

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST IN ENGA

by Philip Gibbs

Who do you say I am?

INTRODUCTION

The lived faith experience of the people must be an essential element in any study of the Gospel in Melanesia. However, it is not always easy for people to communicate that experience in a way which is meaningful to others and yet true to the experience itself. An interested person could enquire with Papua New Guineans with a formal education but usually they confess to be bewildered about where to begin and how to proceed. A solution is to go and listen to ordinary people as they express their faith in Christian communities.

In what follows I will illustrate how Christians from the Enga Province in Papua New Guinea demonstrate considerable creativity and innovation in their faith expression through the use of metaphor and images in prayer, song, dreams, visions, discernment, movements, and artistic expression¹.

PRAYER AND SONG

The way Christians pray provides insights into their understanding of Christ. Engan Christians tend to be relatively informal and uninhibited during times of communal prayer. Sometimes in spontaneous prayer people use translations of common Christian prayers, but often they use terms that show remarkable creativity. I will focus on prayers in the Catholic community.

The most common term for Christ in Catholic prayers in the Wabag Diocese

is *kamongo*, the Engan term for a Big Man. The Engan Big Man is a wealthy person, influential in the pig exchange, a skilled orator and negotiator. He is a man "with a name" (important), a "man with talk" (convincing) or a "large man" (powerful). When the term *kamongo* came to be used by Christians it was used metaphorically. Christ was not a Big Man in a human sense, but there were admired qualities in the meaning of the term which could be used in bringing an innovation to the cultural meaning. If God/Christ is *kamongo* then Christ is important, Christ speaks convincingly, Christ is powerful. With the use of a term from the local language one might ask whether there has been a transfer of meaning from the cultural context not unlike what appears to have happened in the first century when Greek-speaking Christians used the term *kyrios* which had its own field of secular meaning.

Has the close association of the Engan *kamongo* with material wealth and prestige affected the Engan understanding of Christ as *kamongo*? How does this fit with the poverty of Christ's self-gift? The Engan *kamongo* is also associated with both peace-making and success in warfare. How is this to be reconciled with Jesus as reconciler, with his message of peace?

The transfer of meaning can also work the other way so that an introduced term affects its use in every day language. Recently a traditional Big Man near Yampu politely asked that people should not refer to him as *kamongo* because that is now a term used for God.

Kamongo is not the only term of direct address to Christ in Enga. One hears

terms such as *akali andake Jisasa* (Big Man Jesus), *yangoe Jisasa* (Brother Jesus [from a male perspective]), and *pakae Jisasa* (Beloved brother Jesus [from a woman]). Fr. Lawrence Kambao has noted various metaphors that are applied to Jesus. Christ is the new *topoli* (healer), the sacred *akaipu wai* (special plant), the *sandalu isingi akali* (custodian of the sacred), *wane* (favoured son [of our sister Mary]), and *akali lakungi* (friend/lover). Sometimes animal titles are used symbolically. Christ is the *tambuaka* (the exceptional pig), the *lai* parrot (that looks after people and brings good fortune), the *kambi* eagle (that saves people, especially children) or the *laima* cassowary (strongest of all the birds of the forest). These are a few examples of the rich litany of titles and expressions used to refer to Christ in Engan prayers and songs.

Terms such as *wane* (son), *pakae* (brother) and *akali lakungi* (friend) are terms having considerable emotional content. One hears songs such as:

*Ee kamongonya ikiningi doko sangalinya bui
katenge
sui doko tange nyetoale sui*

(God's son has a star on his chest
that is good for me to get [marry])².

*Ee kamongonya ikiningi doko lomenya koko
palenge.
Ee doko tange nyeto lao epo.*

(The Son of God lives inside a protected
sacred place.
I came so I could get [marry] him)³.

Such songs show a strong desire to come close to Christ expressed in very human terms, from a woman's viewpoint. Whereas the term *kamongo* brings out the masculine features of Christ in terms of power, influence and prestige, these terms of endearment reveal a mystical dimension

in Engan prayer and song, a feature that warrants further study.

