My Pilgrimage in Mission

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Once, when I was with the Church Missionary Society (CMS), of which I was general secretary from 1975 to 1985, I was in Jerusalem, staying with a small, radical Christian community, led by an impressive, holy man. His route along the via dolorosa took us underneath the surface of the city, the clutter of centuries of spiritual conflict, and through the Roman Pavement to the dungeon under Caiaphas's house and so to Golgotha.

Then, finally, we went to Bethlehem and into the cave stable under the great church in Manger Square. As we knelt before what has been the reputed birthplace of Christ since the second century or earlier, I was glad that we were alone there and that my friend was deep in prayer. Because there, before the guttering lamp in the dark, hidden, womb-like cave, at that simple, starting place, I was suddenly overwhelmed by unstoppable tears. And the repeated phrase that kept welling up with the tears was, "if only we could begin all over again," "if only we could begin all over again." After what seemed an age, suddenly and insistently a voice responded within me, "But you can. You can begin again. That is why I was born. For this I came."

As we stumbled back into the light above, I knew that the theme of breaking and remaking was central to my pilgrimage in mission, and always would be.

Shadow over Regent's Park

I suppose the first breaking and remaking for me had been in early childhood in the 1930s. The Eden into which I was born, coming into a cream-colored, Regency terrace house, was Regent's Park in London. It's still a lovely place. It was there that God shone for me first, through the pattern made by street lamps on my bedroom ceiling, as my mother told me of that overarching presence holding our little world and all its inhabitants and, in the nearby zoo, the animals I could hear being fed each morning. The enlightenment of this presence was enhanced by my parents' imparting a sense of secure, rational modernity and human progress that would always prevail over all else. In response to glimpses and hints I picked up, through a newsreel in a cinema or on the wireless, of people being bombed in China, of marching in Germany, my father, an informed journalist on the Times who had himself fought in the trenches of World War I, assured me that there would be no more war for us.
But the breaking in of darkness began, the shadow spread over the park, as air raid shelters started to be dug there. The intimate railings were removed to be melted down, and the sirens started to sound out over our neighborhood, just for practice, "in case." When I went off to the boarding school, from which I was to see the sky glow of Coventry being bombed, and the family was evacuated to the village where we would await the threatened invasion and listen to Churchill growling that we would "fight on the beaches," modernity and progress were finally shattered. But even then, at school, after my father's unbelievable death, not long after the war, and when I entered national service in the RAF and then came to Magdalene College, Cambridge, I trusted in some kind of spiritual framework. That framework had sustained those "Western values" cherished and defended in wartime Britain. Later, I thought of entering the Christian ministry to serve people within such a framework. Its basis was a bit shaky, however. The breaking was still there. The remaking was a little less clear.

Out of the Ruins

After Cambridge, in 1953, I went to Berlin, with a duty, some suggested, to go and impart those same "Western values" of democracy and the rule of law, as a lecturer in the new Free University in West Berlin. But the "breaking" here for me was immediately palpable. The sight, even from the air, of that moon landscape of ruins to the horizon, with the Brandenburg Gate in the middle, looking like a door from nowhere into nowhere, was itself devastating. There I struggled to teach students older than myself, many of whom had lived through nightmares. I argued daily with my fellow lodger, who had been recruited as a teenager to the "defense" of Berlin, been inspected by a sullen, still electrifying Hitler, and then fled later to and from the East. He used Nietzsche to pulverize my tentative idealism. I would go with him to watch Brecht's plays, acted in the Eastern sector, or wander on lonely walks in the ruins.

