

Doing Mission from the Underside: A Biblical-Theological Understanding from a Myanmar Perspective

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I. Introduction

As we fast approach the centenary of the Mission Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910, ecumenical organizations like the World Council of Churches, Christian Conference of Asia, YMCA/YWCA and World Student Christian Federation are reflecting on the understanding and doing of mission then and now. The Congress of Asian Theologians VI, gathered at Central Philippines University, Iloilo, Philippines from 8th - 14th February, 2009 will also use this opportunity as a time for retrospect, evaluation and a platform for action concerning mission.

The world has changed a great deal since 1910. A person who had attended the Mission Conference then, if she/he were to participate at our Congress, would very much feel like Rip van Winkle.¹ Geographical boundaries have shifted, political realities have changed and new areas of concern and need have appeared. In 1910, Burma, like many Asian and African countries, was under colonial rule. It was part of the British Empire, the Empire on which the sun never sets. The Western countries were the dominant powers, spreading their control over the rest of the world. Western culture, Western religion and Western financial power extended over large swathes of the globe. Christianity and Western culture was thought to be superior to other religions and cultures and therefore should be exported to lands in darkness. Natural resources of the colonies were exploited for the benefit of the home countries. Trading practices beneficial to the colonizers were set in place. Kings, queens and dictators extended their autocratic rule beyond the borders of Europe and America. Slavery or some form of it such as the discrimination based on color was well accepted. The World Wars that would change forever our perceptions of life were still in the future. Communism was yet to establish a hold over the lives of millions of people.

The Edinburgh Mission Conference participant coming to join us today would be astonished to find that the former colonies are now independent nations with democratic institutions. The sun has set on the British Empire and little of its power remains. The World Wars have changed the map of the world. Monarchs are still around but have lost their authority and aura of might. Communism, a new political ideology, guides the lives of the people living in the most populous nation, China, and other countries like Russia, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam. America has its first Black President, Mr. Barack Obama. The Philippines, like a few other countries, has had two women presidents, Ms. Corazon Aquino and Ms. Gloria Arroyo.

Like the global map, the landscape of religion is changing. In Europe and America, mosques, pagodas and temples have appeared and chants in different languages are heard

¹ A character in Washington Irving's tale who went out hunting one day in the Catskills mountain in upstate New York, who fell asleep a subject of King George and woke up an independent American.

together with hymns. Now, the center of Christianity is shifting from North to South. And Christianity is no longer the influence it was then.

The Edinburgh Mission Conference participant would find new scientific and technological advances like space travel, TV and the Internet, cures for Hansen's disease, typhoid, malaria among others. He would discover, however, that there were new scourges like HIV/AIDS and bird flu.

However, some things have not changed, or if they have it is not by much. For example, the participation of women at the Conference was disproportionately lower than men. The same is still true today although the numbers have increased somewhat. Even at CATS VI women's participation is not equal to that of men. The struggle for gender justice continues. Poverty and its attendant ills are very much evident today as then. Women still die in childbirth, children die or linger in a living death because of malnutrition and disease, men and women struggle to put food on the table and the poor are still exploited. Human greed still causes financial crises and horrors such as tainting of baby milk powder. Wars and conflict are the daily media fare. Human knowledge and skills have put humans in space and cloned animals yet a solution has not been found to such pandemic problems of human life.

In this paper, I will concentrate on a biblical passage, Isaiah 42:1-4, to find ways for the churches in Asia to do mission from the underside. First, I would like to clarify my understanding of the Congress theme, then study the biblical passage and finally make some contextual applications.

II. Mission in Burma Context

I acknowledge that I am the product of mission work in Burma.² The first Christian missionaries from the Roman Catholic Church began significant evangelistic work in Burma in the 17th century. Protestant mission work started with the English Baptist Mission, an offshoot of William Carey's Serampore mission, and led by his son, Felix Carey. However, this mission was not successful and was handed over to Dr. Adoniram and Ann Judson, American Baptist missionaries who arrived on July 13, 1813. The Baptist Mission in Burma will be celebrating its Bi-Centennial soon and so the Baptists in Burma are also in the process of evaluation and reflection of its history and mission.

