

## Loving God and Neighbour in the life of Bernard Mizeki Fr Card-Reynolds FSJ

*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*

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14<sup>th</sup> June 1896 – like today, a Sunday – and Bernard Mizeki rose early, as he always did, and started to prepare for the observance of the Sabbath. Bernard Mizeki was the catechist of the rather quaintly named *Church of England Mission* near Paramount Chief Mangwende's kraal in Mashonaland (modern day Zimbabwe). As was Bernard's custom he raised a white flag to signal that the day was the Sabbath, but unusually the answering white flag did not appear over Mangwende's kraal. He knew that this was not a good sign. He had heard the accusations and anger expressed by the Mashona and the Matabele in recent weeks. He had received an order from Fr Foster, his colleague and superior, to leave his post and seek safety at Penhalonga. He knew that other clergy and catechists had done so. Conscious of what was building Bernard himself had ordered many of those who lived at the mission to leave. And perhaps most pressing of all, Mutwa, whom he had married three months earlier, and now pregnant, begged him to leave. But Bernard could only reply, 'But what of my people here?' – and that his bishop (away in England) had not released him from his post. And he must be obedient.

The bell rung for Matins. Bernard prepared the hymn sheets and put on his cassock and surplice but no one came. Surely he could now see he must go? In the afternoon he had the bell sounded again, for Evensong. And this time out of the surrounding crags and hills came a large crowd of worshippers, more even than usual. The mission chapel filled but the mood was sombre. The Shona people so often full of chatter, song and games were strangely quiet, and departed with an air of sorrow.

Bernard Mizeki had served as the catechist of five years by this time – but he was not of the Shona people, nor Matabele, nor Zulu. He had been born in Mozambique in about 1871 and at around the age of 12 he had travelled with his cousin to Cape Town as an economic migrant. The reality as so often, then as now, was much harsher than he'd expected. He seems to have lost himself in those early years; certainly he lost his voice. He became acutely shy. Then around the age of 18 or 19 his life changed and he started to attend the Mission House of the Cowley Fathers in Cape Town. At that time he was called Barns, perhaps a reference to being the 'Boy'

who worked in the barn. He became a regular at the monks' smoking club – a pouch of tobacco and an evening of classes. Over time he became a disciple of Fr Puller (Balliol), one of the great liturgists and linguists of the community. In the end Bernard surpassed even Fr Puller in languages – he mastered a fluency in eight African languages, English, High Dutch (and kitchen Dutch), and a working proficiency in French, Latin and Greek (both Classical and New Testament). The monks had quickly recognised the brilliance of his mind and sponsored him to attend Zonnebloem College. And while Barns studied he helped the monks run S. Columba's Hostel, a refuge for alcoholics and those in danger of alcoholism, a particular problem for lonely migrants.

The academics in the gospel today question Our Lord to find the precise, the exquisitely precise (and therefore intellectually precarious) answer to which is the greatest command of God.

If we want to understand Our Lord's answer we can see the pattern of it in the life of Bernard Mizeki, or Saint Bernard Mizeki as he is so honoured in several Anglican provinces. In Bernard we can see the total conversion of a life by divine and human love. At Christmass we celebrate, of course, the human Christ-child showing us God. But the incarnation is also God showing us how to be human.

Our Lord's answer to the Pharisees draws together the mystery of how we are loved by God and how we return that love. We love God by loving our neighbour. We love His image in them. And our neighbour may be on the other side of the road but it is not complicated to know how to love them since they are like us – and much more like us than our prejudices suggest.

The region of the Mashona and Matebele is about the size of Germany. Even in the late C19th it was still rumoured to be the biblical Land of Ophir, the source of Solomon's gold, ivory and gem stones. The Rhodes-Rudd Concession of 1888 certainly knew there was gold present.

The early missions had not been stable, not least because although the region was vast it was virtually inaccessible. It could be approached up the rivers Limpopo and Zambezi but the river paddle steamer, the SS Saxon (you couldn't make it up) had run aground.

In 1891 the region was organised into a diocese and its first bishop, George Knight-Bruce (Merton) made a wise choice when he went to possess his see to take with him only six African catechists and a carpenter. They all had to walk for many weeks, 9 ½ hours a day of walking, impenetrable forest to be hacked through, steep ravines, rivers to ford, one meal a day, and at night swarms of mosquitoes and lions to contend with. Remarkably

they did all survive and reached Umtali. Bishop Knight-Bruce then agreed with the various regional chiefs where he might establish his missions.

At this time Bernard had been a Christian for five years. He was baptised by the Cowley Fathers naming himself after S. Bernard of Clairvaux. For Bernard Mizeki the total emersion of his baptism marked his own total conversion – a total conversion that S. Bernard of Clairvaux had held out as really possible – as was the continuing need of conversion. The Cistercian saint wrote, 'If you notice something evil in yourself, correct it; if something good, take care of it; if something beautiful, cherish it; if something sound, preserve it; if something unhealthy, heal it.'

Paramount Chief Mangwende allowed Bernard to occupy a former Portuguese trading post near his kraal. Asked why he had allowed Europeans live so near him, the Mashona aristocrat said that he found it quite entertaining watching Europeans.

