

# REMEMBERING BISHOP LAKSHMAN WICKREMASINGHE

October 23 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his passing away

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*Rt. Rev. C. Lakshman Wickremasinghe, Bishop of Kurunegala, Sri Lanka, was born on 28 March 1927. After a brilliant student career at Royal College, Colombo, and the University of Ceylon, obtaining a first class in political science, he proceeded to Keeble College, Oxford – and then Ely Theological College. After his ordination in 1952 he was on the staff of All Saints church, Poplar, in the UK. He was university chaplain in Sri Lanka from 1958 to 1962, Bishop of Kurunegala from 1962 to 1963. He was elected bishop at the young age of 35, the youngest in the Anglican Communion.*

It was with shock and deep grief that we received the news of the passing away of Bishop Lakshman Wickremasinghe, here in Tokyo. There are Christian leaders here in Japan who had been involved with him in work in the Asian field. His death is not only a loss to us in Lanka but also to the larger concerns he was involved with in Asia, in bringing together people of all faiths and ideologies in a greater commitment to the human rights movement, commanding widespread respect and a founder leader of the newly formed Christians in the Struggle for Justice. We commemorate the memory of one who was a "leading Asian Theologian, an important influence in the Christian Conference of Asia and in the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission." (*London News*)

The spontaneous reaction of many to his untimely death has born the question "Why, why at this time? Why should he have been removed at this time?" Lanka is facing the greatest crisis in its modern history. Crises of civilization as some have put it. During those Peradeniya days he would often say that we are in the midst of an ongoing drama. Some are active participants. Others part of the audience. But all of us are involved as in any good drama. There is no escape; we are caught up in it. There are scenes of tension, pain, joy, fear and horror, but none of us quite know what is coming next. We are not able to explain the way of it. But we do have insights as to the final end. This analogy is particularly appealing to those familiar with Hindu mythology.

When in 1980 he organized the largest ever consultation among Christians both Catholic and non-Roman Catholic at Lewale to arrive at a consensus on the problem of Sinhalese-Tamil relations, he saw to it that the first day of the two-day consultation was spent on Bible study, reflection and discussion. He was attempting to work out a Biblical basis on which to reconcile the Sinhalese and Tamil positions. His Biblical reflections are available in outline in the CCA-URM publication "Christian Response to Race and Minority Issues in Asia" (1980).

He did not indulge in simplistic, escapist, peace and harmony talk, and pietistic condemnation of violent forms of struggle. He had a distinctive and honoured place in Tamil society. He has been referred to as "Jaffna's dearest and most beloved Sinhalese friend." He identified himself with the pain, the anguish and sufferings of the Tamil people. After every major outbreak of violence, he was among the first to arrive in Jaffna. "It has rightly been acknowledged that the healing presence of Bishop Lakshman in Jaffna during times of tension was more eloquent than words. Not that he agreed with everything that the Tamils wanted. He condemned violence and very much wanted us in Jaffna to condemn violence. He was totally opposed to the division of the country. But precisely because he stood by us at times of crisis, because he identified himself with the sufferings of Tamils who had been victims of attack, and because he relentlessly worked for a solution based on justice to both Sinhalese and Tamils – hence he was always welcome in Jaffna. He was respected and his sincerity was not questioned. He was listened to. He tried hard to influence the Buddhist clergy. He was a great force for reconciliation based on justice. If ever Lanka were to become a truly integrated and united state it could be only under leaders like Bishop Lakshman, who have the capacity to win the confidence and allegiance of minorities.

