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MOVING INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD: THE INCARNATIONAL MINISTRY OF MARY SLESSOR

Carys Parker

History of Christianity II

The good news of Jesus Christ first reached West Africa shores through daring mission pioneers known to pack their meager belongings into coffins because they knew they had roughly six months before they would fall to malaria, yellow fever or some equally fatal disease. As time went on and the Church gained a firmer foothold in the region, mission compounds began to dot the landscape providing places of refuge and safety from the abject poverty and animistic worldview all around. In this way later missionaries were able to retain much of their Western culture while witnessing to the new life that could be found in Christ. It was during this season, in 1876, that Mary Slessor set off from Scotland for the Calabar region of Nigeria.¹ It wouldn't be long before Mary, who would later be known as a ground-moving, unstoppable force of love and perseverance, left the safety of the mission compound to live side by side with "her people". In this way, through Mary, for four transformative decades, "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."²

Looking back no one would have guessed that the blue-eyed, red-headed young girl working twelve hours a day in the mills of Dundee, Scotland, would grow up to be such a memorable figure. Mary began to work in the mills at the age of eleven and much of her incredible character developed in these difficult but formative years.³ For though she was a poor, working girl, plain in appearance and self-effacing, she had a

¹ Carol Christian, *God and one Redhead*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1970), 24.

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), Jn 1:14b.

³ W.P. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar*, (New York: George H. Doran Company, n.d.), 5.

spark that drew people immediately to her.⁴ One boy she used to teach at the mission in Scotland said, “she possessed something we could not grasp, something indefinable.’ It was the glow of the spirit of Christ which lit up her inner life and shone in her face, and which unknown even to herself, was then and afterwards the source of her distinction and her power.”⁵

Mary was the second of seven children⁶ and daughter to a hardworking, devoted Christian mother and an alcoholic father.⁷ As a result of the family’s low income and her father’s unreliability, Mary found herself one of the main providers for the family. She worked hard not only to feed her family, but to hide their shame from their community and church. Church was the only light Mary knew in the darkness of slum life. She was a bright girl, but the long hours of mill life made a formal education impossible. Hungry to learn, Mary would often do without work breaks and even sleep to read any book she could get her hands; she even learned how to weave and read at the same time with a book laid out on the machine. Since she was a little girl, Mary’s imagination and hopes had been drenched in the magnificence and goodness of foreign missions, and as she grew older she became only more dedicated in achieving this dream.⁸ Her mother too had always found the cause noble and had hoped her eldest son might enter the work, but tragically he and several of Mary’s other siblings all died before reaching adult-hood.

⁴ *ibid*, 11.

⁵ *ibid*, 11.

⁶ *ibid*, 1.

⁷ J.J, Ellis. *Mary Slessor*, (Kilmarnock: Publishers of Christian Literature, N/A), 10.

⁸ Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar*, 12-13.

The year 1874 brought news of Dr. David Livingstone's death, thereby sparking a renewed interest in mission work on the "dark continent."⁹ It was this spark and her stabilizing family situation that allowed Mary the room and opportunity to finally become a missionary. Her father had long since passed away, and her two remaining sisters found themselves able to sufficiently provide and care for their mother. Furthermore, Mary too planned on sending even what small earnings she would be given from the mission board home to her mother and sisters. Finally after 14 long years of toil in the dark mills of Dundee, Mary offered her services to the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Board and after a few months of training sailed on August 5th, 1876 for the shores of West Africa.¹⁰

Colonization and slavery had left the coasts of West Africa ravished, and therefore it was not surprising that most often missionaries "found the natives to have been demoralized and degraded by a long period of lawlessness and rapine through which they had passed."¹¹ Many missionaries barely saw these people as human, categorizing them as appalling and savage. It was their duty, as the civilized "white man," to bring education, care, and true religion to a world overrun by dark, devilish ways.¹² Mary moved against this stereotyped savagery from the moment she arrived in Calabar. Though Mary would come across practices and situations she would deem wrong, her deep love and respect for the villagers combined with her incarnational approach would

⁹ *ibid*, 17.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 18.