But then I was drawn into a small group that met in a nearby pastor's house. I was asked first to attend a poetry reading. But this soon became a Bible study such as I had never experienced before. In this group of all ages and backgrounds, confessed former Nazis and those who had always been resistant to Hitler, but all of them forgiven and forgiving, I was confronted with a vision for the city and the world, a genuine "third way." It reached beyond the totalitarian oppressiveness of the Stalinallee in East Berlin and the brash
vulgarity of the newly emergent Kurfuerstendamm in West Berlin. As we went together to work at helping people in refugee centers or to attend political meetings and to worship in the Dahlem Dorfkirche, I met, as never before, with the living God in Christ. I was grasped by Christ the Mitmenschi alongside us in the tragedy and the ruins. God was here in a wounded, broken human being alongside us, One with whom we could be made united in brokenness and the beginnings of wholeness.

I returned to Cambridge to prepare for the ministry. Then, to my amazement, I found myself starting off as a young chaplain at my former college. I worked in the vacations in a "New Town" filled with people taken from the bombed areas in the East End of London. In both I saw a striking response to the message and the Master that had laid hold of me. His "new love" could be the key both to college life and to the uphill attempt to create a community out of scattered, lonely people in raw housing estates.

**Ibribina**

But the move that gave my whole life its real direction came when, at the instigation of one of our professors, I went out to teach church history (I had always been a historian) in the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. So I came to be plunged into that rich world beyond Europe (or the West!). In Africa there was so much to learn and relearn. There I met with the breaking and remaking of a whole society. As I worked to encourage my students to explore the real history of their own churches, and sought to care for the whole range of students across the university, I served under an African pastor in our department. He urged me to explore the real meaning of the Gospel to Nigerians. I studied social anthropology, helped by brilliant guides, and soon I was led to the Isoko people of the western delta. There I stumbled upon an amazing early (1910?) vision of Christ, which was almost my Berlin experience, transposed into a totally new key. It had never been fulfilled, but the memory of it lived on.

Indeed, I was struck by the sense of alienation and sadness of some of my finest informants, a kind of nostalgia for vanished hopes. It seemed that in the 1880s and even earlier the old order had been profoundly disrupted. The authority of the elders was increasingly shaken, and the spiritual forces that undergirded them were weakened by new political and commercial pressures from outside, undermining their position. The central cults lost their hold while the peripheral multiplied among women and younger men. New leaders arose
overnight and brought in a succession of spirit cults, arriving in waves and intending to fill the vacuum.

At this moment, a prophetic woman leader, Ibribina, a trader, emerged with a message of one "Jesu Krisi" that had possessed her in the back of a mission church far away up the Niger. She introduced new songs and dances. She waved a Bible over the people. But what was far more, she went back and took instruction from the CMS missionary, which gradually enabled her to read and translate and interpret the Gospels.

She saw in "Jesu Krisi" a new love, a new all-pervasive Spirit power, the possibility of a new people, a fellowship of the unlike, bonding together all tribes, all ethnic groups, both black and white, into a new society. Here the rich would care for the poor and the strong for the weak in what was to be a new heaven and a new earth. Other leaders joined her, and eventually thousands of people flocked in. It was wartime in Europe. Only one inspired young missionary could make occasional visits. The movement thus grew vastly, drawing in the young of all ethnic groups and provoking conflicts with the elders until well after the war. Then white missionaries came in to tidy it all up and regularize things. Ibribina was assigned a role as a college matron, which she never seemed to resent. Many of the inspired leaders, however, were sacked for having more than one wife. The CMS shaped and trained the new church to fit in with the wider colonial world. A much more individualized, spiritualized faith seemed appropriate along with a largely utilitarian education.

Yet who really understood the Gospel better - Ibribina, or the missionaries? Ever since her time African prophets and new church movements in that area have been trying to recover her original version of Christ's model for humankind.

