

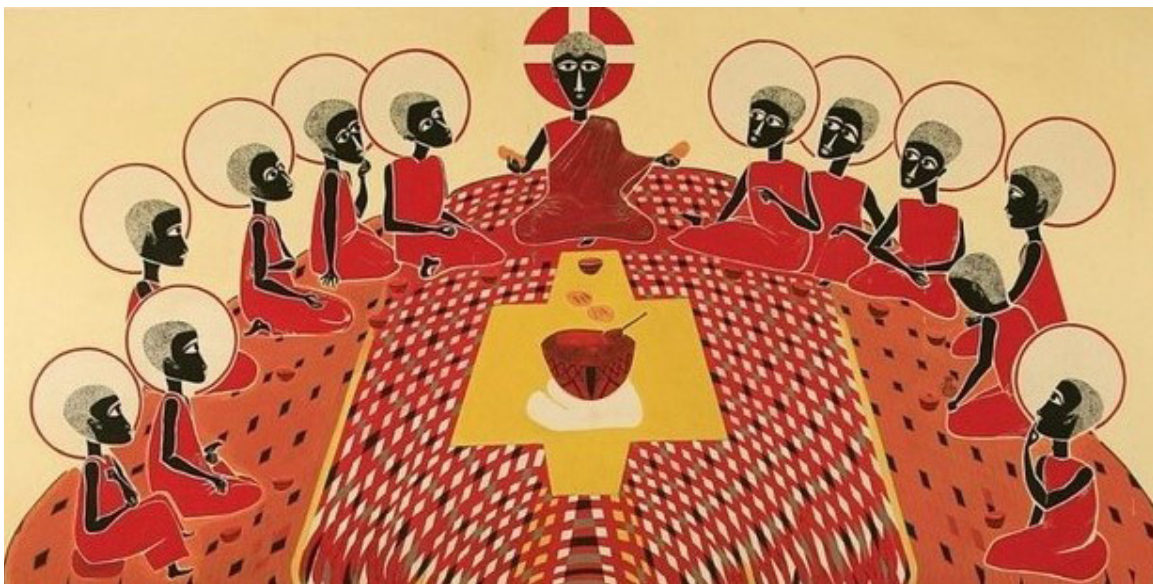
FINDING FREEDOM ON THE AFRICAN FRONTIER

Learning from African Christians' Experience of Liberation

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

Those who historically have ventured forth into new frontiers were often looking for a freedom that they couldn't know at home, whether religious, cultural or economic. Others simply longed to experience the exhilarating liberation found amongst the wilds of nature or within other cultures. Of course, experiencing God's freedom is an essential aspect of each of our Christian faith journeys. And within the Anglican Communion of 85 million Christians worldwide, it is from our African sisters and brothers that we can learn the most about experiencing spiritual freedom.

Within Africa, there are 14 Anglican Church Provinces, making up the largest population of Anglicans within the Anglican Communion. Among the top ten countries in the world with the largest Anglican populations, five are in Africa. As the Episcopal Church in Wyoming, we have been given the gift of having companion diocese relationships with two dioceses within the Province of the Anglican Church of Tanzania, the Dioceses of Kiteto and Mount Kilimanjaro.



The Last Supper – a painting at Keur Moussa Abbey in Senegal, West Africa

I grew up in Africa. It is my heart's home, and naturally, it has influenced the shaping of my worldview more than any other place. Today, Africa is the fastest-growing Christian continent in the world. As the African prophet Blyden said well over a century ago, Africa is "the spiritual reservoir of the world." We have much to learn from African Christians and their tremendous faith. And foundational to their faith, is their experience of God's freedom – an inner, personal freedom. This is the type of spiritual freedom we all long to fully experience. As Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36). One of the most profound aspects of the Christian journey of faith is that God's freedom relates to every part of us – spiritually, emotionally, psychologically and physically. Therefore, following Christ is a road to experiencing greater and greater freedom.



Children from the Diocese of Kiteto

Christianity in Africa proclaims a message of God's liberation. In my experience, African Christians have a greater experiential understanding of God's freedom than any other Christians I have met anywhere in the world. They have a strong belief that the very essence of God's character is freedom. They see the heart of the Gospel as being about God rescuing and liberating humanity. As Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu of South Africa said, "Say to yourselves in your heart. 'God loves me... I am of infinite value to God.' God created me for freedom... freedom is God-given." Therefore, the image of Christ that is most vivid to African Christians is that of "Christ the Liberator" in all dimensions of life; Christ as the one who sets his people free in the here and now. African Christians remind us how important it is for us to study and know the character of God, so that we can allow God to play the role God wants in our lives. God is first and foremost, above and beyond anything else, committed to freeing us.

