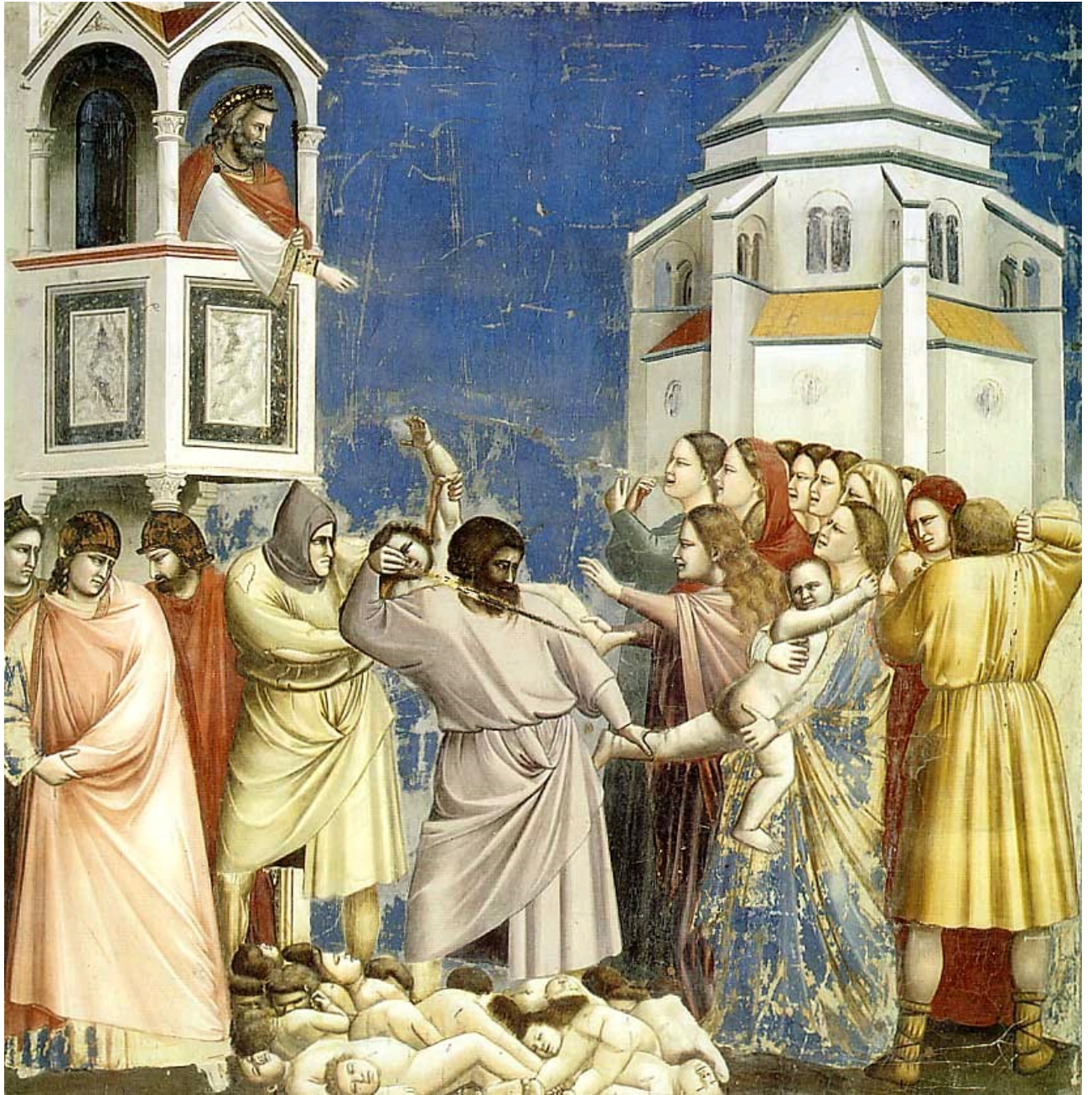


The Childermas Letters



2009

Childermas Eve 2009

For the fourth year in a row, I return to this contentious theme. December 28th is the day in the church calendar when we remember the Innocents who were slaughtered by King Herod. It is a day set aside to contemplate and reflect on the co-relation between the quality of leadership and the well-being of children. This makes it too much for me to resist, speaking as I do on behalf of the Desmond Tutu Centre for Leadership.

C4L is so convinced of the importance of this linkage that it has adopted the slogan – *transforming leadership, so that children are safe.*

This year there will be three bulletins in the series.

- The first will be a case study for those who may think that leaders in today's world can't get away with harming children like King Herod did, even if they have the same motive of self-preservation.
- The second bulletin will present a case study of a child-headed household in South Africa, that I have been visiting regularly in the run-up to writing these bulletins.
- The third will track some of C4L's successes and failures over the same period.

