

The Moment of Truth

Benedicto Wokomaatani Malunga

She felt cheated, abused, degraded and annoyed. She regretted having allowed passion to blind her to the sinister intentions of Cholasa. She felt taken advantage of by the man who had come crawling on his knees as he sang captivating songs of love. She felt betrayed by the beau she had trusted and respected. She had believed every word he had uttered because he had sounded very convincing. She had not suspected that the cherubic innocence Cholasa displayed was a mere facade. She least expected that behind such a facade was a viper ready to ruthlessly prey upon its unsuspecting victim. She never imagined that a man who left the warmth of his College room in June to share a mattress with her in a poor and noisy location like Chikanda could drop her like a hot potato at a time she needed him most. Where was Cholasa the loving man, the generous provider of gifts, the understanding partner, the gentle listener to her woes, the admirer of her body, the companion who elevated her human worth to heights unheard of? Where was he who had turned a blind eye to her being a cleaner and took her to be her lover? Those questions raced in Nakadongo's mind as she felt the punishing impact of being dumped on a rubbish heap of oblivion. How could she single-handedly look after the seed in her?

Nakadongo was indeed confused. She did not know what to do. The life she once viewed as predictable became a conundrum she could not solve. The love she thought she understood and enjoyed so much, became her own undoing. It turned into a mirage—seemingly palpable in her eyes but untouchable in her hands. It took the shape of soap bubbles—apparently concrete when seen, but deceptively nonexistent when touched. She hated herself, the ground on which she stood, the air she breathed, the decision that led to her failing in love with Cholasa. The world was unfair!

However, as the magnitude of her awkward predicament sank in her mind, a voice of reason brought the dawn of pragmatism on her thinking. It reminded her of the need to be calm in the face of her quandary. It assured her that all was not lost. It asked her to seek her solace in the future. It demanded that she should be brave. It restrained her from dwelling on her past which had led to her present

mess. It emphasized to her that she should accept responsibility for the poor judgment she had executed when she made the choice which haunted her now. This was what maturity was all about.

True, she was a cleaner alright. But this did not make her a lesser human being. Fine, she was not as educated as Cholasa the graduate who had come to College to do a Master's degree in Education, but this was not her fault. If she was beneath him, why did he come to her? She was born in a poor family which in those old days could not afford to send her to the famous St. Monica Secondary School much as she had qualified for selection there. Her poverty was no excuse for ill-treating her. It was no cause for handling her like a door mat on which to wipe the mud off one's boots. She just had to develop the resilience of a tennis ball ever bouncing no matter how bumpy the ground may be if she was to face her fate squarely. She would not accept to be put down by a man who was reluctant to come to terms with the mischief of his restless loins.

Nakadongo had become wiser. The daughter she gave birth to eventually was not only beautiful but also extraordinarily bright. Although her father had not wanted to take responsibility for the pregnancy that had led to her birth, Nakadongo happily brought her up with the little money she got as a hostel cleaner at Mbwadza Liberal Arts College where Cholasa abandoned her upon learning that she was pregnant. To her total disbelief Cholasa, who was winding up his studies, openly and callously declared that he could not marry her because he already had children and a wife. He spoke as if he had already forgotten that he had told Nakadongo previously that he had divorced his wife and was ready to take her for his wife immediately when he was through with his studies.

The pain she had experienced from being ditched by a man she had genuinely loved whittled away as her daughter Mdatsika climbed the academic ladder with remarkable ease. She smashed her Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations with a vengeance and won a bursary which saw her gain entrance into a unisex Secondary School—a premier institution which recruited only the best students. Her meteoric rise did not end here. In her Junior Certificate Examinations she was the toast of her school when she became the first girl to emerge as number one in a national examination. Nakadongo was thrilled by this development. Her determination to see her daughter qualify for University Education gathered momentum and became an obsession. She now knew that this

dream was not beyond the reach of Mdatsika. She realized that the limit was the sky. She had seen daughters as poor as her own excel at Mbwadza Liberal Arts College. These girls never bothered about their humble origins. They were never intimidated by the conspicuous affluence of their well-to-do colleagues who dressed like Hollywood actresses. They worked hard on their studies. They derived their inspiration from their hardships. What they lacked in material possessions they compensated for in cerebral power. Eventually they graduated with flying colors while their rich colleagues either repeated classes or got weeded because of getting over preoccupied with endless shindigs and drinking orgies. Such brilliant girls returned to College to take up teaching jobs. They would go abroad for further training and come back transformed. They would park their cars in their home garages. They would arrive with suitcases full of clothes and containers filled with household items of a very sophisticated nature.