Adoniram Judson, although not part of the Haystack Meeting at Williams College, was very much influenced by the enthusiasm for mission of the four who had attended and were then studying at Andover with him. These young men had heard about the evangelistic campaigns of William Carey in India and read Richard Buchanan's rousing sermon, "Star of the East." Both Adoniram and Ann were fired up for mission in Burma.

The Judsons' first target audience was the Burmese who were deeply devout Buddhists. Burmese Buddhism was not merely the religion of the majority of the population; it was part of who they were as a people. Popular Burmese Buddhism is mixed with spirit or

² The name change to Myanmar has political reasons but still signify the dominance of the majority group, the Bama.

nat worship and has incorporated many of the magical and symbolical elements of the old faith. At the gold-encrusted Shwe Dagon Pagoda, faithful Buddhists will pray before the Buddha images and then quite naturally offer flowers and prayers to the *nats*.

Judson did not have much success with the Burmese Buddhists. His first convert was Maung Naw, baptized in 1819, six years after Judson had started his evangelistic work. The obstacles to mission were the political situation, the fast hold Buddhism had on the people, and the way the Gospel was presented. The Burmese King Bagyidaw did not give the Judsons permission to propagate the gospel.³ Any Buddhist converting did so at great risks. The Christian message was too foreign and hard to understand. Christian doctrines, especially of Jesus' atoning death on the cross, were repugnant to Buddhist ears. Plus, as the British gained a foothold in the country, the missionaries were soon regarded as foreign spies.

However, when Judson met the Karens, he found them very receptive to the gospel message. The Karens were an ethnic minority that had been oppressed for many generations. They explained their marginalization as the result of losing the Book given by Ywah, the Creator God. Now they were in thrall to the spirits of earth and sky. But according to legend, one day, the Lost Book would be returned to them by their younger brother who would come over the seas.⁴ Then the Karens would once again worship Ywah. A Karen bandit, Ko Tha Byu, bought in the market, became the first Karen Christian convert. Through his ministry, Karen villages in large numbers became Christian. My great grandfather was one of those early converts. Karen missionaries then went with the American Baptist missionaries to other ethnic minorities like the Kachins, Chins, Lisus, Lahus, Nagas and Was. For the Karen, from being marginalized, they were the instruments of God's salvation. From literally being No-People, they became God's People.⁵

For those times the message and the methodology of the American Baptist missionaries was to some extent acceptable and successful. Especially, as schools, hospitals, institutes for the blind, the deaf and dumb, and orphans followed after. However, the missionaries came proclaiming in a triumphalistic way the truth of the gospel against the Middle Way of the Lord Buddha. They were bringing the light of the gospel to dispel the so-called heathen darkness. This has led to conflict, misunderstanding and intolerance. For the sake of evangelism, they also allied themselves with the British authorities who gave them many privileges.

To do mission on the underside we must identify with the people, disassociate ourselves from the powers of the world and become the servant church, begin dialogue with our neighbors of other faiths, and respect the cultures and traditions of people of primal faiths. In our Burma context, the church must be in solidarity with the suffering people. The

³ Judson had been granted an audience with King Bagyidaw in Ava where he presented him with a Bible and petitioned for religious toleration. The king refused both the Bible and to grant toleration. See Shwe Wah, Genevieve and Erville Sowards, *Burma Baptist Chronicle* (Rangoon: Board of Publications, Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), 25-26.

⁴ The tradition of the Lost Book is common also to other ethnic groups such as the Kachins and Lahus. See *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, 69.

⁵ The partiality towards the Christian Karens by the British would further divide Burmese and Karen. The British used this strategy to sow discord between Burmese and the ethnic minorities.

people have faced political oppression through ethnic conflicts and in the struggle for democracy. They are hungry because of the exploitation of the rich and the powerful. The church must identify with the poor and not isolate itself in the church compound.

III. Reading Isaiah 42:1-4 from the Underside

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him,
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not fail or be discouraged,
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.