¹¹ *ibid*, 16.

¹² *ibid*, 16.

ultimately allow her to address those situations from a point of authority and understanding.

Mary was able to enter into the culture while at the same time boldly and fearlessly challenging prejudice, sexism, tribal segregation, disease, witchcraft, spiritual bondage, and horrific killing and burial practices.¹³ She pushed beyond the bounds of comfort and safety and was known to courageously journey deep into the bush in order to reach remote villages, at one point even stripping down to her petticoats and forging her way through mud, pouring rain and rivers, all while suffering from malaria. Nothing but death itself kept Mary from embodying the incarnational example of Jesus who moved into the neighborhood—not just physically but also by identifying with the customs, language, and human struggle of the people in the neighborhood. Slessor's great success in her missionary endeavor was a direct result of following this 2,000-year-old model of Jesus. She chose to leave behind the clean comfort of the mission compound and move into a village hut in order to be with the people. She ate their food and learned their language, she slept without mosquito net or comfort, adopted children, and made the villagers her family, and the village chief, her chief. She drank unfiltered water, walked with bare feet and a bare head, and was drenched in rain and stricken with fever and illness time and time again. She did everything that would have killed any normal white, Scottish person.¹⁴ Mary moved with the village and its way of life, and yet still moved against the ways in which the culture did not exhibit the ways of God.

¹³ J.T. Mueller. *Great Missionaries to Africa*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, N/A), 138.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 142.

Mary realized that the darkness surrounding village life was not due to a lack of religion or principles and laws in their society, but rather the people were overly burdened by a set of religious rules too complex for most missionaries to understand; “they were ruled by canons and conventions as powerful as those of Europe, as merciless as the caste code of India...”¹⁵

Mary’s first period in Africa was spent at the missionary compound in Calabar where daily life was steeped in the symbolic stew of dark superstition, killings, warfare, slavery, pillaging and general overwhelming heathenism. This was the place and these were the people who became her home, and whom she loved so dearly in Christ, that she even spent three years learning the Efik language out of this overflowing desire to know and serve the people well.¹⁶

Mary endured many severe sicknesses during her years in Africa, most of which she would simply press through. However, in 1880 her fever was so severe she was forced home to Scotland to recover. Her return to West Africa however, marked a new position for her in Old Town where much of her success was to take place. For it was in Old Town, under the freedom and leadership of her own will and heart, that Mary was able to incorporate her own missionary methods.¹⁷ Mary was not one to rush God or base her success on a number of converts or churches built. Rather, she went through her day’s work with diligence, befriending the people, caring for their needs and when necessary standing up against harmful village practices—and the rest was left with

¹⁵ Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar*, 26.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 28.

¹⁷ Mueller. *Great Missionaries to Africa*, 139.

God.¹⁸ “So, she realized it was not a case where one could say, “Let there be light,” and light would shine. The work of the mission was rather like building a lighthouse stone by stone, layer by layer, with infinite toil and infinite patience.”¹⁹

One of her main areas of concern and work was the native practice of "twin killing." Twin killing had emerged from the belief that one of the babies had been fathered by an evil spirit due to a great sin that the mother had been found guilty of. Because it could not be known which baby was half evil spirit, both would either have their backs broken, bodies crushed and be thrown into a hole, or they would be left alone in the jungle or in a pot to be eaten by insects or wild beasts.²⁰ Despite the severe horror of such a tradition, Mary understood the fear and superstition that drove the people to take such action but she would not accept the action as it went against the ways of a loving God. This was not an issue of bringing her terms of Western civilization to a “savage” people (as was the method of so many) but of living with people while at the same time living within God’s kingdom. She attempted and often succeeded at saving many twins from death, even adopting some as her own children.

