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Justin Ukpong's Jesus

Emmanuel for our times

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Abstract

"Africa has a long association with the Bible…At the time of Jesus, the Bible was being read in Africa…Since then, the Bible has continued to be read in Africa" (Mbiti 1994:27). Jesus Christ is the key character with which many who come to the Bible are concerned, academics as well as countless 'ordinary' readers. Beyond the methodological considerations wherein this leading African chronicler of African Biblical Hermeneutics has made an immense contribution, what specific insights might we glean from Justin Ukpong's work about the Jesus of the canonical evangelists vis-à-vis our work as organic intellectuals? What does Ukpong's Jesus offer present-day South Africa, if one with a missiological interest may extrapolate?

Keywords: Justin Ukpong, gospel, African Biblical Hermeneutics, Jesus of Nazareth.

1. Introduction

Having only admired the professor from a distance, I must defer reflection on the contours of his no-doubt colourful life to those who knew him much better and for far longer than I did. Even in this electronic age, sheer distance from Port Harcourt further makes it impossible for me to claim to have seen all his works. But the very little I have seen persuaded me that a careful reading of his work should be of some assistance as South African Christians endeavour to rediscover their mandate in the post-Mandela era. Considering West Africa's lengthier struggles with the post-independence issues which southern Africa is now beginning to tackle in earnest, how and where might Ukpong's Jesus shed light on a possible Christian way forward?

As a New Testament (NT) scholar, Justin Ukpong endeavoured to draw his inculturation hermeneutic, for which he is famous, from the NT in general and from the Gospels in particular. "Evidence of inculturation in the NT include[s] the fact that the account of Jesus' life is given in four different versions (Gospels) reflecting the situation of the evangelists" (Ukpong 1993:163). In this fairly straightforward claim, Ukpong betrays his hermeneutic *vis-à-vis* the NT in general and Jesus in particular. It involves several assertions, among which are the following: (i) the NT

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is replete with evidence that it is pro the inculturation of the gospel, (ii) NT Christianity presents Jesus' life as the ultimate example of such inculturation, (iii) Jesus' life gets appropriated by all interested beholders only against their real-life situations, and (iv) consequently, a version of the gospel forged in and for one situation is not automatically applicable in another. Emphasis gets placed on the overall unity rather than on the incidental differences inherent to the various appropriations of Jesus' life. Differences in the presentation of the significance of Jesus' life, however, serve to remind us of the important hermeneutical role of *context* and background.

These points just enunciated are not alien to the South African theological landscape, particularly the multifaceted contextual theology stream which competently championed various forms of liberation theologies most poignantly in the 1980s. But theology in South Africa today is in crisis and exists in more or less a survival mode. So, hearing these things articulated from outside our borders just might illumine in fresh ways what we in South Africa have otherwise always known. Hence, my goal is not to align Ukpong's assertions with certain South African thinkers or thought streams per se; the recent passing away of Professor Ukpong made a look again at his contribution *in its own right* quite desirable. I need not bother with the question of who influenced whom among the various organic African intellectuals who regard the Bible as a "site of struggle for control and legitimization between the ordinary people, the church, and the academy" (Ukpong 2002a:20); it is expectable that echoes will abound where intellectual struggles are shared in earnest for the wider good. My present goal is simply to tease out from a single African thinker's hand those articulations of Jesus which might prove useful for our current quandary.

2. The Gospels

From some chronological distance, the canonical evangelists narrate Jesus' life as it had been remembered by eyewitnesses in dialogue with the realities of their own day. The Gospels thus entail kerygma. They emerged out of, and in dialogue with, particular concrete situations. They sought, amid those realities, to proclaim the effective significance of Jesus' life. There was no room for idle speculations, for their audiences comprised flesh and blood people who needed a word of guidance, encouragement and/or assurance. And biblical criticism recognizes today that these audiences surely played their part in these *re-memberings* of Jesus' life.