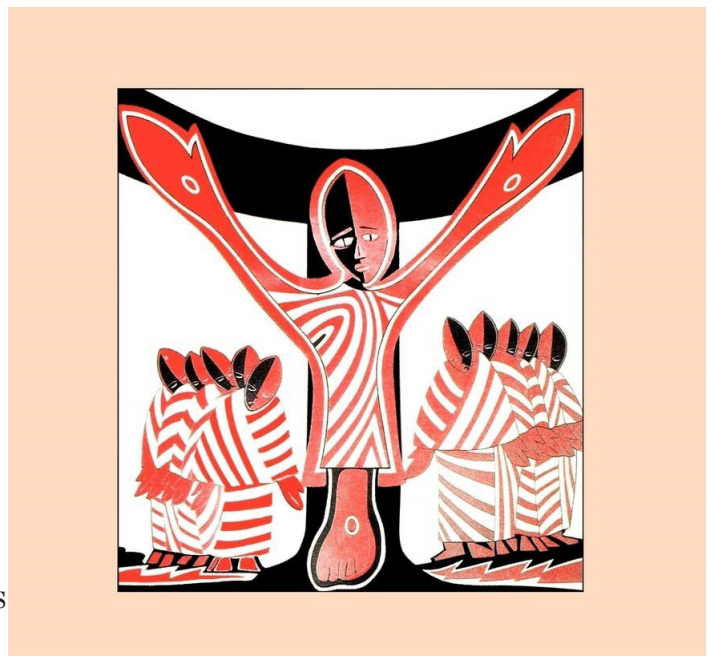
In the midst of all the hardships they undergo, African Christians see God as a powerful liberator. In this regard, Desmond Tutu counsels, "To the victims...it is important to present God as the God who has power and not only as a God who will bring freedom... [God] is not without power, though everything seems to prove the contrary... Our God has heard and seen our afflictions and has come to free us." This is why African Christianity puts such a strong emphasis on a triumphant God and a victorious, conquering Christ, who cares, protects and

restores us, and who banishes fear. To African Christians, the power of Jesus overcomes the powers of evil in all its individual and structural manifestations.

The words to a popular Christian song in South Africa loudly echo this perspective on Jesus:

Jesus Christ is conqueror,
by his resurrection he overcame death itself,
by his resurrection he overcame all things:
he overcame magic,
he overcame amulets and charms,
he overcame the darkness of the [devil's powers],
he overcame dread.
When we are with him,
We also conquer.

I recall visiting an Anglican Church in Nigeria once, and the chorus that they sang over and over again had these lyrics; “Jesus’ Power – Super Power. Satan’s Power – Powerless Power.” There is no question that the churches that are growing most rapidly in Africa are those who emphasize the liberating power of God. African Christians have learned that it is most often in times of greatest captivity or bondage that God chooses to display God’s freedom most clearly. I have met people in Africa who had committed terrible crimes and found themselves in appalling living conditions in some of Africa’s notorious prisons. And yet it is there in that horrific context that they have discovered God’s liberating power, providing them a profound experience of inner freedom in their hearts and minds. Time and time again I have heard refugees and those who have suffered awful violence due to Africa’s many civil wars, who share similar stories. The Christian good news in Africa is a message of liberation.



Ugandan Martyrs Altar Fresco in Douala, Cameroon by Fr. Engelbert Mveng SJ (1930-1995), priest and artist

I was deeply influenced by Bishop Alpha Mohamed, the late Anglican bishop of the Diocese of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. I found his faith truly contagious. Bishop Mohamed understood God’s experience of freedom to be a responsibility. The way he lived his life powerfully demonstrated a belief that God frees us so that we in turn can be used to free others. He believed that only those who are set free themselves can carry that good news of freedom to others. Bishop Mohamed saw freedom not just as “freedom *from* something,” and rather much more as “freedom *for and towards* something.”

The Christian life is a long walk to freedom, as Nelson Mandela of South Africa appropriately titled his autobiography. Our African sisters and brothers remind us that a long walk it may be – but once on the road, it becomes an irresistible and joyful journey of liberation.