This passage is part of Isaiah 40-55, designated by biblical scholars as Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah. Isaiah 1-39 was assigned to Isaiah of Jerusalem who prophesied during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, when the enemy, Assyria, was on the march. Second Isaiah was the work of an unknown prophet of the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century B.C. And Isaiah 56-66 was the work of a post-exilic prophet in Judah. Isaiah 42:1-4 was first classed by B. Duhm together with 49:1-6; 50:1-3 and 52:13-53:12 as the Servant Songs. In these Songs, the Servant is portrayed as one chosen by God, equipped with God's Spirit and given specific liberating tasks. In fulfilling these tasks he will undergo much hardship and suffering which he will endure with patience and perseverance. The people to whom he is to minister are the weak, the oppressed, the one in bondage, the ones at the margins far from the center of life. There have been many suggestions on the identity of the servant. I am suggesting the servant is Israel.⁶

The world of Second Isaiah was the world of the exile or refugee. He shares many common problems with the millions of refugees who are uprooted from their homes because of violent ethnic and political conflicts, natural disasters and economic crises. Faced with the mighty power of Babylonia under the command of its crown prince later king Nebuchadnezzar, Israel succumbed. Its kings, people including religious leaders, were taken into captivity to Babylonia. Those who remained behind fled to Egypt and neighboring countries that offered some measure of safety. The Temple was destroyed, the Ark taken and the former kingdom was no more. The prophet Jeremiah writes poignantly on the fate of the exiles:

⁶ For discussion of the Servant Songs see James Muilenburg, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapter 40-66* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1956); E.J. Hamlin, *Comfort My People: Guide to Isaiah 40-66* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979); T.N.D. Mettinger, *A Farewell to the Servant Songs: A Critical Examination of a Critical Axiom* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1983); C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959).

Thus says the Lord:
A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children
She refuses to be comforted for her children
because they are no more. (Jer. 31:15)

The Book of Lamentations graphically describes the plight of the people of Israel:
Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us;
behold and see our disgrace!
Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,
our homes to aliens.
We get our bread at the peril of our lives,
because of the sword in the wilderness.
Our skin is hot as an oven
with the burning heat of famine.
Women are ravished in Zion,
virgins in the towns of Judah.
The joy of our hearts has ceased;
our dancing has been turned to mourning. (Lam. 5:1, 2, 9, 10, 15)

Another prophet of the exile, the priest Ezekiel, sees a vision of the valley of dry bones. A nation with its own king, religious institutions and buildings, homes, and people is now reduced to dry bones with no life (Ezekiel 37).

Second Isaiah compares the plight of the people to a woman in the midst of “devastation and destruction, famine and sword.” There is none among her sons to be her champion for they themselves lie helpless in the streets like antelopes caught in a net. She herself must bow down and make her back like the street for her tormentors to pass over. Israel is totally degraded and humiliated (Isaiah 51:17-20).

Extra-biblical sources tell us very little of the hardships the exiles faced. Although they were not slaves as in Egypt, life must have been difficult for them. Especially under the last Babylonian king, Nabonidus, there seems to be social disintegration brought about by his conflict with the Marduk priests.⁷ The Nabonidus Chronicles tells a grim story. The inhabitants are represented as suffering so that “their faces became charged/hostile... They do not parade along the wide street, you do not see happiness anymore.”⁸ Drought and famine exacerbated the situation where “people devoured each other like dogs.”⁹ The exiles would have shared the general suffering of the people but their lot must have been worse. They were prisoners of war, refugees and exiles with no rights of citizenship. They could expect no mercy from their masters. They were people with no identity, no honor or dignity.

⁷ Nabonidus was the son of the priestess of Sin and established the worship of Sin. Marduk, the sun god, was the patron god of Babylon.

⁸ James B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament [ANET]* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 313.

⁹ Pritchard, ANET, 562.

Their religion, foreignness and strange customs must have been disturbing to the Babylonians.

So it is strange that Second Isaiah should speak of them as designated to be God's chosen one with whom God is much delighted. For Brueggemann, "Now, in a way characteristic of Israel's faith, it is affirmed that God's work in the world is to be enacted by human agency."¹⁰ In this call of the servant, the language used is full of affirmation and empowerment. The servant is one upheld by God and whom God equips for the task ahead with the Spirit. Just as in early days, judges received the Spirit of God and were strengthened to liberate their people from their enemies such as Othniel over Cushanrishathaim, king of Mesopotamia (Judges 3:10) so now God's spirit falls on the prophet. The prophet also is empowered by God, as Micah proclaims:

... I am filled with power,
with the Spirit of the Lord,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression
and to Israel his sin.

