

## Heroes – Janani Luwum

My hero this evening is Janani Luwum, Archbishop of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Boga-Zaire, who was killed during the night of 16/17 February 1977 while in the hands of the Idi Amin's security forces. He was proclaimed a martyr a few days later, and many, many Christians in the years since then have been inspired and humbled by his Christ like character and example. Janani followed earlier Uganda martyrs. Anglican missionaries of the CMS had arrived in Uganda in 1877, and some Roman Catholic White Fathers followed in 1879. The first Christians, Anglican and Catholic, were drawn from the boy pages of Mutesa, the Kabaka or king of the Baganda, and the first baptisms took place in 1884. At this time Mutesa died, and his son, Mwanga, the new kabaka, was hostile to Christianity and arrested the Christian page boys, three of whom were burned to death. Despite this the number of baptisms increased. The first Catholic martyr was a senior page, Joseph Balikuddembe, who was at first one of Mwanga's favourites, but who was quickly out of favour when he rebuked the kabaka for killing the newly appointed Anglican Bishop, James Hannington. Joseph was also burned to death. At the end of May 1886 the storm broke out against the Christian page boys when Mwanga returned from hunting to find most of them missing, studying the Scriptures in small groups. The boys were assembled before Mwanga in two groups, those who followed Christ and those who followed Mwanga. So many claimed to be Christians that Mwanga hesitated to kill them all, and picked out one and another at random. When those chosen all accepted the verdict that they were following Christ, they were bound together and marched 22 miles to the execution site. Catholics and Anglicans were tied together and on 3 June 1886 the fires were lit, and there was no wailing from the victims, only a quiet sobbing, prayers and singing. The executioner was the only one wailing, as he had been forced to kill his own son, one of the Christian pages. So the church in Uganda had its fill of martyrs from the beginning. Uganda has two main tribal groups, the Bantu in the south, agriculturalists eating the fruit of the plantain, and Nilotes in the north, a warrior people eating millet and meat. Janani Luwum was born in 1922 at Mucwini in East Acholi, close to the border of the Sudan. He was a typical Nilotic, a tall, jet-black giant of a man. This part of northern Uganda is semi-arid savannah country with dry river beds part of the year and impassable torrents in the rains. The Acholi people are energetic, hard-working pastoralists, and Janani in his early years herded the family cattle, goats and sheep. He was a natural leader as well as a skilled marksman first with a catapult and then a bow and arrow. He excelled at traditional dancing, for which the Acholi are famous, and also played the lukeme, a traditional musical instrument, and the drum, and taught the local music when he was older. The Acholi people opened up millet and groundnut fields each rainy season, and the land around Janani's family home was fertile, so that the family never went hungry. Eliya Okello, Janani's father, was an early convert to Christianity, and committed his life to serving as a church teacher. But church teachers received very little pay, and Janani was ten years old before there was enough money to send him to school. But once in school he quickly made up for lost time, and after primary school was admitted to Gulu High School, an 80 mile walk at the beginning and end of term. His family hoped he would become a chief. But, money being short, he joined Boroboro Teacher Training College, a missionary institution with a lady missionary in charge. While there the students staged a strike, complaining about the food, and the men resented having a lady principal. But Janani, always a good reconciler, persuaded them to drop their complaints and support the staff. Janani was always among the first three in his class and was a talented artist. In his final assessment the college gave him the highest grade in practical teaching, and the Education Department in Kampala sent three experts to verify this – which they

duly did! After graduating from the training college in 1942 he was posted to a primary school in East Acholi, and as a loyal worker in his home region he commanded the greatest respect, difficult to achieve among the individualistic Acholi people.

Up to this time Janani was not a converted Christian. But he came to the Lord as a result of the preaching of Yusto Otunno and his wife Josephine, who came in January 1948 to conduct a mission in Janani's home village. These two evangelists were members of the *balokole* or saved ones, involved in the East African revival movement that had swept through the countries of East Africa like a bush fire in the late 1930s. Those caught up in this revival were often nominal Christians, who confessed their sins of pride, hatred, debauchery, drunkenness and division, and their need to "walk in the light". They confessed their sins, and let the blood of Christ cleanse and save them, putting right wrong relationships, restoring stolen goods, burning their charms and pouring away their local beer.

During the preaching of Yusto and Josephine, Janani felt convicted, broke out in a heavy sweat, and confessed Jesus Christ as his Lord. He asked Yusto and Josephine to pray for him, and gave his testimony to all the people, "Today I have become a leader in Christ's army. I am prepared to die in the army of Jesus. As Jesus shed his blood for the people, if it is God's will, I will do the same." As it later turned out, these were prophetic words.