She would ensure that Mdatsika would not fall victim to the trickery of men because of little education. She wanted to ascertain that naivety did not land her in the trap of men stalking unsuspecting women. She did not want her to bear a child out of wedlock as she herself had done. Education of a high order would insulate her against being a perpetual slave of grinding poverty. She would determine her own destiny.

True to Nakadongo's wish, her daughter passed her A levels very well and qualified for entry into a Medical School. A few years later she graduated with an M.B.B.S. She was the best student in her year. She then embarked on her internship program at Dzikolidaya Central Hospital. Her mother was most delighted. When she visited her daughter's modern flat, Nakadongo danced with joy. Her daughter could only laugh; she was proud of her single parent. Mdatsika was now twenty-six years old. She started her rotations in the male ward. She wished her mother well as she returned to Zomba where she worked.

No sooner had she entered the ward she was assigned than she heard the sound of an ambulance siren. Before she knew what was happening, she saw nurses and other paramedical staff rush into her ward with a man on a stretcher. He was unconscious and was bleeding heavily. He was shot in the stomach by robbers who had raided his house in broad daylight. The robbers were annoyed by what the three sons of this secondary school headmaster had

done by disappearing with money they had jointly stolen at a bank. Since their father was not aware of this development, he expressed ignorance when he was asked to tell the robbers where his boys had kept the money. Exasperated by this, they shot him and left him in a pool of blood. By the time his wayward sons and a house servant found him, the masked robbers were driving away as they shot into the air.

The unconscious man had lost a lot of blood. Dr Mdatsika Phompho had to organize blood for transfusion as nurses rushed the patient to the theatre where the surgeon on duty and his team were ready for an operation. But the snag was that much as the old man's sons were willing to donate blood, all of them were found to be H.I.V. positive. As for his wife, she had gone away for MSCE marking. Dr Mdatsika Phompho was confused. She asked the Laboratory Technician on duty if she could herself donate blood. Deep sympathy drew her to the old man. Luckily her blood group was compatible with that of the patient. It was also H.I.V. free to the relief of the crew in the theatre which had already commenced a major operation on the patient. Bullets were extracted from his stomach and his bleeding was put under control. After three hours of a complicated operation, the patient was returned to the ward to be under the care of Dr. Mdatsika Phompho. When the patient came to, he was in deep pain. He groaned a lot. But Dr. Mdatsika Phompho and nurses gave him the attention he needed. They administered pain killers and antibiotics. Recovery was slow in coming. Nevertheless, it eventually came. It arrived to the relief of those who saved his life.

One day, as Dr Mdatsika Phompho was dressing the wounds of her patient, she spoke to him. "How are you feeling now?"

"A lot better doctor. A lot better. I never thought I would be able to sit like this. A few days ago my body was on fire. It has never been so painful."

"Thank God you are alive," Dr Mdatsika Phompho commented.

Meanwhile, her patient's eyes were fixed on her identity card. Something seemed to trouble those eyes.

"Doctor, is it true that you sacrificed your own blood to save me?," the patient inquired with gratitude.

"Never mind. Somebody had to do it. This time it was me. In fact, it could have been somebody else if I were not around."

"How sweet! By the way you look very much like someone

I know. Do you come from Zomba?"

"Yes, whom do I resemble?"

"Let me remember." The patient paused. He then resumed,

"What is the name on your identity card?"

"Mdatsika Phompho."

"The Phompho who used to work at Mbwadza Liberal Arts College?"

"Yes. She is my mother. Do you know her?"

There was silence. It seemed to have lasted for ages. The patient drew his breath. Then tears rolled down his face. In a voice subdued by guilt he pleaded, "Forgive me, my daughter." He closed his eyes.

Wonder-struck, Dr. Mdatsika Phompho froze. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Could this be the Cholasa he had heard about? Was he the man who had ditched her mother? Could she have waited for twenty-six years only to see Cholasa in bandages? The anger she once had towards this man turned into profound sympathy. She would look after him until he recovered. Her love for him would teach him sympathy for the less fortunate.