Besides the qualities presented above, there are further indications of people's understanding of Christ in the role or function attributed to Christ in people's prayers. Often God/Christ is seen as having a protective role in terms similar to that of traditional deities. The following is a translation of part of a prayer at the end of a Sunday Mass at Porgera:

"... You yourself look after us but we forget about you.
We fall into rivers. Demons tempt us. Tree branches fall and kill us.
But God, you look after us and we are able to get well.
... Now it is Sunday and we think of you and receive Christ's body and we rejoice.
The body of Jesus comes to me.
We don't see his face.
We don't look after you, but you look after us.
We praise your name; you are one but you have three names,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen."

When the prayer leader prays, "We don't see his face. We don't look after you, but you look after us," he is following a thought pattern traditionally applied to the deity represented by the sun. A common saying is, "The sun is watching you." Those crossing a dangerous vine bridge might mentally commend their safety to the sun. Hence the earlier part of the prayer listing various physical and moral dangers from which to be protected. The prayer is addressed to God, yet there is a sense of participation in the sacrament, which is Jesus' special manner of being present. So the invisible Jesus ("We don't see his face") is the presence of the powerful and protective power of God.

Another image of the protective power of God is revealed in a prayer on a Sunday during a period of tribal fighting.

The elderly leader prays,

"If we do wrong, don't take us down from your shoulder.
Even if we are heavy, don't take us down.
Carefully carry us.
God you are our Lord for ever and ever."

The image is that of a child being carried on its father's shoulder to protect it from harm. The leader prays not to be taken from God's shoulder because the fight is still on and it wouldn't be safe to come down. Here the image of the personal love/care of God is combined with the basic concern for safety (life). Salvation in this case is not in some transphenomenal beyond, but life in the face of death here and now. This awareness of the loving care of God is made possible by Jesus who, Engans say, "opened our eyes and our ears when we were in darkness." When Jesus died "it was like God cutting off his finger" (an Engan custom to express sorrow, and here used to express God's compassion).

DREAMS AND VISIONS

Dreams and visions have always played a significant role in Engan life. Traditionally the young men in the *sangai* initiation rites spent long hours recounting and interpreting their dreams. Most often the dreams were seen as having a predictive value as to who would win the next tribal fight and as to who or how many would die. Dreams were important for women too, particularly in their predictive value for fortune in domestic life. For example, dreams may help a woman know what clan she will marry into or how many children she will have and whether they will be boys or girls. Dreaming of a loved one lying down might mean that the person is ill and in need of help.

Dreams and visions are an integral part of contemporary Engan Christian faith experience. The following is the account of

a dream by a woman at Yampu.

"I was wandering in an unknown place and a religious sister came towards me. She asked me to come to her house. Her house was a nice big one. The sister gave me a sewing machine to take with me so that I could mend torn clothes for her. I took the sewing machine and started sewing torn clothes in her house."

After praying about it over a long period she interpreted the dream to mean that like the sewing machine that sews torn clothes, she should mend those people who are torn in spirit. After the dream recurred several times she started a group to pray with sick and troubled people and they meet for this purpose each week.

Some say that when Christ appears in dreams he is often dressed in a cassock and may have the appearance of a respected priest whom they know. This is illustrated in the following dream.

"I was in my garden and a priest flying a helicopter landed in my garden. The European priest asked me to take a lift with him and we flew to a town. It was a beautiful town even better than Mount Hagen or Port Moresby. I saw the view of the city from inside the helicopter."

The dreamer interpreted this in terms of Christ being pleased with her and allowing her to catch a glimpse of his "city". Such dreams are highly significant for people, especially if the same dream recurs. A person will then pray about it and perhaps discuss it with others in the community.