In 1999, Thabo Mbeki replaced Nelson Mandela as President. The world lauded Mandela for standing aside after only one term and not overstaying his welcome. That is almost unheard of in African leadership!

Mbeki appointed a Health Minister named Manto Tshabalala-Msimang. She remained in that portfolio for 9 years, until Mbeki was ousted in September 2008. In the media, she came to be known as *Frankenmanto*, and for good reason! Here is how journalist Chris Barron started a full page article on her this week:

“The only tears shed as we bury Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, who has died at 69, should be for the hundreds of thousands of people who died because she refused them, and pregnant mothers, the drugs which probably would have saved them.

“Researchers from Harvard University laid the deaths of 350,000 people at her door and that of her political master, former president Thabo Mbeki.

“That's a conservative figure. Hundreds of thousands more will die because she failed to do her job, one of the most criminal derelictions of duty in South African history.”

Manto makes Herod seem like an amateur! The population of Africa alone today is larger than the population of the whole world was at the time of Herod. He only erased a few dozen infants at best. She condemned hundreds of thousands of people to death, mainly adults, but not excluding children. This has also caused what

Stephen Lewis calls “the deluge of orphans”. His choice of words is a propos – the AIDS pandemic is probably the biggest disaster in human history. It includes three kinds of people – those at risk, those infected, and those affected. Orphans fall into the last category, although some of them may also be infected. Speaking of Stephen Lewis, here is more from Chris Barron in the *Sunday Times*:

“By the end of 2005, almost four years after the Constitutional Court had ordered her to make them available, fewer than a quarter of those who needed antiretrovirals were getting them, and many of these were private-sector patients.

“At the time UN special envoy on Aids Stephen Lewis said every country in east and southern Africa, except war-devastated Angola, was doing more to treat people with Aids than South Africa, with considerably fewer resources. He found the health minister’s behaviour ‘absolutely mystifying’.

“In 2006 came the International Aids conference in Toronto where South Africa’s stand, on the instructions of Tshabalala-Msimang, featured beetroot, lemons and African potato.

“When Mark Heywood of the TAC stood at the podium pleading for political accountability, she sat in the front row giggling. When the chairman repeatedly invited her to respond to Heywood’s arguments, she refused.

“The resulting avalanche of international opprobrium and ridicule spelt the beginning of the end for Tshabalala-Msimang.”

Frankenmanto was not her only nick-name, she was also called *Dr Beetroot!* This reflects another miscalculation by the Mbeki government – their handling of race relations. In the long run, this could prove to be the bigger mistake.

Mbeki launched “the African Renaissance”. He promoted African solutions to Africa’s problems. One of the best-known examples of this trend, sadly, was the famous (or infamous) side-lining of ARVs in favour of “African solutions”. For centuries there has been that cultural and faith divide between the great white missionary doctor and the so-called witch-doctor. It is unfortunate that an issue that affected so many citizens – of all colours - ended up in this familiar motif.

Worst of all, it clouded a deeper reality. The ANC encompasses diverse elements and Mbeki tried to pander to them all. Many black people saw him as a “sell-out” in macro-economic terms, and indeed that backlash did eventually do him in. But one way that he tried to keep his socialist credentials shiny was to take on Big Pharma. He thought this would convince his economic critics that he could still represent the best interests of the black majority in the global economy. That fight was over ARVs – whether to import expensive drugs or produce cheaper generic products locally.

In other words, Mbeki and Manto were trying to save themselves, to perpetuate their regime. This was such a contrast to Nelson Mandela who moved on after one term!

But it resonates with the story of King Herod. The slaughter of the innocents might not have happened, if it were not for the Magi who came seeking to celebrate the birth of a new king. They diplomatically consulted King Herod, who tried to conceal his inner reaction. He tried to conscript them into locating this child for him, but they were warned in a dream and slipped away, out of Bethlehem, undetected. They did not betray Jesus. But they did betray Herod! The moral of the story is that to be faithful, sometimes you may offend the powers that be - especially if their intentions are self-centred.

In 2006, I wrote and recorded a parody of a well-known protest song. Here is the first verse and chorus:

How many times can a leader look up
Before she sees the sky?
How many deaths will it take 'til she knows
That too many people have died?
How many eyes must she have 'til she sees
The truth that her cabinet hides?

The answer, my friend, is groanin' in the wind
The answer is a-groanin' in the wind

It is interesting to note that I used a *nome-de-plume* – Robin' Dylan.

Childermas Day 2009

I have recently befriended a family of three sisters living in a township about 30 kms from C4L. They are spaced 6 years apart in age – the youngest is 11 years old just entering her last year of primary school, the middle one is 16 years old just entering Matric year, and the oldest is 23. She is the head of household. Both parents died – 6 and 7 years ago respectively - when these sisters were 4, 9 and 15 years old.