In a word, the Gospels are a written "record of the way the earthly Jesus impressed himself upon the early Christians" (Ukpong 1994:43). "It is very clear from the commitment expressed in the gospels", moreover, "that the evangelists saw the gospel stories as part and parcel of their faith and that of the early Christian communities" of which they regarded themselves an integral part. It then follows, quite critically for Ukpong, that "for an appropriate interpretation of the gospels it is necessary to enter into and share the

faith of the early Christians" (Ukpong 1994:44). There simply exists no room for idle spectators where the life and significance of Jesus of Nazareth is concerned.

The Nigerian professor's more than competent grasp of the Gospels' ancient socio-historical contexts comes across quite palpably throughout his work (e.g. Ukpong 2003). But given the inculturation hermeneutics framework he pioneered, how did he marry this profound mastery of biblical criticism to his (West) African context in order to meaningfully appropriate Jesus for today? This question is reasonable because despite their mastery of the intricate tools of the trade known as biblical scholarship, African biblical scholars have tended to allow systematizing and theologizing to dominate their scholarly output (see e.g. Ukpong 1998). One has to scrounge through many layers to find biblical studies specific nuggets because, on the whole, "The separation of biblical studies from other theological disciplines, so common elsewhere, does not happen in African biblical studies." (West 2001:43)

It was logical for Ukpong to seek to harness contributions from the myriad African contexts in the interest of the general advance of biblical scholarship. For whereas "the Western and the specifically African methods of reading exist side by side" among "academic readings of the Bible in Africa", the overtly "African readings", unlike their "*intellectualist"* counterparts, "are *existential and pragmatic* in nature, and *contextual* in approach" (Ukpong 2002a:17, italics original). But he must have also been concerned to assuage the concerns raised over the decades by a growing number of African scholars (see e.g. Dickson 1998) whether African scholarship has much to show beyond euphoric prognostications and cerebral pontifications as such. This article is thus an attempt to distil in a single stroke his unique reading of the Gospels in general and of Jesus in particular.

3. Gospel or Jesus

> Jesus Christ is…both the first proclaimer of the Good News and the one being proclaimed. This implies that what is proclaimed today must be taken from the life of Jesus and his proclamation otherwise it is not Good News. (Ukpong 1993:162-3)

So much critical self-application and experience go into statements such as the above. That it sounds somewhat dogmatic is the unfortunate result of pressing needs on the ground requiring succinctness. In essence, the above quote makes three vital affirmations: Jesus of Nazareth is the prime proclaimer of the Good News; Jesus' very life embodied the Good News (Jesus *is* the Good News); Subsequent proclamations of the Good News must revolve around the life of Jesus the Christ. There simply cannot exist any discord between *Jesus' life taken as a whole* and the Christian message as proclaimed in any generation. This need for coherence be-

tween the life of the author of our faith and the witness borne to him partly explains the obsession of some scholars with quests such as for the historical Jesus. If only there had existed voice recorders or our modern conceptions of biography (and journalism) in the first century of our Common Era!

Jesus of Nazareth is the prime proclaimer of the *euangelion.* Of course Jesus was neither the first and only proclaimer of *good news* nor the only character to be associated with the appellation. The concept was taken from the culture of the day, and was then invested with meaning that made Jesus its sole referent as far as Christians are concerned. Since it is part of every culture's normal parlance, the phrase 'good news' must always signify within specific contexts or in association with significant persons. For instance, that Rev. Mmusi Maimane has become the leader of government's official opposition is good news only when qualified by party-political interests or by national interest, by race, by age, by prospects for South Africa's democratic future, and so forth. By the same token it is bad news from the perspective, for instance, of those who relied solely on race to thwart opposition politics.

In the above quotation, Ukpong has in mind the gospel of Jesus Christ *a la* Mark 1:1. This Jesus "was a Jew and spoke the gospel message from within the context of Second Temple Judaism" (Ukpong 1994:46). It is against this background that he can be said to have brought not peace but a sword (cf. Matt. 10:34). Within his Jewish context, Jesus, or his message, simply is good news for some and bad news for others (see e.g. Filson 1950). But there can be no denying the reality that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel *inculturated* or, in more orthodox jargon, *incarnate.* "Jesus' movement was a conscious effort to evangelize the Jewish people" using "already familiar and important theme[s] in Jewish religious thought" (Ukpong 1994:46).