Eliya, Janani's father, had sat quietly through the meeting, but at the end he jumped up and confessed that, though a Christian, there was still sin in his life. He broke his two tobacco pipes and burned the tobacco. 12 people accepted Christ as saviour and master that day, 8 of them members of Eliya's family.

Janani was caught up for a whole year with the revival movement. Only a month after his conversion he was arrested with 8 others and brought before the sub-chief charged with disturbing the peace. He had spoken against drunkenness, smoking and heavy drinking, and the church teachers themselves had contrived his arrest as they preferred to turn a blind eye to such things. The *balokole* were taken to Kitgum, the local administrative centre, where they were thrown into prison, tortured, and given no food. When the prison warders asked them to renounce their faith, Janani replied "All of us are committed to Christ, even unto death." They were released and returned home, continuing to preach the message of revival, and many, including prisoners, were converted.

Janani did not always speak of his actual conversion experience, but much later he did tell a theological student how realising his sins were forgiven and the implications of Christ's death and resurrection had filled him with joy and peace. He climbed a tree to tell those in the school compound to repent and turn to Christ. He also spoke in tongues, and some boys were converted as a result of that sermon from the tree. But, he added, it would be wrong to demand that those who are converted should climb a tree and speak in tongues!

In time the church leaders grew more suspicious of the *balokole* teaching. The evangelist Yusto Otunno suggested to Janani that one of the well educated brethren from the revival should join the full-time ministry of the church and share the message from within. Would Janani sacrifice his teaching career in that way? His family had wanted him to be a chief, but he knew in his heart God was calling him to be a pastor.

Bishop Usher Wilson of the Upper Nile Diocese (which included the Acholi) pioneered a new course in English for future church leaders. Previously the courses were in Luganda, the language of the Baganda in the south, which was not spoken or understood by men from the north. Janani was in 1949 one of the first on this new course at Buwalasi Theological College, which he described as one of the most beautiful places in Uganda with wonderful views of Mount Elgon. His

wife Mary bore their second child there, though she was unhappy with the cold climate and the local customs and longed to return to the savannah plains of the Acholi. This they did at the end of 1950 when Janani was attached to St Philip's Church in Gulu. He and Mary did well in the church and training centre there, though some of the older clergy were sceptical of bright young men who spoke fluent English. But Janani was sent by the bishop for a further three year course at Buwalasi leading to ordination.

Janani was ordained deacon in 1953, and the following year Bishop Ussher Wilson ordained him priest. He and a fellow bishop were concerned to train promising Ugandans for future high office, and Janani was sent on a one-year course at St Augustine's College, Canterbury. Here he was exposed to a wide variety of theological and ecclesiastical ideas and faced difficult questions of doctrine and church practice in various denominations.

Coming back to Uganda in 1959, he was given charge of one of the worst parishes in East Acholi, Lira Palwo, 40 miles across and with only a bicycle for transport. And political developments were affecting the church in Northern Uganda, demands of the political parties competing powerfully with the church's need of financial support. Janani's message, that Christ came first and the party second, fell on stony ground, for three years at Lira Palwo he saw no obvious fruit for his labours, and was often acutely depressed. But one young delinquent, Benoni Ogwai, who had been involved in burning down the church, was changed by Janani's forgiving spirit and went on to become a Bishop of Northern Uganda.

In 1962 Janani was made vice-principal of Buwalasi Theological College. In October Uganda achieved independence. Janani then set out again for England with bursary to study at the London College of Divinity, a demanding course for a Ugandan who had had only an elementary education with some crammed theological training added. But he worked long hours on his Hebrew and Greek, completing the three year course in two years. Back at Buwalasi he took over as Principal, Mary and his family were happy there, and the staff was a united team despite tribal differences. But a year later Janani was moved again, to become in 1966 Secretary of the Province of Uganda in the middle of a great tribal row over who would become the next Archbishop. Erica Sabiti, a Nyankole from the south west of Uganda, was appointed, and Janani did much to soothe the ruffled fathers of the Baganda tribe. The Baganda were also upset by Milton Obote's forcing the Kabaka into exile and relying on his army of northern tribesmen to retain power.

Despite continuing tribal animosities, the Church of Uganda launched a ten-year plan for growth, which Janani promoted vigorously, travelling hundreds of miles and speaking to thousands of people, preaching with homely stories told to great effect.

1968 was the year of the ten-yearly Lambeth Conference of all the Anglican bishops, and Janani went too as an overseas consultant. His reputation was being enhanced, and at the end of the year he was appointed Bishop of Northern Uganda, the first member of the Acholi tribe to become a bishop.