Not a lot has been said between us yet about the AIDS pandemic, as the friendship is still new. Nor would I dare to mention all their names in this bulletin, for ethical reasons, but I assure you that I am not making this up.

By my calculations, their parents died in 2002 and/or 2003. They have a photo of their mother on the bookshelf in the room that serves as living room, dining room and kitchen. There are only two other rooms in their tiny home – both bedrooms. This was about 4 years after *Dr Beetroot* was appointed as Health Minister in 1999. The timing lines up. In 2001, *Frankenmanto* had been ordered by the Constitutional Court to roll out ARVs to pregnant women. This was because of the huge success rates all over the world in preventing “vertical transmission” during the bloody birthing process. She retorted that she was being forced to “poison” her people, and did nothing.

In 2002 she blocked a \$72-million overseas grant to the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal to assist with the roll-out of ARVs – for procedural reasons.

In 2003, a civil disobedience campaign by Treatment Action Campaign (representing people living with AIDS) raised enough of a storm that Cabinet finally insisted that Manto unequivocally announce her commitment to rolling out ARVs. But in reality she dragged her feet and roll-out fell far behind.

It was during this period that the three sisters were orphaned, and became a child-headed household. As they were unable to stay in their parents’ home, they started building a small place for themselves. Their foresight and intentions are clear from the foundations which have been all laid out for a normal-sized house. But only three rooms of this in-ground puzzle have been built up, to date.

The oldest became a Child Head of Household at that time, until she came of age. At present, the two younger sisters are still officially orphans, but the oldest is not. She has had to go to work to support her siblings. For her that means unfulfilled aspirations. Sadly, she has recently lost her job, one of a million South Africans to become unemployed during the Great Recession this year.

This young family struggles. They do not show any obvious signs of malnutrition, except that they are very thin. Or could that mean that there was “vertical transmission” from their mother at birth, and that seropositivity is now turning into AIDS? I don’t know them well enough yet to ask, but I will encourage them to consider voluntary testing if they have not done so already.

The scary legacy of *Frankenmanto* – for those who do find out that they are HIV positive - is that at this stage only 50 per cent of South Africans who need treatment are able to get onto ARVs. This keeps many away from voluntary testing.

It is clear to me that the community around them has been supportive. The sisters took me to meet one family which is where they can go when the food runs out. They are church goers, so that would be another source of support. Two of the three are still in school, so that might bring further support. Only a safety net composed of many strands can catch OVC like these before they succumb to hunger that can drive them into prostitution or other crime.

On the other hand, the community presents risks. I have not delved into why they did not stay in their parents' home? But I know that orphans are often pushed to the side by other family members who claim to have higher priority. I also installed a dead bolt on the front door of their home this week, because in the night thieves pried open the door lock and stole the few appliances they had – kettle, iron, etc. So there is both give and take at community level.

In the Editor's column of Africa's biggest newspaper - the *Sunday Times* – this week, Mondli Mnkomo made some relevant comments:

“To be honest, I did not wish to reflect on the life of Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, as I have been taught that it is not proper to speak ill of the dead...

“History, after all, will remember the truths and the lies told at the time. So it is our duty, as this generation of South Africans, not to allow the lies to overwhelm the truths...

“In penning this piece, I took heed of the advice of a good friend who, on hearing of the passing of the former minister of health, said to me: ‘Truth without venom’...

“At the beginning of this column I set out to speak truth without venom. I think I have pretty much failed. That's because it was difficult to do so without lying. In remembering – and honouring, if we wish – the life of Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, let us make a pledge to ourselves that we will never allow a situation to develop in which we are beholden to authority as we were in that terrible decade. And not to imprison ourselves and future generations in a jail of lies.”

These are moving words and noble platitudes. But let's get practical...

- Who is going to tell these three young citizens what the likely cause of their parents' death was, and why they were neglected by their government?
- Who is going to explain vertical transmission to them and that they themselves may be infected?

- Who is going to advocate for them if and when they need ARV treatment?
Who will secure the nutritional support that they will need if they get on ARV treatment?
- Who is going to tell them the truth and make sure that they hear no more lies?

I would like to, but I am white. That presents a whole other credibility challenge. My skin colour alone could cause them to doubt or dismiss what I say - as lies. But when I took mental note that one of the three sisters is actually called Innocencia - and thought of Childermas. then it was that I decided that their story must be told this week. In remembrance of King Herod's domination.

In his famous resistance speech, Nelson Mandela said: "I have fought white domination and, if need be, I will fight black domination." Domination is the key word. King Herod dominated. That was the way he ruled. Top heavy, top-down, pure self-preservation.