The gospel cannot afford to be abstract; Jesus is as real as any one of us. It is encountered in the things Jesus both did and said in response to the historical moment of first-century Palestine. As presented by the Gospels therefore, Jesus is "the fulfilment both of Israel's hopes and of God's plan to bring salvation" to all creation (Green 2011:520). In a word, Jesus Christ is the ultimate good news:

> At a basic level, there is only one 'Gospel,' who is Jesus Christ, and these books are simply different ways of portraying him. Placing these four books side by side in the New Testament, the ancient church bore witness to the fundamental unity of their focus and subject, Jesus, while at the same time allowing that Jesus' significance could be faithfully rendered in more than one way. (Green 2011:517)

Jesus is amenable to being presented in more than one way in keeping with the dictates of each unique context. Put differently, "different cultures contribute different dimensions…to the understanding of the gospel" as the very existence "of four gos-

pels based on four different approaches to understanding Jesus" confirms (Ukpong 1993:165). Conversely, these disparate cultural representations facilitate his emergence as Lord of each of the contexts involved. Israel's *Christ* becomes *Kurios* among the Greeks and in Africa the *Chief of all Chiefs* et cetera (see e.g. Kuma 1981). Rather than lessen, these accruals add to Jesus' significance and efficacy in the many contexts where he is being encountered. They confirm his lordship not only in modern African times but through all time as the creative presence of God. And yet beyond every concrete historical context, Jesus also seeks to pervade every aspect of each human being.

4. A Holistic Gospel

> …the gospel message should permeate all aspects of the people's lives – religious, economic, political, cultural, social, and so on. (Ukpong 1996a:33)

Life in ancient times was not compartmentalized in the manner we have become accustomed to doing today (Ukpong 1994:44-45). Our indefinite modern categories *religious, economic, political, cultural, social, and so on* would have been odd to people in Jesus' day. For the early Christians, the economic and the spiritual were not separable from the political, and so forth. The gospel of Jesus Christ was proclaimed from the very earliest days to "the totality of the human, societal, cultural, economic and political conditions, and even the physical environment of the people" (Ukpong 1998:24). The quote which opened this section is thus calling for a return to the way things had always been. Beyond evidence supplied by archaeological research, African sensitivity to the primal worldview also demands that it be so.

It is necessary for the return to be made unequivocally in modern times where the gospel has repeatedly been "given a spiritualised interpretation" by those who could not afford to let it confront their privileged socio-political standing. From within quite volatile socio-political contexts, the powerful conveniently prefer to have the Bible read "for the nourishment of individual souls towards spiritual salvation and not in view of societal transformation" (Ukpong 1998:17). Such a luxury was not an option to Jesus of Nazareth or even to the Christians of the first century as the book of the Acts of the Apostles makes abundantly clear.

Beyond thus stating the obvious, insisting on the gospel's pervasive reach amounts to urging modern embodiments of the word of life to heed more closely the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Ukpong is uncompromising on this point. It is quite easy to detach a statement from the Gospels and then apply it to today's situations without giving due regard to the life of Jesus which, in its totality, necessarily informs it. To guard against misappropriations of Scripture for ends that may at times even be contrary to the spirit of the *euangelion* of

Jesus Christ, Ukpong propounded the following interpretive framework (Ukpong 1995:10-12):

First, "Identifying the interpreter's specific context that *dynamically* corresponds or approximates to the historical context of the text, and clarifying his/her perspective in relation to the text."

Then follows the "analysis of the context of interpretation" in the form of (i) a "*phenomenological* analysis" which makes the text real in the modern context, (ii) a "*socio-anthropological* analysis" which focuses on implicated worldviews, (iii) a *"historical* analysis" which investigates conditions that made the issue arise, (iv) a "*social* analysis which probes into the interconnectedness of the dynamics of the society in relation to the issue", and (v) a *"religious* analysis" which explores the religious dimensions of the issue.