Visions too figure in the life of the Christian communities. For example, some who engage in a ministry of healing are helped through visions to discern people's needs. In one of the prayer groups near Par the leader often has visions of the Holy Family touching those who are sick and in need of prayer. Christ usually appears as a

priest in a cassock. The leader is not in a trance or in an altered state, but appears to receive the visions as a normal occurrence. Other prayer leaders are directed to pray over the sick people. With prayer like this, in time, many are healed and come to be active members of their church community.

I do not want to over emphasize phenomena such as dreams and visions. However they do influence Christian people today and have contributed to the emergence of influential religious movements and so must be taken seriously by anyone with an interest in the Engan religious experience.

DISCERNMENT

Divination has always been an important feature of life in Enga. Experts would be called upon to predict the outcome of fights, the cause of sickness or the success of the next pig exchange. Dream interpretation was very important for the young men. Elder members of the community scrutinize the body decoration of the dancers at a singsing for omens of fate or fortune. It is not surprising that Enga Christians are sensitive to signs which will help them know the destiny of their community and of others, allies or foes.

Several years ago during a baptism liturgy the celebrant adapted the exorcism ritual to apply not only to those being baptized but to the whole of the community. Fighting was causing havoc in the surrounding area and so the priest, assisted by the Christian leaders, prayed earnestly for deliverance from the power of Satan for the whole valley. That same afternoon there was a violent thunderstorm and the wooden cross at the entrance to the road leading to the Catholic church in the fighting area was struck by lightning and shattered into tiny pieces. It occurred at approximately the same time as the prayer for deliverance. A short time afterwards, while the same priest was celebrating mass, the church building collapsed and he was

trapped by the falling rafters. He was dragged unconscious from the debris and taken to hospital. Fortunately he recovered.

People don't see such incidents as chance happenings. It is natural to interpret them in terms of a power struggle between Christ and Satan. Some saw the cross incident as an act of God and the church incident as an act of Satan. The cross had a meaning in relation to the fighting and for some the calamities were a warning for whoever would meddle in the conflict that was devastating the valley. One could say that the survival of the priest was a sign of hope.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World from Vatican II says that the Church has a duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel (GS 4). It also refers to the need for God's people "to listen to the various voices of our day, discerning them and interpreting them, and to evaluate them in the light of the divine word" (GS 44). Thus the Christian community reads in historical reality itself the summons of the Gospel.

Often in recent church documents the signs of the times are not taken in their biblical eschatological sense (Mt 16:4). But in Enga, such signs easily take on eschatological significance. They have to do with life and death, and God's will in the final great struggle of history. Catholics in the Enga Province often maintain that they do not heed the frequent claims about the world ending, but the constant reference to that event, especially in places such as Porgera, indicates that the perceived proximity of the last days is a source of anxiety. Discerning the signs for tomorrow's weather is one thing. The challenge for the church is to interpret historical events today from the perspective of faith. We must have the conviction that God speaks to us

in our contemporary situation.

MOVEMENTS

Religious movements are not a new phenomenon in Enga. For example, there was a millenarian movement that in the 1940s swept through the west of what is now Enga Province. This was at least ten years before any Christian missionaries came to the area. In the last two decades there have been a series of Christian or neo-Christian revival movements. In the Catholic church the charismatic renewal movement grew considerably in the late 1970's and the early 1980's and still has some influence. Recently the "God Triwan" movement has been capturing people's imagination throughout the Province. I will describe this movement briefly as an example of movements among Engan Christians today. The movement is led by an Engan catechist, Matthew Ima. He was concerned that the vision of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan that the church be "a community filled with joy sharing the fulness of life with the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit", was not being realised sufficiently. He recalls, "*Mi bin ting olsem Jisas i no stap insait long mi na mi stap olsem wampela tinpis*" (I felt that Jesus was not within me and I was like an empty fish can). Matthew and his community prayed about this for three years until in 1989 at a prayer meeting he began to experience the pain of Christ on the cross and felt a power outside of him moving him to make the sign of the cross. By holding a crucifix Matthew found his fear subsided. Then the crucifix in his hand began to move of its own accord leading him around to bless the community. The people experienced a relief of their fear and a new desire to be faithful to prayer and the sacraments. Heartened by the words to Moses, "I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people out of Egypt ... the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of

Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you" (Ex 3:10,15), Matthew and his supporters have gone out bringing the message that "God Triwan" wants people to be free from the power of darkness and to come into God's light.