The Time of Reckoning

Benedicto Wokomaatani Malunga

Chabwera Church was fully packed. Latecomers had no room. They followed, proceedings from outside.

This was a big day on the calendar of Catholic events. It was a much-awaited occasion. Little wonder, it was graced by his lordship bishop Bernado Mulozeni. Four priests were in attendance to help him say this important mass.

Parents turned out in their best clothes. The youth were all out to outdo each other with the most fashionable gear. The little boys and girls who were being prepared to start receiving their eucharist sacrament were all dressed in snow white.

The men and women who were taking a leading role in the proceedings were dressed in traditional regalia befitting the occasion. They wore flowing robes and pairs of trousers made from locally produced and very colorful material. Among other things they were expected to perform a liturgical dance as the choir sang. In all fairness, they cut out an eye-catching spectacle during the offertory.

Singing melodiously and dancing *ingoma* in unison and gracefully, their procession started from the back entrance of the church and proceeded to the altar which was beautifully decorated with bright colored flowers placed in silver and golden vases. Bishop Mulozeni, his priests, and the altar boys stood in front waiting for the dancing procession.

In the procession, some women carried baskets full of oranges, tangerines, bananas, pineapples and avocado pears to be given to the officiating clergy for their domestic use. Others balanced on their heads containers of all sorts filled with rice, potatoes, cassava, cocoa yams, yams, maize flour, green beans and cabbages to be eaten by the priests. The men, not wishing to be outclassed in this brotherly competition, carried goats and small bags of maize on their shoulders, chickens, crates of beer, bottles of wine, gallons of cooking oil, containers of Sobo and ducks in their hands.

Together the men and women danced harmoniously as they whistled, ululated, yodeled and chanted in syncopation with the throbbing tomtoms vibrating under the dexterous palms of drummers who lined up in front of the choir at the back of the church.

As for the choir, it was in tiptop form. Dressed in well-

pressed maroon gowns, it produced an intermarriage of heart-lifting bass, transporting tenor, hypnotizing alto and enchanting soprano orchestrated delicately by a seasoned conductor who had a knack for the extraordinary. Such refined music was indeed nutritious food for the ear. The crooning organ, the wailing accordion, and the husky locally-made rattles blended faultlessly with the singing to the delight of lovers of order. Hearts yearning for salvation could not ask for a better therapy. Such music created a gregarious atmosphere that resonated well with the mood of this ceremony. The congregation beamed with joy as it partook in the hand clapping. This was religion at its most appealing. Here was liturgy at its mesmeric best. The indigenous color, the pomp and dignity of its participants underlined the fact that Christianity had been fully domesticated in Malawi. Catholicism was completely traditionalized to serve the African heart. It spoke to the Malawian mind. True, the African Synod was assimilated in full. It had come to stay.

When the Father Superior took center stage with his carefully concocted homily on the theme of love, the congregation was held spell bound. Here was a preacher who knew his holy Bible so well he could quote it forward and backward as he laced it with his own humorous anecdotes that drew laughter from his listeners. Here stood a folktale-teller extraordinaire who married traditional orature with the good news of the synoptic gospels to illustrate his point. He interpreted the scripture to suit the needs of an average man and never lost the original biblical import. He plucked the chord which shook every Christian's heart. He teased, challenged and mesmerized.

His choice of language was apt. His creation of mood was right. His manipulation of tone and intonation for theatrical effect was well measured. He was indeed the son of the soil. His was not just a sermon, it was a performance. Yes, to be remembered and treasured. He preached with conviction without losing sight of his vision. He sermonized with apparent faith. He pleaded with undoubted sincerity. He admonished. This was indeed Father Malodza at his most inspiring.

When she entered the church frantically, nobody seemed to take any notice. How would they when they were arrested in a spiritual trance by their preacher? With a baby strapped on her back, she walked hurriedly towards the altar. Stress was written all over her. Defiance was conspicuous in her peripatetic eyes. It mingled

with impatience.

By the time the captivated congregation realized that something was amiss, the undaunted young woman was unstrapping the baby on her back. She put it at the feet of Father Malodza who now looked thunder-struck.