Next is "analysis of the historical context of the text." It follows from this ordering that "historical critical tools are used precisely as servant not as master."

Then comes "analysis of the text in light of the already analysed contemporary context", which includes review of current interpretations, as questions arising from analysis of interpreter's context are put to the text.

And, finally, there is "gathering together the fruits of the discussion and a commitment to actualizing the message of the text in a concrete life situation."

The above hermeneutic is geared towards ensuring that no stone is left unturned wherever the gospel meets real life. The gospel truly comes alive at the "interplay" (Ukpong 2002a:27), at that point where "the inner logic of the text; the immediate, mediate and larger literary context of the text; the historical context of the text" (Ukpong 1995:7) come face to face with acute contemporary questions looking to "derive a satisfactory answer" (Ukpong 1995:8). Pragmatism permeates this outlook:

> Biblical texts are seen as rooted in their historical contexts yet as plurivalent, capable of speaking to different situations differently. The objective in reading therefore is not to discover the meaning intended by the author but to bring the text into dynamic interaction with a particular contemporary situation. Specific meanings are understood as *produced* in the process of reading a *text* against a contemporary *social-historical context*. The validity of readings is judged by their faithfulness to the basic human and biblical values of love and respect for others, community building, justice, peace and inclusiveness. (Ukpong 2001a:193, emphasis original)

5. Ukpong's Jesus

> History is made, it does not just happen, and history repeats itself only when insights from the past are not used to create a new situation. (Ukpong 1993:160-1)

Having summarized the theoretical premises which lie behind Ukpong's reading of the Bible, we can now read the gospels along with him in order to appreciate the Jesus who emerges therefrom. Our goal remains to learn how Ukpong's Jesus might help us deal with our challenging post-apartheid South African context, which now more than ever must confront the question of being African in every sense of the term. Basically, this is a continent characterised from north to south by a "lack of political will to check the excesses of political office holders, and lack of sensitivity to the plight of the ordinary people", a terrain where "governments pay only lip service to national unity [while] they allow tribal, sectional or party interests to influence their decisions." (Ukpong 1998:19)

6. A Jesus for Africa

Beyond mere socio-political considerations, it is actually possible to speak of Africa collectively on account of several 'cultured assumptions' that "lie at the basis of the African's experience of the bible" and thus "inform the understanding and methodology of inculturation hermeneutic" specifically, and/or the African "exegetical conceptual framework" in general. They are: (a) a "unitive view of reality" (contra dualistic), i.e. "a unity with visible and invisible dimensions"; (b) the conviction that the universe has "divine origin" and there exists an "interconnectedness between God, humanity and the cosmos"; (c) a deep "sense of community" across generations, between human communities, and between humans and nature—all of which shape one's identity; and (d) "emphasis on the concrete rather than on the abstract, on the practical rather than on the theoretical." (Ukpong 1995:8-9)

Given the common threads pervading African consciousness, Ukpong then recognized five ways whereby Jesus has been appropriated in Africa, the five African faces of Jesus if you will (Ukpong 1994:41-43): the *incarnational* focus on the eternal Word become flesh and dwelling among us inspires recurrent incarnations of Jesus or the gospel in each subsequent culture encountered; the active agent of creation pervades all human cultures according to the *Logos Spermatikos* approach, whether or not the various cultures recognize him as such; the *functional analogy* approach sees Jesus fulfilling established venerable and redemptive African roles such as 'ancestor'; the *paschal mystery* approach celebrates the resurrection as the ultimate facilitator of inculturation; and, last, the *biblical* approach takes NT statements about Jesus as indicative of his activity in Africa prior to Christianity's arrival.