(Micah 3:8)

In this text, the task is so important that it is reiterated three times:

He will bring forth justice to the nations,
He will faithfully bring forth justice,
Till he has established justice in the earth.

For Hamlin, "Israel appears as a humble gardener among the nations in the midst of chaos and ruin, patiently restoring the garden."¹¹ The Hebrew word "mishpat," usually translated as justice appears three times in Isaiah 42:1-4. The usual meaning is of judgment to be given to the nations. However, Hamlin suggests that in this context justice means the good news of the reign of God in which each nation will receive the particular right ("mishpat") and destiny due it in God's design.¹² The word justice is used together with the word law in v. 4. Torah or law may mean teachings that instruct people to walk in the path of God. In Isaiah 2:3, the nations invite each other to go up to the mountain of God,

"That he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths"
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

So to bring forth justice is to establish God's righteous rule and the acknowledgement of the nations that by learning about God's justice and teachings there will be a new day of liberation. According to Hanson,

Mispat is the order of compassionate justice that God has created and upon which the wholeness of the universe depends. In Israel, God revealed *mispat* in the form of torah (note that in 42:4 *mispat* and torah form a synonymous parallelism). Those

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40- 66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 41.

¹¹ E. John Hamlin, *God and the World of Nations: The View from Babylon as found in Isaiah 40 - 55* (Singapore: Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia, 1972), 46.

¹² *Ibid.*

who repudiate God's *mispat* introduce evil into the world. God acts through God's Servants to nullify the power of evildoers and to restore the harmony that arises where God's *mispat* is acknowledged and observed.¹³

Such an understanding is also supported by the manner in which the servant is to fulfill the God-given mission: "He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; he will not break a bruised reed, not quench a dimly burning wick; he will not fail or be discouraged." The servant is to fulfill his task in a unique way uncharacteristic of earthly authorities. In contrast to political leaders or ecstatic prophets he will be quiet and humble.¹⁴ His way of doing mission is not done with fanfare or publicly. It will be unobtrusive and unannounced, very much like the underground stream that waters the dry earth. He is faithful to his responsibilities. He is not distracted or tempted to turn aside. He will face disappointments and difficulties but he will not be discouraged. Instead, with perseverance and hard work, he will accomplish that for which he has been chosen.

The people who are at the heart of his mission are those bruised and beaten reed and flickering wick, the dregs of humanity whom the world would stamp underfoot if not for the servant. The people with whom he is concerned are the weak and weary, who are often left behind or thrown aside. Another word used in this text is "coastlands," which stand far from the centers of power, on the distant frontiers of the whole earth. The people in the coastlands are the forgotten, the silenced and the degraded. The reference to coastlands and nations makes the universal framework of Second Isaiah's message indisputably clear. According to Brueggemann:

The exilic community as servant is dispatched by Yahweh to reorder social relations for the sake of the vulnerable. Israel itself is to practice vulnerability and to be attentive to those who are vulnerable, "bruised reeds and dim wicks." Israel's way of relationship is thus drastically contrasted with the way of Babylon (or any other worldly power), which is to break such reeds and snuff out such wicks. Israel is to pursue a different way... – to refuse the modes of power mostly taken for granted.¹⁵

The servant called by God is empowered with God's Spirit so that like the prophets and leaders of the past, he will work under God's authority and power. His concern is for the defenseless and weak people who are desperately in need of God's help. As God's helper, his concern will be to strengthen and uplift them from brokenness to wholeness. He will fulfill his task of bringing about God's rule of justice and love quietly, faithfully and perseveringly.

IV. Doing Mission in the Land of Green Ghosts

May 2, 2008 was an ordinary day like any other day in the fishing village of Thabygyaing, Laputta Township, Ayeyawaddy Division. The weather forecast called for squalls but that was expected at the beginning of the monsoon season. Pastor Maung Bay made no special preparation. Other villagers like him carried on their daily activities as usual. However, by evening the winds became stronger and the waves higher. That night, the

¹³ Paul. D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40 - 66* (Louisville; John Knox Press, 1995), 42-43.