**An Agape Revival**

I returned to Magdalene, Cambridge, with my wife-to-be, Jean (a Scottish doctor, a former CMS missionary), who had been our university medical officer in Ibadan. Together, in Nigeria, we had struggled to bring healing and wholeness to the students as we worked together with other Christians on the staff. But while we had been away (1960-63), our own whole society at home had changed. In Cambridge I was broken
again, and well nigh despairing of ever being able to get through to the students at all! It was only after my encounter with David Watson the evangelist, then a curate in the city, that we met with the beginnings of the charismatic renewal, and once again, now at the hands of David Du Plessis on a missionary visit to London, I received a further "remaking," an in-filling of the Spirit. Gradually, in that strangely utopian culture, I was able to see the meaning of our Nigerian experience in this setting and to develop a form of chapel community that seemed to offer to many the "Ibribina" possibility. I tried to point their generation to the hope of a new humanity, a new way of being God's people in the Spirit. Then came a further opportunity of working this out. John V. Taylor, whom I had come to know at CMS, where I had chaired the Africa committee, invited me to go and start a new CMS training college at Selly Oak, in Birmingham, which we called Crowther Hall, after the great Nigerian bishop consecrated under CMS auspices through Henry Venn's farsightedness in 1864. Bishop Crowther had died of a broken heart, after being deeply hurt by a new, arrogant generation of young missionaries, at a time when the CMS had forgotten much of its earlier vision. In Selly Oak, I was to lecture on how the CMS had started in 1799 as a movement of reparation for the evils of the slave trade and East Asian commerce, to bring the hope of a new gospel life to Africa and the East, and how after Venn's death it lost its way. Venn's vision of the euthanasia of mission - that is, of bringing mission-agency control of the African church to an end - was neglected. The CMS itself became a vehicle of white dominance over the churches it had helped to found.

But then again, under the more recent leadership of Max Warren and John Taylor, the society had begun once more to work out a definite mission of reparation, this time perhaps for some of the sins and failures of Western missions in the first half of the twentieth century. How I hoped that we could now, at Crowther Hall itself, start an Ibribina-style revival community of the Spirit in which to train a new generation of mission partners!

But that was not quite how it worked out. My first fellow staff member had come back to Britain from the experience of the East African Revival. Early on, she began to confront me about certain failings in the organization of the new college and in its inner relationships. A Ugandan pastor who came to stay challenged me deeply. As the community developed, I began to discover whole new facets of the action of the Holy Spirit. Metanoia, turning to God, conversion, and being forgiven opened the door not only to the initial knowledge of God in Christ but also constantly and continuously, seventy times seven, to growth into life in the Spirit at every stage. The charismatic and the East African Revival were fused. The Dove was released through the cross, wholeness through repeated brokenness. Indeed, the real test of the presence of the Holy Spirit was whether there is genuine growth in costly love.
We began to grasp more of the lessons the Corinthians had to learn about power in weakness. The fullness of the Spirit is here and potentially available, but yet it is also still incomplete. We have as much to receive through our own frustrations and sufferings as through any triumphant miracle. One of our number, a remarkable community health worker, who afterward gave her whole life to the poorest of the poor in India, now began to urge us out into the inner city not far away. We were to learn from the poor in the city. In central Birmingham we started to work with a community development agency alongside people of many races, coming closer to them through sharing their struggle for better housing and services than we ever would through distributing tracts. As we became friends with them and allies, heart spoke to heart. As we learned just how small was our capacity for sacrificial loving - "long term loving," as Max Warren had called it - we were tested and thrown back more deeply on grace, grace both in our own mutual relationships and in being enabled to receive hints, touches, of the coming of God"s kingdom. The goal that I bribina had glimpsed would begin to be reached only along the way of the cross. And yet a sense of resurrection breakthrough and of the release of the Spirit's healing kept being rediscovered among us.

We began to sense more of the meaning of the notion of what we called an agape revival, its symbol the dove and the cross, emerging only through continuous forgiveness and repentance.