The "first four approaches may be described as systematic" after the manner hinted at above. Adapting the fifth, Ukpong then grounds his inculturation hermeneutic in "the totality of the ministry of Jesus" rather than in either NT claims taken at face value (Ukpong 1994:43) or systematic ruminations on some isolated aspect

of Jesus' life and ministry. Plainly, the Jesus Ukpong derives from the Gospels is not made up of proof-texts. Africa deserves not a piecemeal Jesus but a Jesus who is able and willing to tackle and be taken on by every facet of African life.

Ukpong's efforts to take into account everything that the canonical evangelists report about Jesus is a model contribution to modern biblical scholarship. Post-apartheid South Africa can use a Jesus who not just endorses the notion of "a new humanity", but in fact also facilitates its "realization" within a context characterised by "deteriorating religious and moral standards" (Ukpong 1994:46). This Jesus would be good news indeed, especially for ordinary South Africans battling to cope with the unbridled influx of foreign nationals on top of the many other burdens they bear.

7. An ordinary Jesus

I have already granted the important qualification that the African biblical scholar constantly pursues within him/herself a balance between issues of his/her existential context on the left hand and the issues of critical scholarship on the right. Notwithstanding the difficulties attending this pursuit, I must now say a little more about the left hand of the African biblical scholar's consciousness. The biblical Jesus whom "African Christians" see and are eager "to actualize" in their daily experience (Ukpong 1995:3) is as potent today as he was in the first century in relation to his "actions in respect of the poor, the oppressed, captives, and the sick" (Ukpong 1994:46). This popular Jesus is quite hands-on, and rightly so.

For a long time, African biblical scholars upheld the tendency to "read the bible through an interpretive grid developed in western culture, and then seek to apply the result in their own contexts" (Ukpong 1995:4). The discord which often characterised such performances is well-rehearsed among us; several African scholars have urged, for instance, that "Africanization is a much more complex process than sheer translation or indigenisation—it is a combination of combat and construction" (Maluleke 2006:70). Significant strides have been made in regard to engendering meaningful relations between Africa and the Bible, thanks to incisive contributions from scholars like Justin Ukpong.

Ukpong regards as paradigmatic the reality that the various evangelists presented Jesus Christ in dialogue each with his own community's existential situation. It follows then that competent analysis of our own situations will lead to effective representations of the good news that Jesus' life is or ought to be among us. The evangelists' contexts are most certainly different from their modern African counterparts. But Africa's primal worldview as typified by its cultured assumptions matches fairly closely the worldviews of the evangelists' communities. For instances both worldviews "assumed that God and demons could act directly on human be-

ings" (Ukpong 1994:56). It thus becomes a very short step for African Christians to participate in the world of the Bible as much as the Bible effectively participates in their daily lives. Jesus literally speaks and acts decisively today in respect of the poor, the oppressed, captives, and the sick.

In the company of ordinary readers, the critical African reader of the Bible "who *consciously* takes his/her socio-cultural context as a point of departure in the reading, and who is part and parcel of the Christian community whose world-view and life experience he/she shares" (Ukpong 1995:5) can thus also meaningfully participate "in the world of the text" (Ukpong 1995:6). After all, the Bible records "ordinary people's experience of God in their lives and communities" (Ukpong 2002a:20). It follows then that "[a]ll scholarly reading… originate from and contain elements of ordinary readings"; or, to put it differently, the "structured and systematic…scholarly critical readings" are virtually meaningless without the "experiences…intuition…insights of fellow ordinary readers" (Ukpong 2001a:190).

Bible appropriations which are generally dubbed 'ordinary' are in fact quite extraordinarily fundamental in a *sine qua non* sense to Christian thought. It is as though Jesus, standing together with those who mourn and thirst and hunger for righteousness, keeps declaring: "You have learned how it was said…but I say to you." (Ukpong 1994:46)

8. Agent of God's solidarity

It is a critical "point of departure" for Ukpong "that in his ministry, Jesus used…the inculturation approach", which is to say, "he proclaimed the Good News to the Jewish people from within the perspective of the Jewish culture" (Ukpong 1994:40). The culture into which he was born duly supplied the tools he needed to carry his message and carry out his mission. "Jesus did not, therefore, invent the concept of the kingdom of God", he was rather "set on evangelizing Jewish culture and religious thought from within by utilizing the resources of the culture" (Ukpong 1994:49) as we already also saw with regard to 'good news'. Appropriating the evidently familiar and important theme of the Kingdom of God, Jesus went on, according the gospels, to *redefine* "the conditions for entry…the imminence" as well as through parables the "nature" of the kingdom (Ukpong 1994:47).