Turning to the preaching priest, she spoke at the top of her voice:

"What love are you preaching about here liar! Do you call it love when a supposed celibate like you impregnates an eighteen-year-old school girl and abandons her when her parents throw her out of their home for disrupting her education and for conceiving a baby out of wedlock? If you knew that you are not supposed to marry, why did you pursue me persistently like a fly does a rotten wound? Here is your baby. Keep him in your residence. My grandparents who gave me refugee can no longer assist me with looking after him. As you well know, they are poor. Show the boy the love you are preaching here and the congregation listening to you will take you seriously. As for me, I have had enough of your hypocrisy. Who can feed a child with empty promises? Who can clothe a baby with lies? I have done my part with a lot of hardship. I have now come to the end of my tether. It is your turn this time to complete the rest. Share with him the food you have received from this generous congregation."

She did not wait for an answer. She walked briskly and rebelliously out of the church, sweating profusely. She was fed up. She had come to the end of her road. She was not in the mood to wait for anybody's reaction. Enough was enough. For how long would she remain abused by a man of the cloth?

Meanwhile, the eloquence of Father Richard Malodza gave way to muteness. He carried the baby who resembled him so much that nobody would doubt that it was his offspring. It was like his mouth was gagged. The fire which came out of him as he preached became cold ashes. He was deflated. He was caught with his pants down. He walked away from the altar with baby in hands. He spoke to no one. He looked at nobody. He proceeded to the residence where priests stayed. He had not anticipated this blow. He never expected that it would come this way. He had not imagined that he would suffer such humiliation. Certainly not in front of his congregation,

in the presence of his bishop. Why couldn't the Lord spare him? Why hadn't he foreseen this when the last meeting with Mallfa had been a stormy affair?

As Father Malodza walked away, the church was gripped with tension. The vibrance it had enjoyed a short while ago was replaced by graveyard silence. Those sitting next to each other became strangers to one another. They never talked and let alone looked each other into the eye. Nobody knew how to conduct oneself in the unfolding drama. No one was eager to comment on what had occurred. This shocking saga was better absorbed individually than communally. It was a big slap on the Church.

But, no sooner had Father Malodza disappeared, than his lordship the Bishop continued with the mass to the relief of everyone. He sounded unusually calm for a man who had been terribly disgraced by his priest. His face did not betray any emotion. The congregation followed suit. The tension which had reigned supreme in the church gave way to a gradual return to enthusiastic participation. Whether such enthusiasm was genuine or a mask, nobody could tell. Nevertheless, the mass progressed well. Eucharist was administered to the newly initiated boys and girls first amidst handclapping, whistling and ululating done in the typical African way. The elders followed and so did the youth. But, let the truth be told, beneath the calmness of bishop Mulozeni a volcano of anguish was erupting. Before his Lordship the bishop ended the mass with benediction, the Chairman of the Church Council Mr. Chandiwwa, who was a renowned retired headmaster and a committed and dedicated Christian who could run a thousand kilometers for the sake of his church, went to the alter to make announcements. But before he did so, he made the following remarks:

"Your Lordship our beloved Bishop, our priests, brothers and sisters, we are greatly honored to have you here not only as our guest of honor, but as the leader of our diocese also. It was really kind of you to accept and honor our invitation asking you to be with us at this important ceremony. For all we know, you could have been elsewhere performing a similar ceremony at some other church within this diocese." He cleared his throat and surveyed the congregation as if to solicit its approval.

"The little boys and girls to whom your lordship has happily and kindly administered the eucharist today are the fathers and mothers of tomorrow. From their Christian families God will call

his shepherds in the name of priests, nuns and brothers. But for them to become the responsible and exemplary parents we would like them to be, strong Christian principles have to be inculcated in them by us, their parents, with the spiritual assistance of you, our spiritual leaders. This has to be done at a tender stage like the one at which they are. In this way we can be guaranteed of a reliable and enviable church in the years to come." He stopped to acknowledge the ecstatic ululation that came from women.

"On behalf of our church Council and indeed on my own behalf, I am pleased to note that your coming today has assured all the parents gathered here that you share our view to the effect that we should teach our children by example if we are to demand higher morals from them." His point was drowned by a standing ovation given to him by a satisfied congregation.