How does a movement such as this contribute to our understanding of Christ in Enga? While the name of the movement refers to the Trinity, the focus throughout is on Christ crucified. They place great importance on passages of Scripture such as 1 Cor 2:2 "The only knowledge I claimed to have was about Jesus, and only about him as the crucified Christ" and Gal 6:14 "The only thing I can boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world." Their prayer and song reflect their conviction that it is the power of Christ crucified that takes away sin and opens the way to living in the light.

What is particularly interesting is the way movement members explain the moving cross which has become a distinguishing feature of the movement. There is a customary Engan form of divination called *pepe miningi* used for finding out what has caused death. A diviner holds a stick or a spear decorated with *kola* grass over the body of the deceased and asks, "What caused you to die? Was it X? Was it Y?" When the cause or the person responsible for the death is nominated the stick begins to move or shake. The explanation given is that the spirit of the dead person "sits" on the stick or spear and causes it to move as an answer to the question from the diviner. In the God Triwan movement the leader or his assistants hold the cross and it moves, sometimes quite violently. Matthew says, "*Kruse em yet i muv na i no isi, klostu haus i bruk!*" (The cross shakes strongly of its own accord; almost destroying the house!) They say that it is the power of the Spirit of Jesus

which causes the cross to move and in so doing it is revealed what caused Jesus' death (our sin). Not only is it seen as a reminder of why Jesus died but they go further and say that Jesus who is not dead but alive wants to warn us about what is causing us to be "dead". Jesus reveals, heals and saves. So in practice the shaking crucifix in the hand of the prophet is a stimulus for individuals and the whole community to admit their sinfulness and to resolve to turn away from sin towards the light.

In Enga shaking is usually seen as a sign of power. It was present in the pre-Christian millenarian movement and the charismatic movement. Now the shaking cross is a phenomenon central to the God Triwan movement signifying the power of the Spirit of Christ to reveal sin and to free people from it.

There is an important liberative dimension in movements such as the God Triwan movement. The emphasis is not simply on the cross but the liberating power of the cross. Movement members often refer back to the account of Moses freeing his people from their slavery in Egypt. This is a point as old as the scriptures, so what is special about the Enga use of it?

Their special contribution is in the way they see the liberation in terms of their contemporary life experience. Sources of oppression common to people in many Third World nations such as the colonial experience or large-scale land alienation have not influenced the Enga people to any great extent. Their colonial experience was brief and relatively benign and there has been little land alienation except in Porgera in the far West of the Province. However many today feel a "heaviness" connected with violence and tribal fighting which continues unabated despite efforts by many

local leaders, the government and the churches to stop it. To the people, religion is not something compartmentalised, separate from politics, economics or socio-cultural matters. They see it as having to do with life and life in its fullness. So Christ is concerned not simply with our spirit or with freeing people personally, but particularly with helping to change the heaviness that people feel so that they can be truly free to experience the fullness of life.

This is an example of Christ's liberating power seen in very practical social terms. Moreover this view of religion being relevant to people's daily concerns about suffering, sickness and death is characteristic of an underlying cosmic religiosity which continues to play an important role in people's lives and which adds richness to their Christian faith. Jesus Christ is not some figure who lived a long time ago, but the one who wants to work *pepe miningi*: to reveal the cause of sin and death now, so that his people may have life.

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Several years ago I met with an Engan artist Aki Tumu to discuss how one could depict the Enga Christ in a graphic way. Together we decided upon a sand painting with the central figures being a man and woman in the traditional finery of the Enga people. The man has his hands raised above his head as if calling out to people, and the woman has an arm outstretched towards him. She is offering him a bunch of *lepe* (Bog Iris) leaves: a symbol of life and well-being. *Lepe* leaves also form the base from which the male figure emerges. Marks of death by crucifixion are visible in his hands and side. The woman also has a wound on her side from which liquid is running into a bamboo container.