As with *euangelion* and the kingdom of God, so too with parables:

> In using parables as the principal mode of teaching, Jesus was availing himself of an already existing mode of teaching that had a long tradition in the Jewish culture and was current in his time. This was only reasonable; otherwise his teachings would not have been understood. (Ukpong 1994:55).

This Jesus read the Scriptures, or rather reread the Scriptures both critically and ethically (Ukpong 2001a:191), regularly engaging in critique upon "critique of the contemporary society's values in the light of God's values" (Ukpong 2001a:199). He especially embodied in his person "the reversal of values" where "contemporary society's way of acting is upturned in favour of the disadvantaged in society" (Ukpong 2001a:204). By and large, Jesus epitomized an ethos of "actualizing God's rule on earth, to which all Christians [also] are called" and which "involves going against the grain of normal societal practice; challenging the status quo" (Ukpong 2001a:211). Jesus identified with the downtrodden so much that, as Ukpong's long-time colleague at Port Harcourt indicates, he did not even once feel the need to compete with them.

As for John, behind his "eternal *Logos*…christology is Jesus as the presenter/proclaimer of God's salvation, and all through the gospel we see how Jesus gradually reveals the mystery of this salvation" (Ukpong 1994:47, sic). Coming to Mark,

> It is evident in the four gospels that Jesus' ministry was characterized by a proclamation of the Good News. In the widest sense, the proclamation comprised not only what Jesus said but also what he did and what happened to him. For Mark, this was the Good News. (Ukpong 1994:46)

In Luke we meet a Jesus who is the greatest equalizer: *"in the coming of Jesus God has raised up the weak and the lowly, and simultaneously put down the great and the mighty"* (Ukpong 2002b:63 italics original). Whereas Luke had an ostensibly non-threatening message for the ears of the elite, namely, "the Jesus movement is different" because "it is interested in the poor, not the overthrow of Rome" (Ukpong 2002b:63), his message was still much more animated to the ears of the poor and marginalized. The latter met in Luke "a revolutionary Jesus"; they could finally visualize "a radically new social pattern of living, a radical transformation in the configuration of the contemporary religious, political, social, and economic relations" (Ukpong 2002b:62). How South Africans need this Jesus who enables the downtrodden to see visions of liberation "aimed at enabling Bible [readers] to become 'subjects of their own liberation process'." (Draper 2006:99).

"Raising up the lowly means breaking down the bond of oppression by the mighty that subjugates the lowly" (Ukpong 2002b:69). Contrary to expectations of a Davidic king, Luke's messiah came from among "the poor and the lowly. These are the ones that need liberation; it is from among them that the liberator comes. The rich and oppressors would also be liberated from their practice of exploitation but only through solidarity with the poor" (Ukpong 2002b:65). Not only were the poor "the object of Jesus' mission", but "Jesus identified himself with them"; accordingly, "the Church as an institution must become the church of the poor, a

church that sees and thinks from the perspective of the poor, a church that does not just speak on behalf of the poor, but one that empowers the poor to speak for themselves and to struggle out of their situation" (Ukpong 1998:22). But the South African church is overrun by exploiters of the poor and vulnerable!

