

ICON OF THE MONTH

‘There is always something new out of Africa,’ said the ancient Greek proverb. But now that all the exotica has been explored or expropriated, too many of us feel that all that comes out of Africa is depressingly familiar: war, corruption, poverty, famine, disease and natural disaster. Across the Dark Continent, from Algeria to Zimbabwe, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse appear to have a free rein.

Somehow, this vast territory seems to invite such generalisations. ‘Africa is a scar upon the conscience of the world,’ said Tony Blair, commendably, the other day. Even as he inflated – let’s be honest – a dozen states maybe into ‘the world’, so he compressed 47 countries and 800 million people into a single entity. We have been tarring 11,677,240 square miles with the same brush for centuries.

The story of Africa (to generalise still more) has always been written by outsiders. Even the Egyptian pharaohs are best known to the world through their (unsympathetic) write-up in the Hebrew scriptures – and who now remembers the great cities of Timbuktu and Mali that thrived even before Tudor London began to stink?

For most of us, civilisation did not even reach the interior until its ‘discovery’ by Europeans, and their assumption of ‘the white man’s burden’. The value of Africa was determined by overseas markets, in diamonds, ivory, gold and human beings – for even the fate of its peoples was sealed by an obscure verse in the

Christians’ Bible in which Noah curses Ham to be a slave.

To this day, different interests, all of them foreign, shape our perceptions of the continent. The media work on our prejudices – Africa is wild, Africa is romantic, Africa is the place where ‘the dark gods of the blood’ still rule. The aid agencies have their own reasons to



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present a picture of hapless, helpless need. Even Live Aid, in its spasm of angry sympathy for the starving people of Ethiopia, adopted as its logo a map of the entire continent, curiously set between a knife and fork as if it were the item for (our) consumption.

And still the idea is ingrained in us that Africa is primitive – stuck at an earlier stage in human development, less civilised, less ‘developed’, less adult than the West. Monsters like Idi Amin (keeping his wife’s corpse in the fridge) and Hastings Banda (feeding his enemies to the crocodiles) confirm our suspicions of savagery – but perhaps, too, the apparent innocent simplicity of men such as Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela play to our perceptions of the childlike.

Curiously, modern science connects the continent with ‘first things’ in a different way. Palaeontologists say that the earliest hominids walked in the Great Rift Valley, and geneticists tell us that in Africa the gene pool is far deeper than anywhere else on earth. If Adam was an actual man (and Kenya, as it happens, is famous for the red earth that his name may allude to), he and his wife, ‘the mother of all who live’, were surely black.

No matter. It has been Africa’s misfortune for more than two millennia that it lies next-door to Europe. In the past, it has been a temptation. Today, it is a rebuke. In the future, it will be a threat. Only 50 years ago, there were just two Africans to every five Europeans. In 50 years’ time, the ratio is likely to be three to one.

For our global strategists now, the buzzphrase is ‘enlightened self-interest’: don’t let Africa go down the pan or it may take us with it. For Christians, the imperative is more simple: Love your neighbour as yourself. **Huw Spanner**