Mary responded in a similar way to the unsettling burial methods of the locals, whose custom it was, when an important villager died, to bury human slaves (and sometimes even wives and other family members) with the deceased so that they would have helpers in the afterlife. Charles Ovens, a missionary who helped in Mary’s work for a season, was the first country-man to witness Mary in action during a crisis. Etim, the

¹⁸ Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar*, 28.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 27.

²⁰ Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar*, 36.

son of the village chief, had been crushed and killed while building his new hut and immediately the village went into a mournful frenzy of preparation which involved raiding nearby villages for prisoners to bury with the deceased. For if a villager of such high standing died suddenly, the tragedy was almost immediately associated with sorcery and curses, which meant someone had to pay for Etim's death.²¹ Mary's brilliant and cunning response in this particular situation embodies her ability to break down spiritual barriers that would mark the rest of her life and ministry in West Africa. Upon Etim's death, the villagers immediately captured prisoners and attempted to use witchcraft to retrieve the dead boy's spirit. Twelve prisoners, including three women with infants, were chained up and prepared to be sacrificed. Although she blatantly disagreed with this burial practice, Mary refrained from using cultural superiority or anger to prove the people wrong and get her way. "Mary knew by now that these things happened out of a deep-ingrained sense of what was necessary—out of what one author on the subject of witchcraft called the 'tragic fallacy' where adherents see a convincing connection between one cause and another effect."²²

Mary chose rather to decorate the corpse in as extravagant a way as possible to divert the restless anger of the people from the prisoners to the splenderness of Etim and the greatness of his passage out from this world. She dressed him in a European suit with an umbrella in one hand (a symbol of a chief's power) and a mirror in the other so that his ghost might enjoy the overall effect.²³ The people were pleased with Mary's actions and though this did not immediately change their minds about human sacrifice,

²¹Christian, *God and one Redhead*, 76.

²² *ibid*, 77.

²³ *ibid*, 77.

it bought her enough favor to maintain a place in the court, thus making sure the prisoners never once would leave her sight to be killed without her knowing. With Charles' help they stood watch day and night, taking shifts, using their own bodies and disapproval as a barrier between the people and the lives of the prisoners. Charles, who was new to the village and its customs, wished to cut the prisoners free but, "Mary had learned that no precipitate act was so effective in these affairs as unrelenting inexhaustible patience."²⁴ So rather, Charles set off under Mary's orders to build the most elaborate coffin he could manage. And it was through this stubborn patience and also her pre-established relationship and respect for the villagers that she reclaimed life after life as prisoners were slowly set free, some through her persistent pleading, others through her physical darting in between the killer and prisoner. Most interesting was the final release of the last prisoner who Mary believed was freed by a villager who had been won over by her example of love and respect for human life. It was a long and drawn out process, but the day of the burial saw only a corpse and a cow going into the silence of the ground—thanks to her persistence.²⁵ "Not a human life was taken, such a thing had never been known before in Okoyong."²⁶ Chief Edem himself ended up thanking the "white ma" for the peaceful outcome and admitted that he himself was weary of many of the old customs.²⁷

Furthermore, in addition to the moral and ethical issues, Mary addressed the political side of village life as well. She was committed to seeing the people succeed in

²⁴ *ibid*, 77.

²⁵ Christian, *God and one Redhead*, 79.

²⁶ *ibid*, 79.

²⁷ *ibid*, 81.

every way possible and this was clearly seen in her dedication and devotion to strengthening their social and economic lives. Mary saw this as an integral part of spiritual missionary work rather than a separate secular entity. Her sense of justice was set against the trade attitude of the Calibar people. They wanted to control the trade with the Europeans and thus endeavored to prevent the inland tribes from doing any face to face trading with factories. Those who attempted stealthy methods to trade and were caught would be mutilated, killed, or both.²⁸ Mary took up the defense of these inland tribes and fought for unrestricted trade between them all. She was so passionate about this that though there was an ongoing war between these tribes she would secretly help the inlanders under cover of night and personally lead them through to the factories to trade safely. "In this way she helped to open up the country. It was not, perhaps, missionary work in the ordinary sense...but it was an effort to break down the conditions that perpetuated wrong and introduce the forces of righteousness and goodwill."²⁹