The Redemptive Process

The sudden sense of bereavement when John Taylor left CMS, and the summons to me to attempt to step into his and Max Warren's giant shoes as general secretary, unexpectedly gave me the opportunity to explore more of the universal implications of the Crowther Hall experience. As the CMS had grown smaller in numbers and had deepened its relationships with fellow Christians and church leaders, in parts of the world both familiar and new to it, we had steadily come out from under our dangerous heritage of power. Yet we had to recognize the inherent contradictions of the global market. We were at the mercy of its pressures. We could never really escape the continuing concealed colonialism. But at least we must recognize now, wholeheartedly, that in so many ways we must decrease that others may increase. The world missionary task must be tackled by Christians from all the churches acting together and no longer by one-sided initiatives from or within the West. Further "reparation" was called for.
At the CMS we worked at attempts to *receive*, here in Britain, through what we called the "interchange" of people, gifts, and insights, still always having to acknowledge our endemic condition of economic and cultural one-sidedness. We sought as openly and transparently as possible to build on the rich relationships we had been given through history to introduce a genuine mutual challenge across the world to repentance and forgiveness throughout every church, to an agape revival, to shared renewal worldwide, to the building up of an equal "fellowship of the unlike," as the only true means of living out and communicating the Gospel in a plural world. We wanted to use our wide network to link growth points in mission worldwide. What we still lacked, then as now, were international teams that would witness to the grace of Christ among all faiths by their very being and that would be accountable to an international missionary movement in all churches.

We knew we must be smaller and more selective. But our goal was to help send, bring, and place the most creative and redemptive "people in mission" we could find in situations where they could open the way to a deeply pervasive, spiritual renewal. Only people who are constantly being changed can bring change to others. Through them the message of the wounded Servant God in Christ might become "a story whose hour has come." We are moving toward a melting pot of all cultures and ethnic groups in the next millennium, a kind of breaking and remaking of humanity, in the midst of which the cross can gently but surely be planted to spring up as a tree of life for all faiths.

But those who present that message must be people who are humbled, gentle, profoundly spiritually motivated, radiant, more of a Celtic than a Western imperial spirit. My greatest experiences at CMS were encounters with such people, pilgrims often on the edge of many different worlds of faith, spiritual pioneers, Iribina-like figures, leading small, growing companies of fellow seekers into the way of the cross. They were "watchers on the walls" not ceasing to cry out, as it were, "Jesus have mercy." Indeed it was then that I first began to learn to use the Orthodox Jesus prayer and to sense with many others, scattered throughout the world, that we were being drawn into a universal rhythm, a hidden cosmic redemptive movement at work. Wherever
people prayed, suffered, and lived out "faith active in love" it seemed, "Love will out."

When I went to be bishop of Coventry, in that great broken and remade cathedral with its theme of reparation and reconciliation, this was the message that overseas Christians whom we invited brought home to us. They urged upon us a movement of prayer, of openness to transformed relationships of mutual repentance, forgiveness, and, in the Spirit, the release of each person’s gift.

Everywhere the theme seemed to be leaping out of forgiveness and repentance: At Stratford, where, as a trustee for Shakespeare’s birthplace, I preached on Shakespeare’s development of this theme, especially and wonderfully in his late plays. At Warwick University, where the then professor of social thought, Gillian Rose, helped me to explore the movement of what she called "failing towards," continuous *melanoia*, in Hegel and Kierkegaard. Tragically, she was struck down with cancer, which she fought bravely, and in the course of the struggle worked through her own insight until the point at which I had the privilege, on her death bed, of baptizing her. I sought to develop across the diocese a movement of prayer, mutual forgiveness, release of our gifts, and the drawing together of rich and poor, town and country, North and South, long divided, and a commitment to world mission, using the cross of nails and our ancient, Celtic, Mercian cross. If we ourselves were broken and remade, we could then offer to our broken world a quality of forgiveness, the freedom to keep "failing towards" God’s goal for us of a just, loving, and sustainable society.

For me this is a theme to be pursued in Cambridge, where I am now back in my old college. Here I want to turn more and more to the study and the contemplation of this task now confronting the world missionary scene. In the whole world church we have to learn how, through continuous personal and social repentance and forgiveness, we can go on being changed and bringing change, until that day when the kingdoms of this world are transformed at last into the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

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