

ALL SAINTS' DAY 2009

1 November 2009

Each Sunday morning we find ourselves reading quite a lot of the Bible: we generally have three readings and no one can expect to take in every word of all three! We always have to sift through to see what the 'take-home message' is for today: what are these words able to reveal to us that will make a difference for this coming week? Sometimes the sermon can help to do that, sometimes we find ourselves taking a very different message home from the one in the mind of the preacher. That doesn't matter a bit: what we find is that God gets through to us one way or another and it really doesn't matter how.

So when I am thinking about what to say in the sermon, as likely as not I will go through the text with a bright pink high-lighter, marking the key phrases which seem to hit me that day. And then, with luck, something like a message will come through – as if I am joining up the dots – leaving out those phrases which don't fit the overall pattern.

So, for today I started with a question: what have particular men and women done which helps us to recognize them, after their deaths, as saints? What did they do to attract our attention in that way?

So, with marker in hand, I looked at the passage from Revelation, this fantasy book at the end of the Bible, full of poetry and weird predictions. But in this short passage a couple of phrases sprung out: *See the home of God is among mortals; he will dwell with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes...* And then a bit further down: *To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things...*

And then I read on to the Gospel, and the last six words, *Unbind him, and let him go* – the end of the great story of Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life.

And in a nutshell I had three small pictures of what makes up someone who is a saint: they live cheek by jowl with the rest of us; that they are the kinds of people who are instinctively on the side of

healing – wiping away the tears; and finally that they are able to share what they already have – water from the water of life himself.

And my memory went to the front of Westminster Abbey and to the new carvings that have been placed there over the last ten years (replacing statues long since gone through disrepair or someone taking a dislike to the figures there) which are of modern saints and martyrs. One of them is the man whose face looks out from front of our service booklets today, Archbishop Janani Lewum of Uganda. And as I briefly tell his story, I hope you will hear those bits of the Bible coming alive in his biography.

Janani was born in 1922 in the rural Kitgum District of Uganda and was responsible for keeping the family goats. Goats are goats: they don't take much looking after but they were valuable so you couldn't afford to lose one. Colonial Uganda was a pretty sleepy kind of place; the sun shone and the goats got looked after.

Eventually, and with only very simple schooling, Janani became a local school teacher. But he was very bright and very determined in a region where opportunities for education were few and far between.

Then, at the age of 26, he was converted to Christianity – and suddenly his whole world turned upside down. Instead of just being a basic primary school teacher, just a few pages ahead of his children, he started to read the Bible and become a quite outstanding local evangelist. Ordained a priest in 1956, by 1974 he was Archbishop of Uganda!

Suddenly he was managing a whole Church province – setting up a Church based dairy farm, vocational schools for kids who wanted a second chance after poor exam results, a fast track system for university educated Christians, successfully persuading them that ministry in the Church was a worthwhile career.

In an area where wars were frequent he co-ordinated relief for the hundreds of thousands of refugees who swarmed over the border from both the Sudan and from Rwanda. He insisted that all students from the priesthood should also take courses in development studies so that the Church in Uganda could be self-supporting and not rely on help from the west. He had to learn, very quickly how many goats made five: *See the home of God is among mortals; he will dwell*

with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes... To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

But Janani wasn't just interested in improving the lot of the average Ugandan in the mid 70s, or even of encouraging the brightest and best of his students like Henry Orombi who later became Archbishop of Uganda, or John Sentamu the Uganda Chief Justice who became Archbishop of York. Janani had one more role to fulfil, one that he certainly never predicted.

Dashing from one part of his huge Province to another, organising and encouraging, was all set against the backdrop of Idi Amin who, in 1974, had taken over power in Uganda. He was a terrifying figure, with spies in every community. Justice had long since been overthrown and the terror squads of army personnel tortured and killed anyone opposed to Amin and his closest friends. People just disappeared on a regular basis.

Lewum was one of the few voices that could be trusted in Uganda and so it wasn't long before this quite elderly, gentle Archbishop was dragged into a vast football stadium, full of people paid to insult and threaten the accused, where trumped up charges were levelled against him and two others. They said he was organising to overthrow Amin by force.

Two days later, Radio Kampala announced that the Archbishop had been killed in a car accident while trying to escape from custody. What the report didn't say was that his body was full of bullets.

And it all started with a few goats, a little education and the hearing of the Gospel message.

Does all this make Lewum a saint? Who knows? But what is certainly true is that the Church in Uganda, from the time of his death, has grown by leaps and bounds. Freed from Amin's tyranny the people of that land see in their former Archbishop someone who loved God to such a degree that he had to take care of those who needed him – in schools, hospitals and universities - even to the point of risking his own life when his people needed someone to speak up for them against Amin's corruption.

His memory is not just recorded on a plaque somewhere: his life and death are to be seen in a whole nation which is living by the principles he taught them.

Out of his life has come true life – happiness and growth. But out of his death has come the resurrection of his people. Janani Lewum, the man who truly shared the water of life and the gifts of God, with all his heart.

He deserves his place on the front of Westminster Abbey; but he lives on in real people which seems even more worthwhile.