What did the people think? The initial reaction was quite subdued. Some wanted the meaning explained to them. Resisting the temptation to do that, I used the picture as the basis for a dialogue homily one Sunday. In a short time people suggested 15 possible meanings for the male figure and as many for the female one. Some said the male figure represents an Engan *kamongo* (Big Man). Others said it represents Christ; others, Adam, or a prophet such as Moses (with his arms raised so the people could escape across the Red Sea.) Others said it represents Kimala, a mythical folk hero. Others looked at the dynamic of the picture and said it spoke to them of Christ calling out for us to come to him. Then there was the idea that it portrayed the death and resurrection of Christ, with the marks of the passion and the figure rising out of the *lepe* leaves (being symbolic of life). This was further supported by the people's perception that the woman is Mary at the foot of the cross or Mary of Magdala at the tomb. Some offered a theological explanation: that the male figure with the female one together represented the whole of humanity and that Christ gave himself for us all. One went further, pointing out that it could represent the church, the body of Christ. Then someone said: it represents "us". There was a murmur of assent from the congregation as they realised that they too were represented in that picture of the Enga Christ.

The Enga Christ is one whom Enga people can identify with. Such a personal sense of the meaning of the incarnation is a goal of evangelization and particularly of attempts at inculturation of the Gospel. But how can this happen? How can people come to respond to the question, "Who do you say I am?" in a way that appreciates the mystery of the universality of Christ while at the same time offering a uniquely Melanesian answer to that question?

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY OF LIFE AND DEATH

It is generally agreed that in Papua New Guinea the continuation, protection, sustenance and celebration of *life* is a central value. However life is not to be taken in isolation, but in contrast to death. It could be that we need to give more attention to symbols of death in Melanesia in order to understand better the deepest meaning of life and death which are so central to the paschal mystery of Christ.

Elements such as water, blood, or certain birds or animals may be seen as symbols of life in rituals and healing magic. What about these same elements as symbols of death outside of a ritual context? In Enga most major river crossings were dangerous. Even today "*nogut yu pundan long wara*," (take care that you don't drown) is a common expression. Blood encountered "out of place" is always a source of fear or anxiety. Birds may be signs of life in their habits and their plumage, but their calls are often interpreted as omens of death.

Ghosts are possibly the most significant symbols of death. Spirits of the recent dead, angry at being deprived of their familiar life and still mindful of grievances against the living are most likely to cause trouble⁴. In many cases being bitten by a ghost is the most common cause of sickness and death. Many Christians have a dichotomous belief: they believe in the power of Christ, and at the same time they are deathly afraid of ghosts. I think that a deeper understanding of symbols of life and death in Melanesia will open ways for Christians to appreciate the full significance of the paschal mystery of life and death.

Jesus shared human struggles and experienced temptation, tragedy and death. He forgave sin yet shared the lot of sin-

ners. In his life and especially his resurrection he made the fullness of life in all its dimensions a possibility for all people. It is important that this Jesus of history is an integral part of people's faith. Otherwise there is too easily an over-emphasis on the second coming and the intervention of Christ at the end of history. Such millenarian thinking with its pessimistic view of the present and the image of Christ as judge on the last day is not uncommon among Enga Christians.

Possibly the greatest challenge for Engan Christians is to discern the place of Christ within modern developments. Some become obsessed with politics as a source of life and well-being, yet with it there are often the dehumanizing and death-dealing consequences of intimidation, dependence and broken promises. There is also the frequent experience of sickness and fear (of shame, violent death, etc.) or plain boredom so that life revolves around card games or court cases.

