was the first novel in English to be published by an East African, and his account of the Mau Mau movement in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967); presented for the first time an African perspective on the Kenyan armed revolt against British colonial rule during the 1950s.

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Like Achebe and Soyinka, Ngugi explores the themes of the detrimental effects of colonialism the cultural and linguistic imperialism of the West, the loss of traditional African cultures, and the effect of Christianity on tribal communities, and the desperate liberation struggle of the dispossessed peasants.

His passionate opposition of the injustices perpetrated by the postcolonial Kenyan government, resulted in his arrest and imprisonment.

He lost his professorial chair at Nairobi University, his theatre group was banned by Kenyan officials, and fearing further appraisals, Ngugi left his country for a self-imposed exile lecturing in universities in the United States.

Synthesis:

Critics across the world have acknowledged the important contribution these three African literary giants have made, not only to the body of literature in Africa, but to the life and thought and political scene of the African sub-continent and beyond. Their works have been noted for their political agenda, and their attempt to give a literary voice to the poor.

The irony is it that Africa, so rich in natural resources should be so poor economically - What has gone wrong? Is the development brought by the West a mirage or a facade? Behind the soaring Western-style skyline of many of our African cities lies a different story: a story of poverty, injustice and imperialism which our three African literary giants have laid bare. Africans need help to ponder these questions and come up with some solutions.

Where is the Good News of Jesus Christ in all this?

Although there is no record to show that this inspiring African trinity of writers are practising Christians, the issues they raise in their writing remind us of Christ's love and passion for justice.

Like Biblical prophets they have been the voice of the poor and the oppressed and have paid a personal price for speaking out. They have been rejected, suffered imprisonment, death threats and exile. They challenge our complacent and comfortable lives and hopefully urge us into some positive action.

The restoration of the walls of Jerusalem after the exile.

Our first reading this evening, tells of another man, in exile, the Prophet Nehemiah. He was doing well in the king's court (Artaxerxes), the Sir Humphrey of the Old Testament, but still had a passionate heart for his people, grieving over news of their spiritual and material poverty, and the loss of their cultural heritage, security and identity.

His analysis of the situation of his day was brutally honest, and challenging not only to others but to his own people. Many had settled for the status quo, "the wall is not too bad, why don't we simply rebuilt our homes and plant our crop?" But Nehemiah would have none of that: the wall must be repaired. It is a vision which captures the people of the city and at the same times stirs up political opposition. But Nehemiah was resolute and refused to be deflected.

Nehemiah is a prophet but also a man of action with organisational and leadership skills, and despite, or perhaps because of, the opposition of others, there grows a unity of intention among the people. Nehemiah had confidence that God would answer his prayer and he was content to leave the detail and timing in God's hands.

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Like Nehemiah, Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi are concerned with rebuilding the African nations and are not afraid to challenge those in power whom they perceived to be self-seeking.

Ngugi wa Thiongo said:

“Our lives are a battlefield on which is fought a continuous war between the forces that are pledged to confirm our humanity and those determined to dismantle it; those who strive to build a protective wall around it, and those who wish to pull it down; those who seek to mould it and those committed to breaking it up; those who aim to open our eyes, to make us see the light and look to tomorrow... and those who wish to lull us into closing our eyes”.

Rebuilding is a vital part of Christian life and that is our calling as the people of God. Ours is a call to speak out for the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed and to challenge injustice.

In our reading from St. Matthew’s Gospel Jesus assures his followers that though they have left everything behind follow him they need not be anxious. The provision which God will make for them will be as ample as the provision he makes for all his creation. We can see the natural providence which preserves the lives of the birds and allows the flowers to grow however short their lives are. Why then should we, human beings, be anxious, when supported by so gracious a providence?

Then Jesus goes on to say to his disciples, “Set your mind on God’s kingdom and his justice, and all the rest will come to you as well”. In other words, get your priorities right. By so doing, you will receive more than enough in return.

What Matthew says is not only relevant to those who commit themselves to the life of poverty but it also speaks to everyone called by Christ to follow him. To them and to us, the advice is: do not lose sight of the kingdom; the kingdom involves doing the will and purpose of God.

We should be able to see our daily lives in terms of the kingdom. The decisions we make: the way we spend money, the social relationships we form, the jobs we take and the homes we set up should be the arena where we seek justice. That is the place where we can do God’s will.

As followers of Christ we are being promised not God’s bounty but food enough, clothing enough, time enough. Bread for today. Our daily bread.

When “things fall apart” for us, whether through ill-health, bereavement, job loss, or lack of employment, we read that in Christ, the master-builder, all things hold together. In his letter to the Colossians Paul writes: “*Christ is the image of the invisible god, the firstborn of all creation; ...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together*.” (Colosians 1:15-17).

I sincerely believe that a strong and united Africa, where the growth, human flourishing and wellbeing of all, will only happen when we as its peoples and nations get our priorities right. When we embrace a vision that is clearly articulated, with a clear plan for action and above all, when we rely entirely on the Christ, the master builder.

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever.

AMEN”.

Ephesians 3:20-21

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