Domination gets particularly ugly when it lines up along racial lines. It used to be non-whites who were discriminated against. Now there are voices saying that it is happening to non-blacks. This is an even graver concern to me than the consequences of delayed access to ARVs has been.

What the Magi brought to light was that in Jesus, not only was a new leader born - *but a new way of leading.*

Afterthoughts

There is another side to this story as well – the narrative of C4L’s emergence, growth and efforts to make its social contribution at “the eye of the storm” in terms of the AIDS pandemic.

C4L was launched in 1999, the year that Manto was appointed Health Minister. Its remit is capacity building of people and groups in the human services. By 2003, C4L realized that its campus was situated in the area with the highest HIV-infection rates in the world. So we explored what our role could be. In 2003, about the time that the three sisters became a child-headed household, C4L launched its pilot project in this sector – to train teachers and enable schools to provide care and support for OVC.

This programme has gone from strength to strength. It has trained 90 teachers, 120 community volunteers and 100 youth leaders. It deploys a combination of these three role players – teachers, parents and peer counselors – to establish support groups for OVC after school. These are called Kids Clubs, and 25 schools in 8 communities now have one running regularly. This safety net serves about a thousand OVC regularly.

In early 2005, I was invited to speak to an AIDS Conference in Ottawa, Canada. Among the remarks I made was the following:

“Recently, South Africa’s health minister actually lamented that for every doctor lost to a country, that country should send a doctor to Africa. Does the right hand not know what the left hand is doing? The home affairs minister who controls immigration should take note of what she said! The health minister must have no idea how hard it is for a Canadian to settle in South Africa. To say nothing of competing under the prevailing market conditions, usually called ‘black empowerment’.

This seems to me to be a double standard. Canada allows immigration because multiculturalism is seen as a good thing. What are the implications of Africa not reciprocating? Africa still promotes “transformation” (meaning affirmative action); it is called positive discrimination, but it casts a shadow. There is a lot of talk about an African renaissance, and with good reason. What about a Reformation to go with it?”

In the months following the conference, C4L acted as the lead agency of a consortium of NGOs applying to the Global Fund (Round 5). The consortium covered three countries – South Africa, Swaziland and Mozambique. The centerpiece of the joint proposal was to build 10 replicas of an existing ARV clinic. It operates in the same community that the three sisters live in. It is an exemplary institution, so we wanted to build 5 more in South Africa, 4 more in Swaziland and one in Mozambique.

But we got stone-walled by SANAC (SA National AIDS Council). Even though Swaziland’s Ministry of Health issued a support letter (after weeks of lobbying), approval in Geneva hinged on approval by South Africa. At the time, the chairman of

the national AIDS council was the then Deputy President, Jacob Zuma, and the vice-chair was the Minister of Health, *Dr Beetroot*. It turned out that Zuma was struggling for political survival - he was dismissed by Mbeki soon after. And history corroborates the fact that *Frankenmanto* would not countenance any such ambitious plan to roll out ARV clinics.

Especially if the clinics were private and worse yet, operated by whites or foreigners! I personally spent weeks of hard work on that funding proposal without fully realizing at the time that the odds were stacked against it. Global Fund groundrules state that at least 40 per cent of its funding must be channeled through “non-state actors”. At that time, government had snafloed all Global Fund resources (Rounds 1 – 5) and shared nothing with the other sectors. In this light, its abysmal record in terms of ARV roll-out is double-jeopardy.

The noise that C4L made in and after Round 5 paid off in one respect – SANAC had no choice but to offer all funding available in Rounds 6 and 7 to non-state actors, to get the missing balance back. To the Paradigms of Excellence Christian AIDS Network (PECAN), though, the episode was demoralizing.

In 2006, C4L started to beat the drum about Childermas. It came to recognize that leaders are the ones responsible for creating safe conditions for children to grow up in. Whereas often what is best for children is sidelined because leaders are more concerned about self-preservation than they are about the Innocents. King Herod is the icon for self-engrossed, paranoid leaders.

The three sisters have lived through untold difficulties because of the state negligence.

Civil society organizations were side-lined by the same Cabinet, which came to see criticism as unpatriotic instead of a democratic responsibility.

The Mbeki government fell into disrepute and Manto’s name competes with the name Judas for treachery at worst and misplaced intentions at best.

Many churches no longer read the story of the slaughter of the Innocents from the pulpit. But the worshippers go home after church and read the *Sunday Times* – where the story is told and re-told, time and again. I agree with the editor of Christian Week who once encouraged churches to put Herod back in Christmas!

But I go a step further – encouraging Christians to recover and practice Childermas on December 28th.

*God, bless Africa
Guard her children
Guide her leaders
And grant her peace
For Jesus Christ's sake, Amen*

Post Script

Try to see the movie INVICTUS with Morgan Freeman as Nelson Mandela! If only his legacy had prevailed. Alas!