Bernard was all-alone at the new Church of England Mission. For an African for whom tribe and communal life are everything it must have called out of him an extraordinary resilience, so many of the missionaries, African and European, couldn't bear it.

The chrism of the Cowley Fathers was not the spiritual imperialism of others. They believed Our Lord's words when He had sent out missionaries saying, 'The Kingdom of God is close at hand' and 'The Kingdom is very close.' Salvation already resided in the culture and in the people. Bernard could arrive in Mashonaland with nothing but himself because he wasn't taking the message of salvation. Salvation was already there, already 'close at hand'. It just needed to be uncovered. (Footnote: how very different this is to our present obsession with church planting.)

The incarnation both points us to our God and to our humanity. Bernard lived his love of God. He incarnated it. He did so with the most beautiful humility – literally in the humus – the earth. He didn't tell people about conversion, he didn't tell people to convert; rather he opened himself to be converted by God's salvation that existed in that place and in the people. God's work of converting him became Bernard's witness.

*Year One.* He leant Mashona and was only satisfied when he had no accent. In the earth he planted a garden for crops and also for flowers – flame lilies, aloes and arums. He placed the flowers in the mission as an offering of the beauty of the place. The people were intrigued by his relish of what was so familiar to them. He studies the physical geography, the astronomy; he would stop and stare at a beetle or a butterfly. He walked everywhere quickly – to show the urgency of the Gospel. In the mission daily he said Matins, Prime, Evensong and Compline. He meditated and prayed, studies his Bible, read any and every book he could lay his hands on, and would walk 60 miles to receive the Blessed Sacrament from Fr

Zigubu, his nearest priest. And with his own hands he made furniture for his hut.

*Year Two.* He cut up the furniture and fashioned his hut as the Shona, everything at floor level. The custom among the local people developed to call upon him for his greeting – and from them, particularly children, he learnt their various games so he could play with his neighbours. He especially loved ndoma (a sort of cross between croquet and Pooh sticks). The Mashona love riddles and he would join their riddle contests: “I built a hut without a doorway. What did I build?”

He also learnt the destructive aspects of Shona culture – the practice of killing infant twins and handicapped babies, of sacrifices, and even human sacrifices, of the denunciations for sorcery that could lead to death, and the violence and feuds of one tribe against another.

For two years he had no pupils, no congregation. He allowed himself to be converted. ‘We learnt to love Bernard my teacher,’ said one of his later pupils, ‘because he loved us first.’ *Bernard my Teacher* was the name everyone called him and in turn he called himself *Bernard your Servant*. And after two years he started to invite people to the mission and little by little his work of catechising increased. He found music a good way to reach the people. Again, and at first, he allowed himself to be taught by them. He then fitted Shona tunes to Christian words. The Shona ‘sing from the heart’ and so he saw that they were already spiritually prepared for liturgical and sacred music.

At last on S. Stephen’s day 1895, after 5 years of work, he was able to accompany a small group from the mission to Salisbury where they were accepted as catechumens and marked with the cross as ready to prepare for baptism.

BUT...Political and social unrest was building. By 1896 the tinder was dry and needed only a spark. The Colonial Government in the face of a widespread outbreak of rinderpest-disease in cattle ordered the slaughter of thousands of animals, it was all that could be done, but the result was inevitable starvation. It was more than enough to start the uprising.

The tensions of that Sunday, 14<sup>th</sup> June 1896, had appeared to come to nothing. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday passed. Bernard sent people away from the mission and tried to understand what he must do himself. On Wednesday evening a sick and starving old man came to his hut. The old man had no one to care for him – Bernard had his answer, he must stay.

That night beacons could be seen on the hills. Bernard and Mutwa retired to bed. Then late at night there was loud rapping on the door. Mutwa urged Bernard not to open the door but the voices outside shouted,

'We have bad news for you.' Fearing it was news of deaths Bernard let in the men – they dragged him out of the hut and thrust a spear in his side.

The account of what happened next is mystical and explains why the place of Bernard Mizeki's martyrdom is so revered. Mutwa came out of the hut and found Bernard not quite dead. She and another woman moved him to nearby rocks and bushes to hide him. He said, 'Your uncles have attacked me and I am dying. I wish you to be baptised and the child in your womb. The work of priests and teachers is not ended. When I am dead there will come many more priests.' Mutwa and her companion went to get blankets and warm food but on their return Bernard had disappeared. The hillside they said was lit up, and there was the noise 'like many wings of a great bird' and the ground where Bernard had lain had a strong red glow.

'Wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr has given his blood for the blood of Christ, there is holy ground and the sanctity shall not depart from it.' Thus wrote TS Eliot. By 1931 the place was dedicated as a site of pilgrimage and today tens of thousands of pilgrims go to the shrine, particularly on 18<sup>th</sup> June.

I thank you for this opportunity to share a little of the life of S. Bernard Mizeki, proto-martyr of southern Africa, catechist of the Cowley Fathers, Bernard my Teacher, Bernard your Servant. Here at Pusey House some of the chapel interns are funded in honour of Bernard Mizeki. May he pray for you and for all in this House, particularly for the grace of our total conversion, so that in loving the humanity of our neighbour we love God.

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