
Born from lament: *Alastair McIntosh's* Thought for the Week

*'Our true battlefield is
first the soul.'*

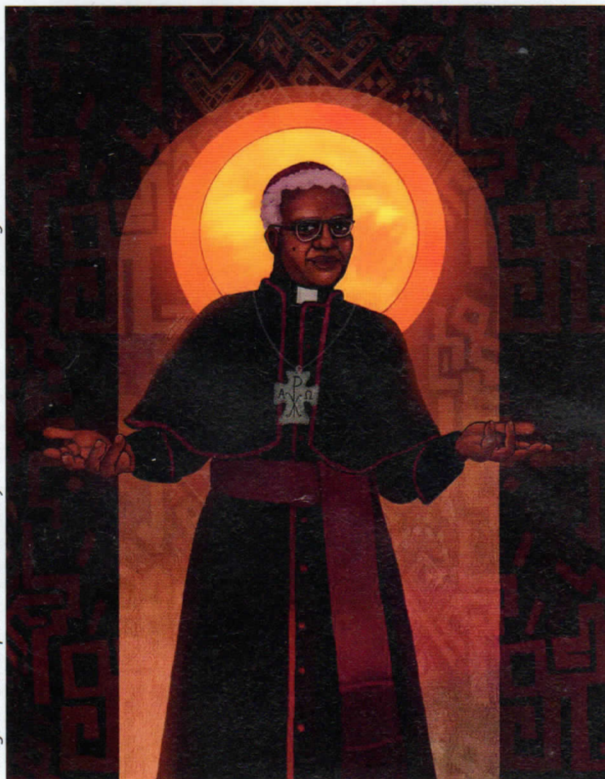


Image of Christophe Munzihirwa by Dani M Jimenez for Friends of Ignatius

There are things that can be seen only with eyes that have cried.'

That's a line from a book called *Born from Lament*, which I've been reading over the New Year. The book is by Emmanuel Katangole, a professor of theology and peace studies at the University of Notre Dame, who suggests that, in the midst of suffering, hope takes the form of 'arguing' and 'wrestling' with God. But the line itself is from Christophe Munzihirwa Mwene Ngabo, a Catholic priest from Democratic Republic of the Congo, who in 1996 was tortured and then murdered by Rwandan soldiers, after a life of advocacy for human rights.

Human rights, and with them, the rights that protect nations, are embedded in international law. As we embark on 2026, these are what risk being unravelled as the White House announced this week that it will consider, 'utilizing the US military' to take Greenland away from Denmark.

These are distressing times, for international law exists to help the nations to live in peace.

In the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths, the law of Moses was written down on Mount Sinai on tablets of stone. Christians call it the Old Covenant, mapping out the paths of righteousness, or right relationships, with God and one another.

'To face the world in distressing times, despair can be too shallow an emotion. It has no transformative potential.'

But the Hebrew prophets knew that words alone would never be sufficient. They looked towards fulfilment in a New Covenant, what Christians call 'the Way, the Truth and the Life', written not on stone or statute books, but on the beating hearts of every one of us.

To face the world in distressing times, despair can be too shallow an emotion. It has no transformative potential; it lacks the imaginative hope, the spiritual vision that can be 'born from lament'.

'We cannot transform the social system,' said Munzihirwa, 'without reforming ourselves first.'

'Our true battlefield is first the soul, the spirit of man'; and so, he concluded, 'The strongest countries are those [that] have succeeded in reconciling differences.'

An icy blast is blowing down from Greenland this new year. But it need not leave us frozen to the marrow and blinded by despair. Remember those heartwarming words of the martyred Munzihirwa: 'There are things that can be seen only with eyes that have cried.'

Enfolded from lament, is born a deeper hope. ●

Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting.

In view of the importance of Katangole's book, and the power of love in the face of extreme violence expressed in his chapter on Munzihirwa, I have taken the liberty of scanning the chapter and storing it at:

<https://alastairmcintosh.com/general/resources/2017-Lament-Katangole-on-Munzihirwa.pdf>

A second item, also originally a BBC Radio Scotland "Thought for the Day", is now also added here, see page below.

Agents of change: Alastair McIntosh's Thought for the Week

*'That's a key word,
agency.'*

The impacts of the US-Israel war with Iran will touch us all. I myself have been on edge as I'm expecting a delegation of grassroots leaders to arrive from Indonesia, but their flight from Jakarta to Glasgow, via Dubai, got cancelled.

Hopefully, they'll get here through Shanghai and Amsterdam.

We'll then head up to Stornoway, to exchange experience with both the West Harris and the Galson Estate trusts, on how community ownership strengthens people's agency.

That's a key word, agency. It's the capacity of groups and individuals to shape their lives, and not just be the passive recipients of decisions made by others.

In Scotland's 500 or so land trusts, local people have relatively high traction in local places. But what if you've got no traction in life? What if your wheels are spinning round but only kicking dust?

The other day I led an online meeting with a church in Minnesota, the United Methodists. There were more than fifty people at the event, mostly white, and from a town that's big on MAGA (Make America Great Again). But this church is flat out in solidarity with vulnerable people: mostly towards Latino people who are frightened to leave their homes amid widespread reporting of people being

dragged out of their cars by ICE officers, and people thrown into detention centres, with their families split apart.

We spent two hours on Zoom discerning where the church's agency might lie. If you'd like you can see our session, 'The Battlefield is in the Soul', at <https://tinyurl.com/2st45r6y>. For sure, for church members to reach their president is beyond their current sphere of influence. But what about – and this goes for us all – their neighbours?

'Love your neighbour, and love your enemies too: pray for, and do good to those who persecute you,' said Jesus (Matthew 5:43-44 and Luke 6:27-28). And there you see the agency come into play. Then as the twenty-third Psalm has it in the Scottish Psalter (*The Psalms of David in Meeter*, 1650). 'My table thou hast furnished / in presence of my foes.'

Emmanuel Katongole's reading of that text would have it (in his *Born from Lament: The theology and politics of hope in Africa*, 2017) that only if we're saved from feeding hate with hate, from giving violence home advantage, can we avoid taking on the likeness of the traits we most deplore.

Only if we get around the table, in the presence of our foes. ●

Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting.



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