¹⁴ E.J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah* (Dublin: Richview Press, 1945), 36.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, 42.

category 3 cyclone named *Nargis* hit landfall with gales up to 150 miles an hour and waves twenty feet and over. It hit Thabyegyaing and other villages and towns of the Delta, the Rice Bowl of Burma. It left in its wake death and destruction of a magnitude never encountered before in Burma. Over one million, including Paster Maung Bay, died and affected over five million people. The land and people were completely devastated. Today, the people are picking up the pieces of their lives. They struggle not only for existence but to understand why such a thing happened to them.

My people have endured suffering upon suffering because of militarism and its accompanying evils. It seems the people are at the breaking point. And now even God and nature seems to have turned against us.

Burma has been given many names such as the Land of the Golden Pagodas and the Land of Smiles. But in recent times the name most appropriate is *The Land of Green Ghosts*.¹⁶ According to Burmese spirit (*nat*) beliefs, the spirits of persons who die violent deaths, green ghosts, restlessly seek justice and revenge. They will not rest till the perpetrators of their unjust deaths are brought to justice. How did the golden land become and *The Land of Green Ghosts*?

On March 2, 1962 General Ne Win in a coup d'état took over control of the government. Ne Win abolished the constitution and initiated the *The Burmese Way to Socialism*. He introduced a centralized socialist economy, nationalizing most of the private companies. Military officers were put in charge of the economy leading to mismanagement, bribery and corruption. In 1974, General Ne Win promulgated a new constitution with governance under a one party, The Burmese Socialist Program Party, with himself as President of the country and General Secretary of the Party. By 1987 Burma's economy was worsening. The nation that had once been the chief exporter of rice was now facing rice and commodities shortages. Ne Win demonetized the currency, wiping out the savings of many people. There were widespread pro-democracy demonstrations initiated by students who were joined by people from all walks of life. Daw Aung San Su Kyi emerged as the leader of the pro-democracy groups. On 8 August 1988 the soldiers began firing on the demonstrators, killing thousands. Many activists fled the country into Thailand and India. Thus, 8-8-88 became a movement and a day to remember. The exile groups would begin organizing for democratic change.¹⁷

The army abolished the 1974 constitution and formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The name in Burmese is very telling, *nyein-wut-pee-pya-kaungsi*, literally meaning, "silenced and flattened," their aim to completely wipe out all opposition. SLORC then announced that a multi-party democratic election would be held in 1990. In the election, even with Aung San Suu Kyi under arrest, her party, the national League for Democracy won a resounding victory winning 82% of the electoral seats. However, the transfer of power to the legally elected party never happened.

¹⁶ I'm indebted to Pascal Khoo Thwe, a young Karenni refugee, for this title. In his book, *From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), he relates a harrowing tale of protest and exile.

¹⁷ See Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1990).

In 1993, SLORC, now renamed State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), convened a hand-picked National Convention to establish the principles on which the constitution was to be drafted. Guidelines were provided by SLORC for the incorporation of principles which would ensure the continued influence of the Army in the future constitutional regime. After an interval of inaction, 1995-2005, the National Convention was reconvened. On September 13, 2007, the National Convention finalized the guidelines and held a referendum which was declared successful. The next step is the holding of elections in 2010. The people have little hope that there will be democratic changes any time soon. Meanwhile, Aung San Suu Kyi still remains under house arrest and continues to be the ordinary peoples' hope for the future.

In spite of SLORC liberalizing the socialist centralized economy to a more open market-oriented economy, poverty remains endemic. Burma is a poor country in spite of its vast natural resources. Joint ventures with companies in countries such as China, Thailand, Singapore and South Korea have depleted the natural resources without any apparent national development. One such example is the gas project with TOTAL and its partner, Unocal. TOTAL's investment in Burma has helped the regime to build up its military capacity. The Yadana gas pipeline led to deforestation of the region, resettlement of villages and human rights abuses. In December 2004, Unocal (now owned by Chevron) settled out of court rather than go to court to defend allegations of human rights abuses.¹⁸

The government's gas revenues go to equipping the army. It is estimated that 50% of the country's budget is utilized for the army and only 5% for education and health.¹⁹ One of the most urgent health concerns in Burma is the escalating HIV/AIDS epidemic. Estimates of the number of people living with HIV/AIDS range from 340,000 and upwards. Myanmar has the third highest prevalence rate in Asia. Malnutrition leads to low resistance against diseases like tuberculosis, malaria and other tropical diseases.²⁰

On August 25, 2007, the rise in fuel prices followed by rise in prices of all food commodities led to peaceful demonstrations led by 8-8-88 Generation student leaders and monks. The monks in their thousands left their monasteries and marched peacefully in support of the people's demands for lowering of prices. Again there were violent crackdowns and monks and supporters were killed or jailed.