If the Gospel is to mean anything it must impinge somehow on this human experience. It must address people, not in the abstract, but in the reality of their lives. The word of God comes to us firstly in scripture but also through historical signs. Domestic life, political episodes, religious worship, aesthetic experience, economic movements and other human realities can all provide the raw material through which God's saving word comes to us. The Gospel is a living word that illuminates both positive and negative human experience empowering people to transcend their own limits, to die to what is opposed to the ultimate good of humanity, and to become a culture of life in the face of death.

CHRIST THE CHALLENGE TO A NEW IDENTITY

The invasion by outsiders and for-

eign products has disrupted many aspects of the traditional Enga universe. Alcoholism, poverty and the breakdown of family and clan structures cause serious problems. While efforts at inculturation must appreciate traditional values, there is more to take into account as people become marginalized and teenagers finish school with dashed dreams. They can't go back, but where is the hope for the future? There emerges the tragedy of the non-person so common throughout the world. What does faith in Christ say to this? Does faith in Christ challenge Enga people, especially the young, to a new identity? The search for a new identity in Christ will be an on-going process, not in rejecting the socio-cultural reality but within and through it. Ultimately Engans will discover their identity as followers of Christ in community, and this is surely one of the greatest contributions the church can make in a changing world.

The quest for the Engan face of Christ risks abuses and unacceptable syncretism. But the alternative is to risk handing on a colonial Christ or second-hand formulas from someone else's milieu. Some think it is possible to strip away the 'husk' of historical and cultural influences so as to uncover a supra-cultural 'kernel' of truth. Unfortunately in attempting to dispose of the cultural wrapping the meaning gets lost too. Perhaps the attention has to move from theory and ideas to faith life and practice. Then Christian identity is found in being part of a contemporary community of believers who in fidelity to Jesus and the apostolic tradition, strive to share the experience of the Gospel with others by writing a fifth gospel with their lives⁵.

CONCLUSION

This paper only touches on some elements in the faith expression of Enga

Christians. Perhaps it will provide a stimulus for others to study the matter in greater depth. I have illustrated how people are beginning to tell the story of Jesus together with their own, using prayer and song, dreams and visions, movements, discernment and art forms. Their response is innovative and creative. As in the early church, Christians in Enga are searching for ways to express their faith in Christ that are meaningful yet true to the life and preaching of Jesus. The people's task is to persevere in their quest and to share the news of their discovery with others. The task for missionaries is to listen and to encourage people to reflect critically on their faith experience. I have tried to show how raising issues such as the place of the paschal mystery and identity, can help deepen and refine the uniquely Melanesian answer to the question: "Who do you say I am?"

This kind of enquiry is possible and desirable if one understands the testimony of the Christian communities as God continuing the dialogue with people in our time. Listening attentively to the way people express their faith will bear fruit if one perceives the many elements from Melanesian culture which enrich people's understanding of Christ to be moments of grace in which God's love has been revealed to people even before they heard the explicit proclamation of the Gospel.

The enquiry has been concerned not just with using the Gospel message to "shed light" on people's life experience. It has also shown how people's faith experience contributes to the meaning of the Word of God, disclosing it as a living Gospel today.

ENDNOTES

¹ I want to thank and express my indebtedness to the many people who have shared their stories with me, especially people in the churches of Porgera and Par in the Enga Province.

² Similar references to the star are made by supporters of politicians during political campaigns.

³ The *lome* is a walled-off place in the forest, set aside for sacred activities. The Christian women singing the song are also referring to the tabernacle in the church.

⁴ M. MacDonald, *Symbols of life: An Interpretation of Magic*. Occasional Papers of the Melanesian Institute (Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 1985), No.2,5. Engan priest, Fr Lawrence Kambao, feels that ghosts are more symbols of life (resurrection) than death (personal communication).

⁵ The expression "Fifth Gospel" is used by Joseph G. Healey in "Our Stories as Fifth Gospels," *AFER* 30 (1988):151-166. It is also used by Mary Catherine Hilkert in *The Praxis of Christian Experience*, ed. by Robert J. Schreier and Mary Catherine Hilkert, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989, 51.