Ukpong (2003:141-7) then reads Matthew with eyes coloured by one of sub-Sahara's most distressing challenges, HIV/AIDS. Within a world where sickness and misfortune are often interpreted as divine disapproval, Ukpong finds in Matthew a presentation of Jesus which those among us who live with HIV/AIDS should find to be a liberating companion. Considering his own flawed ancestry all the way to his passion via countless miracles and teachings, "Jesus' solidarity with people who were not perfect" comes through genuinely. Even his birth, naming and flight into Egypt alongside "the slaughter of innocent children", all these signified solidarity: "Jesus is the savior who will manifest God's saving presence in the world. …he came to share the plight of numerous refugees all over the world today." Having captured the significance of Jesus' baptism and his "model response to temptation", the beatitudes focus "on situations of human suffering." More precisely, "the beatitudes are about the reversal of situations of suffering" without implying that there is to be no "suffering under God's reign" as such. Furthermore, the constant "affirmation that Jesus healed all types of diseases" betrays "the comprehensive nature of God's saving involvement in human suffering." Ultimately, "the passion, death, and resurrection narratives" represent "a Christian approach to suffering", namely, "Those who follow Jesus must…face suffering squarely and trust in God, who will empower them to turn it into an instrument of salvation."

By way of conclusion, Jesus' life as Good News "hinge[s] on the ethic of love" in all the gospels; the implication is that "[t]hose who would be God's children must prove their 'legitimacy' by loving as God loves" as well as by showing mercy "in antithesis to the demands of the letter of the Law" (Ukpong 1994:49). Nothing was more "central" than love to Jesus' fresh "approach to the Law" (Ukpong 1994:51). Its essence was this: "God wants repentance, mercy, and love rather than the ritualistic observance of the Law" (Ukpong 1994:53). Armed with such a concise message, it must be possible to *again* dream of true justice prevailing in our lifetime within post-apartheid South Africa. It cannot be true that an entire generation of prophets (the very ones who once fearlessly spoke truth to power!) has been bought by the powers that be and have consequently been drafted into singing nothing but Caesar'*s euangelion.*

9. A Jesus for post-apartheid South Africa

There are enough pointers from the foregoing incomplete summation of Ukpong's Jesus to the effect that apprehending the life of Jesus compels his disciples to lead

lives that *are* good news to those with whom they come into contact. The gospel is not just a matter of spoken words. Here the meaning of the Gospel texts plays itself out in its readers' lives (Ukpong 2002a:30). The good word of life thrives by becoming embodied in the lives of its proclaimers, far less than through the agency of only reciting 'Lord, Lord' (Matt. 7:20-29). Beyond being mere messengers, Jesus' followers become good news to the manifold facets of human life.

Jesus' followers are called to be Jesus's for their day and time and contexts. More accurately, far from being asked to become Galileans or Judeans, they are called to become Christ-like, Christ's if you prefer; thus the attributive tag *Christians* designating *those who are so like Christ they are practically Christ.* And, as we have seen, Jesus read or rather reread the Scriptures as one "identifying with and reading from the perspective of the most disadvantaged and unimportant characters in the text" (Ukpong 2001a:189). In present-day South Africa too, "the goal of [Bible] reading", or the validity of our encounters with Jesus Christ, must facilitate "the empowerment of people for authentic Christian living, and for taking responsibility and action for change in society." (Ukpong 2001a:192)

We granted from the onset that Ukpong's Jesus could never be foreign to our South African theological landscape, especially among those who retain the memory of the struggle against apartheid. Hence, as we have seen, Ukpong's Jesus is first of all to be appreciated in the context of his socio-religious background. He was a Galilean with a mission set upon Judea. By the same token, South Africans' Jesus cannot evade Pretoria, among other bastions of power that are in need of transformation. Ukpong's Jesus demands that he be appropriated as a whole or not at all. Present-day South Africa is in dire need of this sort of missions.

Jesus' followers bore witness to him as a community and, often, like their master, bore marks on their bodies to that effect. Christian discipleship is not primarily a matter of words; the South African Christian community needs to remember this fact. Jesus' followers, though initially concerned with identifying with and reading from the perspective of the most disadvantaged and unimportant characters in their context, must eventually also reach beyond their own comfortable borders. Through the agency of their own cultural eyes, they must ultimately become good news to all by all means. *Kurie eleeson!*

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