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From Mozambique to Cape Town and Murdered in Zimbabwe: The Martyrdom of Bernard Mizeki, the Seed of the Church in Mashonaland (1861-1896)

By James Amanze

Introduction

One of the most touching and inspiring stories of the Church of the Province of Central Africa of which the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe is a part, is the martyrdom of Bernard Mizeki, a man of God who gave his life for the sake of his Lord and Savior, Jesus of Nazareth. Today, scholars generally agree that the Church in Africa was planted and grew as a result not only of the work of missionaries from Europe and America but also thanks to the extensive efforts and suffering of local catechists—men and women of faith who, after embracing Christianity, went out with great zeal to spread the gospel to every corner of the African continent. This is the case even today. Missionaries planted the Word of God while local evangelists and clergy watered it so that it grew into a large prosperous harvest of believers. In this way, Africans became missionaries to themselves.

The Anglican Church in Zimbabwe

The Anglican Church in Zimbabwe today claims thousands of adherents. In his 1981 book titled *History of the Church in Africa*, Jonathan Hildebrandt estimated that there were 500 Anglican congregations, 95,100 members and 237,848 affiliated members in Zimbabwe.¹ Though the accuracy of these figures is difficult to establish, they do, nevertheless, show that the church has been experiencing tremendous growth from the time of its inception to the present day. David Barrett, in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (1982), noted that there were 153,000 Anglican adherents in 1970. He predicted that this number would go up to 135,120 in mid-1980s and that it would reach 289,020 by the year 2000. In fact, his estimate fell short of the actual 325,000 Anglicans in Zimbabwe

¹ Brandt 1981, p. 278.

in 2000.² A recent article from the site *Religion in Zimbabwe* indicated that, as of 2000, there were 674 Anglican congregations, 128,000 adherents, and 320,000 affiliated members.³ Although in all instances the figures do not portray the true picture of the situation on the ground, they do nevertheless convey the feeling that, like many other churches in Africa, the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe has been making great strides in its evangelistic mission of turning people to Christ.

The roots of Anglicanism in Zimbabwe are in part grounded in the blood of Bernard Mizeki, who was martyred in Marondelas in 1896. This was history repeating itself. It is a well-known fact that the annals of the history of the Church contain countless testimonies demonstrating that Christianity as a world religion has continued to exist in time and space through the courage and sacrifice of people who offered their lives to Christ. Beginning with the account of the martyrdom of Stephen, as recorded in Acts 7: 1-60, Christianity laid down strong foundations for its future growth and development on the legacy of the martyrs. In the apostolic age, the blood of the great martyrs such as the apostles Peter, Paul, Thomas, Bartholomew, James, Matthias—to name but a few—was indeed the seed of the Church. In the Early Church period, men and women of faith such as Justin Martyr, Polycarp, Perpetua and Felicitas, and others, ensured that God’s Church was built on a rock against which even death could not prevail (Mt 16: 18). After witnessing the suffering of the martyrs, many people turned away from sin and committed their lives to Christ. Throughout church history this has been the case in many lands, especially since the 16th century Protestant Reformation. Africa has had a good share of martyrs. For example, the martyrs of Namugongo, executed on June 3, 1886, in Uganda, are a stark reminder of how the powers of evil can contrive to stifle the work of God and yet never prevail. Archbishop Janani Luwum’s ultimate sacrifice for the love of Christ and his people in Uganda is another example of how good stood against evil to the very end.

From Mozambique to Cape Town, Martyred in Mashonaland

As a martyr, Bernard Mizeki paid the ultimate sacrifice because of his love for Jesus. Stories about this exceptional apostle to the Shona trace his ancestry to Mozambique from whence he migrated to seek work in Cape Town. He arrived

² *World Christian Encyclopedia* (2000).

³ “Anglican Church,” *Religion in Zimbabwe* website.

in South Africa at the time when the Anglican Church was expanding to other countries in southern Africa. The evangelization of Mashonaland became one of the goals of the Anglican Church at this time. Equipped with insights from the gospel that Mizeki acquired around the time of his baptism in Cape Town, he was in a position to join a missionary campaign to Mashonaland to plant the Anglican Church among the Shona.

Once in Mashonaland, Bishop G. W. H. Knight-Bruce put Mizeki in charge of a mission station near Chief Mangwende's village among the VaNhowe people in east-central Zimbabwe. According to oral sources, it was not an easy task from either a political or a social standpoint. Thus, right from the start, Mizeki's ministry seemed doomed to failure. But he was ready to sacrifice his life for Christ, his Lord and Savior. After a short period of work in the area, Mizeki contributed significantly to the spread of the gospel. In addition to disseminating the good news by word of mouth, he assisted Bishop Knight-Bruce in translating parts of the Bible, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed into Shona.⁴

Unfortunately for Mizeki, the beginning of the First Chimurenga ("revolutionary struggle," 1896-1897), which is celebrated among Zimbabweans as the prelude to the movement for political emancipation from colonial rule, signaled the end of his ministry among the Shona. But the events that put an end to Mizeki's ministry appear to be a series of mysterious internal conflicts in Mangwende's family. Accounts of Mizeki's martyrdom are intricate and vary in theme and detail. Therefore, it would not be helpful to repeat them here. However, the common thread in all the stories is that Mizeki was murdered and his blood watered Zimbabwean soil. Out of this soil sprang one of the strongest forms of Anglicanism in southern Africa that has withstood the test of time.

The Blood of Bernard Mizeki: Seed for the Anglican Church in Mashonaland

Mizeki was no ordinary Christian. His evangelistic zeal drove him to respond to the call of God in a foreign land. He travelled all the way from Cape Town to Mangwende's country only to be murdered by the chief's family members. Mizeki's blood was, borrowing a leaf from Tertullian, "the seed of the church" in Mashonaland. This apparent victory of evil over good is a stark reminder of how,

⁴ Zvobgo, p. 45.

in the days of the early church, the Roman Emperors tried to wipe out Christianity by killing Christians in the Colosseum. This magnificent structure in central Rome is a frightening reminder of the power of evil that seems to know no boundaries. However, history tells us that the more Christians died in that arena of death at the instigation of the emperors, the more people gave their lives to Christ. The explosive nature of their faith nurtured in the blood of countless martyrs enabled Christianity to overflow the boundaries of the Roman Empire and reach other parts of the world.

The example of Bernard Mizeki, who left his native land of Mozambique to go to Cape Town and then to Mashonaland to preach the good news of salvation only to be murdered there, deserves a special place in the history of the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe. It is in this context that, for decades, the Anglican Church has honored this great saint, who gave his life in a foreign land because of his love for God, his Master and Creator.

In recent years, the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe has witnessed a great deal of persecution instigated by authorities within the Anglican Church with the support of the powers that be. As in the past, people lost their lives for the sake of their church and Jesus Christ, their Savior. One may be tempted to believe that, like Mizeki who shed his blood for Christ in 1896, their blood too would make the church stronger today than ever before.

Mizeki's martyrdom should be considered the bedrock from which the current generation of Christians in Zimbabwe was hewn. Mizeki, the evangelist who traveled from Mozambique to Mashonaland through Cape Town has become a pillar of the faith in the history of the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe. It is no wonder that his shrine attracts many faithful to Marondelas to praise and thank God for his life and ministry in Zimbabwe. The *DACB* has two brief accounts of the life and death of Bernard Mizeki which are featured in this section.

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