"Having thanked you for your coming your Lordship, let me also take this opportunity to apologize to you on behalf of our Father Superior and the congregation for the disaster which our dignified high mass nearly experienced this morning. I am saying nearly experienced because I am aware that if the woman who brought a baby here had chosen to stay for a longer period, the situation would have been worse than it turned out to be. Her early exit spared us and our children the indignity of hearing the nastiest things which have taken place between her and our father Superior. Maybe it was God's kind intervention, you never know." The congregation mumbled its agreement as it listened to him with great expectation.

"I should also point out that I do not doubt your lordship that if it were not for your remarkable calmness and maturity under a trying situation, our colorful ceremony could have been a total fiasco because of the mischief of one person. As a concerned congregation we have written you before about our concerns vis-à-vis the weakness of our Father Superior with women. But this action notwithstanding, our man has not made any effort to change for the better. Instead, we have seen him ruin the very marriages whose matrimonial knots he himself tied here. On some occasions he has been beaten up for going out with wives of his own flock." Total silence now prevailed in the church. Meanwhile, the Chairman softened his lips with his tongue as he composed himself.

"Much as we acknowledge that our priests are not made of wood but flesh like all of us, we expect them to respect themselves if they are to be taken seriously. But when we say this, their response

is that what they do in their private life is none of our business. The question is, what was so private about the scandal we saw a short while ago?" A murmur of concurrence swept through the congregation.

"Your Lordship saw how ably our father Superior preached today. He was very persuasive indeed. All of us had our attention arrested because he did not only capture our minds but our hearts also. But all this was erased by the depressing scene we saw. Our priest's words were not matched with his actions hence creating a crisis of confidence among his flock. What we have seen today, your Lordship, is very demoralizing. Our children have noted how deceitful our religious leaders whom they trust so much can be. We will therefore not be surprised if some of them, upon going to the seminary, will not listen to the advice of their spiritual directors. Surely this cannot continue if our church is to remain credible." He regained his breath amidst hand clapping from the congregation. He hammered home his message with the seriousness it deserved. The nodding heads in the congregation seemed to suggest this.

Turning to the younger priests seated on the two sides of the bishop, Chandiawawa said, "To those of you who have not been exposed yet, what we have seen today should certainly serve as a useful lesson. Whatever you may do in the dark will, at some point, come into the open. It may not be today, not even tomorrow. But eventually it will come to light. Perhaps not in the form of we saw today. It could manifest itself as AIDS contracted somewhere secluded. Should this happen, we will find ourselves in the difficult position of being unable to explain to this very congregation, you see, what has become of you. It sounds harsh to say this now, but all of us know that what I am talking about is already happening. If I am saying it now without any qualms, it is because I am aware that as your parents, we have a responsibility to safeguard your lives. Furthermore, we are not blind to the fact that you are already very few. It will therefore be very bad for the church if we lost all of you. Our congregation needs you in this age of moral decay and suffering unleashed by the AIDS pandemic." By this time, the whole congregation was thoroughly frozen with the truth Chandiawawa dished out. He wiped beads of tears rolling from the corners of his eyes. As he was uttering his last words, he remembered the two priests in the diocese who had died in the same week after being tortured by AIDS for literally a whole year. Although everybody who went to see them

in hospital did not have to ask what they were suffering from because it was obvious, nobody was willing to mention AIDS by its real name.

Chandiwawa could not make the announcements which had taken him to the altar. He lost his composure as he bowed before the Bishop reverently. His Lordship rose from his chair shaken. He advanced towards Chandiwawa and hugged him like a lost but found brother. The Bishop shed tears. When he recovered, he said benediction with a tremulous voice. He was moved by Chandiwawa's words. He was spiritually challenged by his message. His hug was a seal of approval from his high office. The mass ended, leaving everyone wondering, pondering.

As the bishop and his procession of priests and altar boys walked out of the main church and went to the vestry, the choir spontaneously broke into song. The song talked about God's garden. On account of its big size it needed a multitude of workers. Then the song asked the congregation if it would supply the required labor.

Standing like they were transfixed to the floor by a force beyond their own control, the congregation sang with the choir with renewed enthusiasm. Beyond that enthusiasm, a lot of unanswered questions lingered. This church would never be the same. The priests who saw their colleague humiliated had a rude awakening. The children who had received the holy eucharist today went home with more questions than answers. They would pester their parents with a lot of questions on what had happened today. The time of reckoning had indeed come. Priest and parent alike had a lot of homework to do.