

In memoriam: Vuyani Shadrack Vellem† (25 December 1968 – 4 December 2019)

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Warm heart; sharp mind; frail body – black prophet treading where others do not dare ...

For almost a decade, Prof. Vuyani Vellem sub-edited a special collection on black liberation theology. This year the focus was on *James Hal Cone* (05 August 1938–28 April 2018), who was an American theologian, best known for his advocacy of black theology and black liberation theology. However, this collection was the last which Prof. Vellem could supervise. Vuyani Shadrack Vellem passed away on 04 December 2019. His body was frail for a long time, as a result of cancer. However, his courage did not allow him to give up. Vuyani and his family fought until the end.

Many who embarked on difficult journeys of liberation – not satisfied to take comfort in the status quo but yearning, and willing, to press for deeper change – drew courage from him. Vuyani was a man of God, of tender heart and sharp mind, and simple but robust faith. Once it rubbed off, it was there to stay.

He was the black prophet who refused to use Jesus and Biko to further his career. With great integrity he sought to wrestle with Jesus, in faith, from the black experience, and to grapple with Biko's black consciousness.

He sought to be faithful to Jesus right to the end, in practising an option for the poor. Even in his sickness, he took up the position of pastoring a Presbyterian church in Diepkloof, Soweto – a mere few weeks ago – to stay close to his people. He mourned the shift of consciousness from the lens of the black poor to the black middle class, insisting that we had to see the world through the eyes of those still looking from the outside in (Vellem 2012).

This commitment of his is made evident in the words of Jeanet Sibanda from Khayelitsha:

I am so heartbroken by the passing of Prof Vuyani. I was not his student and yet he was willing to mentor me. Even though he had high standing in the academy, he still found time to support and mentor grass-root movements like eKasi theologies. (Jeanet Sibanda, occupation undisclosed, date unknown)

In the words of Nkosi Gola, as he reflects on what Vuyani has taught him, the informal settlement became a black response of resistance to 'white euphemistic assaults' but, at once, a clue to the future city: 'the proliferation of the zink forest... is the prophetic call from the decks and the margins speaking to how the city could potentially be designed in a liberative manner'.

Vuyani insisted that we are invited into a depth of consciousness that went beyond pigmentation – that invaded the crevices of the soul and the mind, to replace depths of prejudice with new and brave imaginaries. He modelled, to us, the quest for a true humanity.

Not all understood him. Some were nervous around him. Some did not want to understand him. The truth he told, and the anger he held, at injustices in the subtlest and most overt of forms, simply could not be borne by all. It was too heavy. His truth-telling also sat heavily on himself, with his gentle soul.

Yet, others drew courage from him. As Caroline Powell, from our urban cohort in Cape Town, where he became a close friend and mentor, shared, '[t]he few times I was with him he always made me feel less afraid somehow'. She spoke about how 'his gift was received by so many here... He came at a crucial time in our lives... we needed his voice and friendship'. Unfortunately, I think, Jesus was probably right when he said a prophet is not known in his own land. The gift

Note: The Legacy of James Cone, sub-edited by Vuyani Vellem†.

of Vuyani's life and wisdom often travelled far places, transforming hungry souls, whilst back home his gift was yet to be fully embraced.

These words of Archbishop Oscar Romero summarised the gospel Vuyani preached, articulated in his theological work, and embodied through his life choices:

A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed – what gospel is that? (Oscar Romero, Archbishop, date unknown)

As a black theologian of liberation, post-1994, Vuyani was simply in a league of his own. If only people had ears to hear, the courage to be confronted and the capacity to usurp what came from his mind – which were sometimes complex constructs as he sought for the truth – then they would not have been left untransformed. As Ulrike Kistner summarised it, 'Vuyani was a giant of generosity, gentle power, and incisive judgment'. And yet, it was the unsettling nature of the gospel he held dear that disabled some from grasping where Vuyani was urging us to go.

What won some over was not necessarily the clarity of vision, the disruption of prophecy or the complexity of argument, which Vuyani exuded, but it was his generosity of love, the warmth of his hugs and the sincerity of his humanity.

Vuyani was an ecumenical leader contributing theological wisdom and sharing his humanity not only all across South Africa but also around the world. He could hold himself equally well in sophisticated academic discourse, amongst shack dwellers and grass-root leaders of Khayelitsha or Khayamandi, or in the pews of township churches of Alexandra or Diepkloof. His message did not change from one context to the other, but was almost haunting in its congruence.

He related his faith and theology to the experiences of black townships and informal settlements – the land question and the reality of socio-economic exclusion and injustice. Increasingly he worked on the intersections of race, class, gender, land and earth. His theological insights were saturated with African wisdom, an embrace of the 'kraal'

amidst 'mekhukhu' and 'eKasi' (Vellem 2014) – a disruption of Empire's deadly and all-embracing exclusions. He insisted on finding life in the harshest of places – on claiming it, celebrating it and sharing it.

He never gave up on the church, but was committed to its unshackling from colonial, pigmentocratic and culturally oppressive structures, and the death it dealt. Such unshackling – or liberation – required a definite (Vellem 2015):

To unshackle the church, a subversive model of ecclesiology is the starting point wherever it could be identified. For a Black Theology of liberation, the subversive character of the church is in the memory of the miserable, the condition of blackness. (p. 5)

Without deliberately incarnating itself in the memory and experience of 'the miserable', Vuyani held, 'ecclesiology in South Africa remains pie in the sky' (Vellem 2015). This is a foundational challenge of Vuyani to the theology we do: are we locating ourselves in the experience of 'the miserable', or do we peddle 'pie in the sky' constructs with little liberatory substance? '[T]he subversive character of the church is in the memory of the miserable, the condition of blackness'. (Vellem 2015:n.p.)

We are eternally grateful to Phumeza, his wife, and Vovo and Philly, his daughters, and also to his mother and extended family, for gifting us with Vuyani, for sharing him with the world.

We who remain have the responsibility to delve deep into the wells of wisdom and thought that Vuyani bestowed us with. If we want to be faithful followers of Christ in 2020 in South Africa, we have to discard the prophetic disruptions and hopeful imaginaries that Vuyani articulated, at our own peril. We cannot afford to do that if we are on the side of life!

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