Burma is home to many different races and ethnic nationalities. The ethnic nationalities and the Burmese have always experienced division and mistrust. Whereas the Burmese were mainly Buddhists, the ethnic groups like Karen, Kachin, Karenni (Kayah) and Chin were mostly Christian. This was one reason for questioning the loyalty and patriotism of the Christian ethnic population. Although at the time of the struggle for independence, all the ethnic groups had opted to join the Burmese, after Independence, their discontent with the central government later led to armed conflict.

¹⁸ Anne-Marie Impe, *TOTAL: Financing Dictatorship*, Vivant Univers, No. 452 (March/April, 2001). For an update see Matthew Smith and Naing Htoo, "An Industry Blind to People's Tears," *Bangkok Post* (September 15, 2007), 8.

¹⁹ See "The Mess that the Army Has Made of Myanmar", *The Economist* (July 21, 2005).

²⁰ See *Threat to the Peace: A Call for the UN Security Council to Act in Burma*, September 20, 2005.

Even though SPDC has made ceasefire deals with the majority of ethnic groups, the conflict with the Karen continues. The Four Cuts strategy of the army against the Karen National Union, cutting off food, funds, intelligence and recruits, has led to dislocation of villagers and the problem of Internally Displaced People. It is estimated that over 2500 villages have been destroyed and that there are 630,000 IDPs in the country. IDPs are regularly resettled in areas not conducive to agriculture and with no possibility to work the fields and orchards they have been forced to abandon. The children have little chance for schooling and health care is non-existent.²¹

Many others risk their lives in crossing the border into Thailand. It is estimated that there are 356,000 refugees in 10 camps along the Burma-Thai border. Life in these camps is precarious. Organizations such as the Thailand Burma Border Consortium provide basic necessities.²²

Political conflict and the growing financial crisis have led to growing feminization of poverty as this anonymous poem indicates:

Yagu Peddler²³

O my love!
When you died at the frontline,
The pension was not enough to feed four children;
Rice, oil, salt and *ngapi* (fish sauce) walk out our kitchen.

O my love!
I also worry too much about the children,
That they may not even get a fourth-grade education;
Well, like ourselves. Yes! I am helpless.

O my love!
I, then started praying to Sule Pagoda,
Of course, for freedom from this bondage and samsara;
But Sule with its chiming bell fails to answer
I don't know whether Hpaya is playing
Poker with his grandpa.

What then am I to do?
I know people are not saints or bodhisattvas;
'tears' hidden in a smile, 'bitterness' concealed in sweetness;
Come on! Who and whatever you are. Who cares!

O forgive me, my love!
Yes! I have been selling Yagu in the Sule nights.

²¹ See Martin Smith, *Burma, Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991), 258-262.

²² See the Thailand Burma Border Consortium 2007 Report at www.tbbc.org/resc.

²³ *Yagu* is a gruel made of rice balls. It is a snack mostly consumed by low income people.

The financial crisis has led also to the trafficking of Burmese women to work in the entertainment and sex industries in cities like Bangkok and Chiang Mai in Thailand and Kunming and Hunan in China. The Kachin Women's Association reports that women are sold as wives to Chinese men or as sex workers in Chinese border towns.²⁴

Rape of women of ethnic minorities who are regarded as enemies has been well-documented and reported to world bodies. The UN Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma gave detailed incidents of rape by SPDC soldiers.²⁵ The UN Rapporteur on *Violence against Women* received reports that women and girls are subjected to rape by government soldiers to "intimidate the local population, to extract information from women detainees and to extract bribes."²⁶ Rape is used as a weapon of war and is part of the arsenal of terrorism used by the Burmese military. Women suspected of supporting the rebels or being in the wrong place at the wrong time risk sexual violence with its attendant trauma.²⁷ SPDC's policy of Burmanization for suppressing minority dissent is also seen in cases where Burmese soldiers are encouraged to rape and impregnate ethnic women to bear Burmese babies.²⁸

Who are the servants working quietly, faithfully and perseveringly to bring about peace and justice in my country? Who is doing mission on the underside to bring God's justice and teachings to the hungry poor, the street children, the young migrant workers and the violated women?