His passion for liberation was grounded in and controlled by a distinctly Christian worldview. He gave precedence to all things to God's free and sovereign grace. He combined in a unique way the pastoral, the teaching and the prophetic

ministry. We were fortunate to have a bishop who with all the authority and respect he commanded threw himself on the side of the marginalized, the discriminated, the oppressed, and the poor. Bishop Lakshman's ministry (not as university chaplain and bishop came a momentous period in the history of the country, when the tensions and contradictions that lay dormant in a typically newly-independent colony from Western rule, were beginning to surface. The mid-1950s was a period of social upheaval. The search for national selfhood was on. The common man, as he was called was beginning to assert his place in the socio-economic set up. The working class was in a militant mood. The line was beginning to be clearly drawn between oppressors and the oppressed, the privileged and less privileged. Liberation Theology was yet to be born. The conditions for change were the dynamic forces at work. The founding of the Christian Workers' Fellowship and the re-energization of the Student Christian Movement took place. But the response was not clearly articulated in theological terms. That was to come later; action and involvement preceded theology.

In his commitment to both thought and action, Bishop Lakshman was in the forefront, responding to the challenges of his times, taking his stand firmly on the side of the oppressed. That was later vividly demonstrated by an act of his that will be remembered in history, when he presided over the workers' mass for justice to the July 1980 strikers, which the CWF has recorded as a "prophetic, prophetic act... that rallied the forces for justice and democracy." *As Satyananda Behera* has appropriately summed up, Bishop Lakshman together with the late Bishop Leo Nanayakkara of the Ceylon Church "had a powerful insight into social reality and talked about it with prophetic force and fearlessness."

In September 1982 he identified himself fully with the campaign launched by the All Lanka Peasants' Congress. On that occasion he said, "If the demands of those who suffer are to be won, all sections of the oppressed must join hands – forgetting all divisions they must come forward to win their demands."

And with reference to the plantation workers he has said, "My deepest sympathy is for these Tamils..." In this same pastoral letter, his last, which the CWA has poignantly titled "A Cry from the Heart," he said with reference to the July 1983 violence, "his massive retaliation mainly by Sinhalese against defenceless Tamils in July 1983 cannot be justified on moral grounds. We must admit this and acknowledge our shame. We are ashamed as Sinhalese for the moral crime other Sinhalese committed."

These words came from a man who acknowledged and drew inspiration from his Sinhalese Buddhist heritage. He sought to channel the forces of Sinhalese Nationalism in a positive and constructive direction, to revive, restore and develop that which was true, good and beautiful in an ancient culture.

As president of the Civil Rights Movement he led the protest against the gradual erosion of democratic rights in Lanka culminating with the infamous referendum of 22 December 1987 by which the people of Lanka were persuaded, pressurized and manipulated to divest themselves of their sovereign right to elect their own representatives to parliament. For his role in the Civil Rights Movement he was named and attacked publicly. Nevertheless this was the 'power of the powerless.' Those who have known him know what role he has played in that great drama, and in that dream, he put himself on the side of the people. Even as we grieve that he has gone, we raise our hearts in thanksgiving and honour a life so nobly lived, a life so truly given for just causes, a life lived for others.

Whatever the heightened degree of awareness there may be, there is a point beyond which we as individuals and even as small groups are helpless. But we shared something in common – a hope, a longing for justice, reconciliation and peace. It was a meeting I will personally cherish much like my first meeting with him 25 years ago. Once in a lifetime, a figure emerges who sums up the hopes, aspirations, and longings of a people who share the same faith and concerns. It was a joy and privilege to have lived in the times of Bishop Lakshman Wijesreasinghe.

A persisting memory that lingers is that of the then Father Lakshman, young, handsome, humane and intellectually challenging in that homely and beautiful church in a picturesque setting in Penderiya, leading us in worship. Facing the altar he would invite us with the familiar invocation that he was so fond of, "Come, let us worship God in the beauty of holiness." People like Bishop Lakshman do not die. They live in the hearts and minds of people – ever inspiring us to continue in that for which he dedicated his life: "In the Beauty of Holiness."

*This is a tribute delivered at a memorial meeting on 7 March 1981 at the National Christian Council of Japan, Tokyo.* ■

Courtesy: *Daily Mirror*, 21 October 2008.