

What makes a nation Christian? That question came back to me on this past weekend, when I was preparing my "homily" (the Catholic's fancy name for a "sermon"!) for the Sunday feast of Christ the King. It's a wonderful feast day, and the Gospel reading for the feast is indeed a wonderful text: Matthew 25: 31-46.

You will recall that in this text Jesus is telling his disciples who those are who will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven on the final judgment day. He doesn't say it will be those who shout, "Alleluia, Praise the Lord," or those who sing "Glory, Glory, Glory!" Nor will it be those who go on long pilgrimages or stay up all night praying. Nor will it be those pastors who live a luxurious life-style to teach people what it means to be "saved"! (Nor, to be honest, will it be those who write these weekly columns for THE POST!)

No, Jesus is quite clear. Those who will be coming into his Kingdom are the sisters and brothers who feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison. Why? Because, "As long as you have done this for the least of my sisters and brothers, you have done it for me!"

JUSTICE AND KINGDOM

Now that really makes me pause and ponder the statement made last week by a Government Minister (who is also a "Minister" in the other sense - a real mix of "politics and religion"!). The statement was to the effect that declaring Zambia a Christian nation had helped spread Christian values and good morals. But is that true in a political sense of purpose and priorities?

Some people might see a big Christian song festival occurring here in Lusaka this week to be a sign of what a good Christian nation Zambia is. Well, I like good Christian songs. But I certainly question if songs rather than deeds should be the mark of a Christian nation. Would that be true, in the sense of really following the challenging teaching of Jesus?

Wouldn't much more relevant and credible signs of Zambia's being a Christian nation be that the hungry are fed because mealie meal prices are attainable, the thirsty in the compounds can easily get clean water, the refugees from neighbouring countries are made to feel at home, the unemployed can get jobs so they can dress decently, the sick can be treated in good hospitals and clinics and get affordable medicines, the imprisoned around the country receive speedy and fair trials?

Yes, social justice is the mark of the Kingdom here and now. What I'm saying is really not that radical or heretical or unrealistic. It's simply taking seriously that Jesus himself put down as the test of our being one of his followers that we act more than sing, be charitable more than pray, practice justice more than preach conversion.

In so doing, Jesus was only following the clear teaching of the Old Testament prophet like Amos who reminds us that God says: "Let me have no more of the din of your chanting, no more of your strumming on harps. But let justice flow like water, and integrity like an unfailing stream" (Amos 5: 23-24). And Jesus knew that it was Isaiah who had to remind the people that all their prayers and fasting were ignored by God if they weren't paying just wages to their workers, sharing bread with the poor and sheltering the homeless (Isaiah 58: 3-7).

POLITICS AND KINGDOM

So what does this mean for the politics of Zambia today? Especially when the new Government likes to claim again for Zambia the title of a "Christian nation." I think it's good to hear the very honest message of the Zambian Catholic bishops back in 1992, responding to the much disputed Presidential proclamation. The Bishops reminded Zambians that no nation is Christian by declaration, but only by the deeds of justice and concern for the poor. That should have some very obvious implications for me and for you, the reader of this column, and especially for the leaders of our new

of Parliament. (I hope that they are also readers of this column!)

pay of key Government officials and Members of Parliament not holding these officials and parliamentarians responsible to move the country forward -- especially as concerns the well being of the majority of this very rich country, the impoverished in our urban compounds and rural areas. Let them take their pay, but make them work for it! And let the national Budget for 2009 reflect that.

Moreover, shouldn't we hear an end to the irresponsible criticisms of church leaders who speak out for the poor, criticisms that call these leaders "partisan" or "supporters of the opposition" when they question priorities, challenge policies or confront practices? Rather than try to defend or deny outrageous remarks about "promoting genocide," let our elected servants cooperate with those who are close to the people suffering every day in this country.

CONSTITUTION AND KINGDOM

And what would be a very powerful way of putting into effect here in this country the message of Matthew 25? I don't think I am being idealistic to suggest that putting economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) in a new Bill of Rights in a new Constitution would go a long ways toward making Zambia more of a true "Christian Nation"! Because it is precisely these rights, and the rights of women, children, the elderly and the differently-abled, that deal with the hungry, thirsty, sick, homeless, etc. These clearly should be included in a new Bill of Rights in a Constitution that might again proclaim in its Preamble that Zambia is a "Christian nation."

New leaders in the new Administration have urged that the NCC complete its work by 2009 so that we can have a new Constitution in place before the 2011 elections. That is fine and good, as long as we make sure that the calendar will allow time for the National Referendum necessary to enact a Bill of Rights that brings Zambia up to score with progressive nations across the globe.

We look forward to intelligent discussion of these ESCR by the NCC, taking account of the good research that has been done, the comparative studies undertaken, the national petition that is gathering thousands of signatures across the country. I don't think it is far-fetched to say that those who really want Zambia to be recognised as a "Christian nation" should be in forefront of the campaign for these ESCR in our new Constitution. Let's hear them!

So, let the Christian songs ring out, yes. But don't mock the word of God found in scripture passages like Matthew 25: 31-46 by implying that songs signify Christianity. Deeds do, deeds following Jesus' deeds. In the four Gospels, we don't have many examples of Jesus' singing but we have plenty of examples of his feeding the hungry and telling his disciples to do the same!

Amen!

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