The church in Burma considers itself to be the servant of God. It is a minority church always under the gimlet eye of the MI. Although there are no overt persecutions, there are obstacles and difficulties. The church is told to confine its activities to spiritual affairs. There is then a disproportionate amount of time and money spent on "religious matters." Christians are into dawn prayers, fasting and praying, tithing, evangelistic trips and building edifices rather than building up people. The Baptist churches continue to spend a great amount of funds for "converting the Buddhist," considering this a good preparation for the Bi-Centennial celebration.

The Church must transform itself into being a servant people who will work silently and unobtrusively for justice for the bruised reeds and in building communities for peace. They must be faithful to their calling and mission and persevere even though faced with the principalities and powers of evil. They will be able to do this as God's spirit empowers them.

²⁴ Kachin Women's Association, Thailand, *Driven Away: Trafficking of Kachin Women on the China-Border*, Chiangmai, Thailand (no year cited but interviews were conducted in 2004).

²⁵ UN Economic and Social Council (58th Session), *Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar*, A/58/219, August 5, 2003.

²⁶ See UN Economic and Social Council (57th Session), *Integration of Human Rights and the Gender Perspective: Violence Against Women*, E/CN.4/2001/73, January 23, 2001.

²⁷ See "Shattering Silences: Karen Women speak out about the Burmese Military Regime's use of Rape as a Strategy of War in the Karen State", Maesot, Karen Women's Organization, 2004; "No Safe Place: Burma's Army and the Rape of Ethnic Women", Refugees International, April 20, 2003; "License to Rape: the Burmese Military Regime's Use of Sexual violence in the Ongoing War in the Shan State", Shan Human Rights' Foundation and the Shan Woman's Action Network, May 2002.

²⁸ See "No Safe Place", 46.

And as Second Isaiah saw God working through Cyrus, the secular Messiah (Isaiah 45: 1 - 6), God is working with others to bring about peace and justice in the land. Aung San Suu Kyi works for peace and non-violence. Although treated violently, her human rights abused, she advocates understanding and dialogue. She works, like the servant, silently, stubbornly and faithfully. Her vision and hope for the future is a country where "people will live whole, meaningful lives as free and equal members of the world community."²⁹

I see God working through the Buddhist monks and people dedicating and sacrificing their lives for the people. Because of their bold action for freedom some have been sentenced to 15 - 65 years in prison. Among them are young people, even young mothers. After the *Nargis* disaster, many volunteered to help the survivors regardless of race and religion. Some have been detained because of such work. They are unknown and unsung heroes and heroines. Their actions inspire as does the poem by a young Thai girl, Nid, a 22 year old student at Mahidol University who died during a demonstration:

For the People³⁰

If I were a bird
and able to fly afar,
I would like to be a white dove
to guide the people to freedom.

If I were the cloud in the sky,
I would shelter and bring rains
to the rice field.

If I were a grain of sand
I would throw myself down
to make a path for the people.

I will sacrifice my life
for the suffering people.
I would sacrifice my self
no matter how many times
I would have to die.

For me, doing mission from the underside in my context means working faithfully with many other people with similar goals. And that is to bring the rule of love, peace and justice to the Land of Green Ghosts, so that it will once again be the Golden Land, the Land of Smiles.

²⁹ Aung San Suu Kyi, "In Quest of Democracy," *Freedom from Fear*, ed., Michael Aris (Middlesex, England: Viking Press, 1991), 179.

³⁰ Nid, "For the People," *Your Will Be Done* (Singapore: CCA Youth, 1986), 42.

I would like to conclude with a Burmese benediction:

May you be healthy and whole,
May your life be fragrant as flowers,
cool as spring waters.
May joy and peace be yours always.
May you be ever free from all evil.

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