Janani's consecration as bishop took place in the Pece Stadium in Gulu, a large field used mainly for political rallies, football matches and national celebrations. The consecration was also partly political, as Dr Oboti's Uganda People's Congress, strongly Protestant, was increasingly linked in people's minds with the Church of Uganda, and the President and his wife were present with the Catholic Archbishop and other celebrities. But the ceremony emphasised the spiritual, and Janani had asked for the Hallelujah Chorus from the Messiah to be sung, which was done with gusto. Janani knew the Diocese of Northern Uganda was weaker than other parts of Uganda, congregations had dwindled and giving was low. But he attacked both synod meetings and visiting the parishes with enthusiasm. The Acholi were quarrelsome, and demanded immediate changes.

Janani wanted to visit all parts of the diocese before changing things, and as he travelled he told his homely stories to encourage generous giving. He took great interest in leprosy work, and jointly with the Catholic Bishop opened a 16-bed leprosy ward near Gulu. Janani was sad that so many church members were not totally committed to Christ and were only interested in finding themselves a job. So a mission was planned in April 1970, with over 100 missionaries from other dioceses. After a slow start there was a packed Sunday morning service at Christ Church and a joyful procession of hundreds to the Pece Stadium.

From 1970 political disorder overshadowed Janani's time as Bishop of Northern Uganda. After a number of political assassinations General Idi Amin seized control in a coup d'etat to the surprise of most of the world. It was not easy at first in Gulu to find out what was happening in Kampala, but there were reports of many Acholi soldiers being killed, and then houses in Gulu were looted and burned down and the Acholi were among Amin's special targets.

Supporters of the deposed President Obote were thrown into prison, shot, bayoneted, and tortured. As Janani continued to visit across his diocese he was greeted by the traditional wailing of people for their dead. He comforted the mourners, encouraged the faint hearted, and urged all to forgive, as Christ had forgiven his enemies as he died on the Cross.

Amin's decision in August 1972 to expel all the Asians in Uganda caused a world outcry, and Janani, attending a World Council of Churches meeting in Utrecht at the time, was involved in a statement of concern by the world Christian leaders that put him in great danger when he returned home. In the midst of the troubles Janani continued to urge people to return to God and be forgiving.

The Archbishop of Uganda, Erica Sabiti, retired in 1974, and there was in the end little doubt that Janani would be chosen as the next Archbishop. Some were worried about his links with the revival movement, but he was not extreme in his views and believed that it was better to love people into the kingdom than to frighten them. But Janani knew as he became archbishop that he left many problems in his old diocese, not least rivalry between the Church of Uganda and the Catholics. His installation as Archbishop in Namirembe Cathedral was a simple service overflowing the building. President Amin did not attend. As Archbishop, Janani was willing to cooperate with all the non-Christian and political groups in Uganda, as well as with the Catholics, the different Balokole groups, and other denominations. He went also on safari to all parts of the large province which included parts of Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi. Everywhere he was greeted by jubilant crowds, though they often travelled over appalling roads and suffered from floods and mud. By this time Idi Amin was making it clear that he no longer looked with favour on the church. His own tribe was the only predominantly Muslim one in Uganda, and Christians were increasingly removed from government posts.

Despite lack of cooperation from President Amin plans were made for a great celebration of the centenary of the Church of Uganda.

Then in 1976 attacks on students and looting and killing by soldiers became widespread. Janani joined the Catholic Archbishop and the Muslim kadi in a meeting to discuss the disturbances and the attacks on their people. Janani continued to tell his colleagues that they must love the President, though as a marked man Janani felt he might die any day.

On 28 January 1977 Janani drove south to the consecration of the first bishop of West Ankole. Huge crowds had gathered, far more than for the second anniversary of the Second Republic the previous weekend. The sermon had stressed not fearing death and preparing for eternity. Back in Kampala a few days later armed men raided Janani's house in the early hours of 5 February. They claimed to be looking for arms, but found nothing. Prompted by the Catholic Archbishop, the

church leaders gathered together and made a statement protesting at the attacks and harassment. The President sent for Janani on 14 February and accused him of plotting with Obote to overthrow the government. Janani protested his innocence.

The President called a meeting on 16 February and Janani arrived with six of his bishops early that morning to find a vast assembly to meet them at the International Conference Centre. After a staged trial for plotting to overthrow the government, the crowd was dismissed, but Janani was told that "You, Luwum, are wanted in that room by the President". Janani turned and smiled at his friends. "I can see the hand of the Lord in this" he said. They never saw him again. Bishop Festo Kivengere, who was there at the time, said there was a rumour that Janani was asked to sign a confession, which he would not do, and that he was praying aloud for his captors when he died. It was clear he was shot, though the official radio news announced that Janani and two cabinet ministers had died in a motor accident. So ended the turbulent life of my hero, loving and forgiving to the end.

*Gordon Landreth*