But Slessor was not just a social worker; she deeply cared about souls as well, and understood that there was no clear-cut division between the sacred and secular concerns. For Mary, and for the African tribes she lived among, everything was spiritual, and so she cared for their physical well-being and security, and fought for justice. Slessor worked tirelessly to break down archaic practices that filled the villages with death and fear, while at the same time respected beauty wherever it could be found in tribal culture. She continued to work diligently to bring better trade routes between villages, care for the sick and save those who would have died as a result of witchcraft. It

²⁸ Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar*, 37.

²⁹ *ibid*, 38.

was through her persistence and loyalty in the issues that mattered most to the locals that trust and admiration for the strange but wonderful “white ma” of Calabar grew. And it was out of this respect that seeds were planted for the future growth of Christianity amongst the people. “She was a missionary after their own heart,”³⁰ and one that the villagers respected and loved as one of their own. At one point Mary even awoke to find that the villagers had, out of their own freewill, gathered the materials and manpower needed to build Mary a larger mission home. It was a task of devotion and respect that evidenced Mary’s impactful missionary approach in the village.

It also must be noted what an accomplishment her mission work was in that time and place — for Mary was not only a foreign white Scot, but also a woman. She stood up against female discrimination within village culture, and at times within the Mission Council itself. She struggled more than a few times to obtain permission from the Council to allow her to continue her work deeper in the Calabar region. “For a women this was a bold and daring venture, and the Mission Council long hesitated before granting her permission.”³¹ But as she moved further into the region of Okoyong, not only the Council, but Scotland itself, began to be filled with an awe and sense of how very capable this unstoppable redhead was. At one point, Mary even single handedly fought off a panther who had stolen one of her adopted babies during the night, thus saving the baby’s life—an action that spoke volumes to her capability and boldness.³² She provided a new concept of womanhood through the empowerment and freedom that comes

³⁰ *ibid*, 38.

³¹ Mueller. *Great Missionaries to Africa*, 140.

³² A.J. Bueltmann. *White Queen of the Cannibals: The Story of Mary Slessor*, (USA: Dodo Press, N/A), 27.

through Christ.³³ The sense that something extraordinary was developing in Okoyong out of Mary's deep involvement with the people stirred the hearts of the faithful in Scotland."³⁴

It has been said that, "for hope to be credible in the future, it must be tangible in the present,"³⁵ and Slessor is among those who embody this philosophy completely. Mary passionately pursued her missionary work out of her love for God and for the sake of His kingdom, but she was not motivated by an emphasis on religious conversion as most of her contemporaries were. As a young girl she had been driven to faith out of fear of hell-fire, but once in the embrace of God, "she found a Kingdom of love and tenderness and mercy, and never throughout her career did she seek to bring anyone into it, as she had come, by the process of shock and fear."³⁶ Mary didn't rely on the fear of hell as a reason to accept the redeeming, reconciling love of God found in Christ Jesus. She believed that with enough time and patience love always wins.

The beauty of Mary's missionary methods were not fully appreciated, for the villagers themselves feared for their "white ma" as she embarked on journey after journey to the inland tribes, often completely alone. They would gather at the river as she entered the rickety canoe, and say, "We will pray for you, but you are courting death."³⁷ On the contrary, Mary saw herself courting life, the only life she wanted to live. For truly life was filled with great suffering and evil, but Mary lived in the belief and security that Jesus had overcome this world, and so she faithfully and boldly walked a land laden with

³³ Mueller. *Great Missionaries to Africa*, 135.

³⁴ Christian, *God and one Redhead*, 81.

³⁵ Ambassador William Seiple

³⁶ Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar*, 3.

³⁷ Mueller. *Great Missionaries to Africa*, 141.

the corpses and cries of suffering with the promise that this too had already been overcome.

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Images:

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