

**“Now Praise We Great and Famous Men”: Homiletic Reflections in Remembrance of Kofi
Annan
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Preamble

But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:16).

My emphasis at this Remembrance Service is on the part of the text from the epistle to the Hebrews that says: “God is not ashamed to be called their God.” It is a great privilege and honor to be tasked to deliver a homily at a memorial service for such an illustrious son of the world of international politics and diplomacy, Kofi Annan. In this colossus of a human being, Ghana has been honored with the legacy of a great man. Kofi Annan was a man of solid worth. His calm demeanor, decency, composure in public speaking and wisdom in articulating the most complex of socio-economic and political issues in simple language with unsophisticated vocabulary devoid of insults and cynicism, appealed to all well-meaning persons who encountered him. Against the backdrop of developments in Ghana, if such a one had gotten actively involved in local Ghanaian politics, we would have run him down with insults of the unprintable category and destroyed his reputation. God saved him from that!

That the man whose memory we celebrate today accumulated unsolicited accolades ranging from that which was conferred on him by the Asantehene, Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu II, to honorary degrees from some of the Ivy League universities in this world, is testimony to the fact that we had in Kofi Annan no ordinary mortal and about whom we shall continue to speak and write for years to come. When in 2002 the Asantehene conferred the rare title of *Busumuro* on Kofi Annan, the reason included his “selflessness and contributions to humanity and the promotion of peace throughout the world.” *Busumuro* Kofi Annan was a world citizen. His acceptance speech on that occasion included the words: “I share the honor with all the people of the world through whose contributions we are able to get somewhere.” God is not ashamed of people like that because they represent the spirit of Christ by serving their generations and thereby, make the world a better place than they found it. Those who wish to know how much of a man of substance he was, must get to read Kofi Annan’s Autobiography titled, *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace* (London: Allen Lane, 2012). Of his commitment as the Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan wrote: “On taking office, I realized that we had to be more creative...I knew we needed leadership of a different kind to renew the UN’s mission for development—and to do it

in an innovative, energetic way, engaging with all forces in the private and public sectors to join the struggle” (p. 216).

Celebrating an African Icon

In an age in which everything is contrived and where people pay money for the conferment of honors of various kinds, degrees and traditional titles of all sorts, Kofi Annan remained an embodiment of genuinely earned accolades. He earned his place in history as Secretary General of the UN, Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a Nobel Prize Laureate alongside a stalwart like Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In my own vocation as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I have found it disturbing that even pastors, priests and ministers of the gospel, clamor for undeserved and dubious ecclesiastical honors to make up for the short falls that they feel in their personal worlds. Kofi Annan carried himself well with his very personality and demeanor serving as a public critique of those who seek honor by mundane and pecuniary means. These thoughts were not far from the mind of Jesus Christ when he chastised the religious leaders of his day for seeking public acclaim through empty externalities that amounted to nothing but the pursuit of vain glory. We read in Matthew 23:5-7,

They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market places, and to have people call them rabbi.

In contrast to this sort of vain and carnal pursuit of forced and contrived public recognition by the religious leaders of the day, which has been reinvented for our times, what Kofi Annan represented is what Jesus said in Matthew 23:11, “The greatest among you will be your servant.” He was the very embodiment of this sort of servant leadership and in spite of his many challenges during his tenure as Secretary General of the UN Kofi Annan was able to maintain the sort of private and public respect and dignity that made him an icon of a Ghanaian in world history. He notes in *Interventions*, the book I have just referred to:

I have always said that the UN needs to be a United Nations not just of governments but of peoples, as it is from people, not governments that all power is ultimately derived (p. 216).

I did not know Kofi Annan personally. My closest encounter with him was in the year 2004. I was on sabbatical at Harvard University’s Center for the Study of World Christianity when he came in to speak at the Graduation of the University that year. He was still in office then as the Secretary General of the UN. Naturally, those of us who were there as Africans and in particular

Ghanaians, felt very proud that a son of our soil had become one of the most significant personalities in the history of world politics and diplomacy. He had come under pressure from certain world political power blocks at the time but in the midst of what seemed extreme provocation, and against the backdrop of the Iraqi invasion by the allied forces led by the UK and the USA, Kofi Annan stated his position and made his points very firmly but in very calm and gentle tones. In the end, he was proven right as we are now told that the invasion of Iraq was based on something called “false intelligence” and how the world powers got it so wrong is for history to judge. To say that his Home Call is a loss to any particular country or even continent would be to do great injustice to the influence of Kofi Annan, both during his time as the world number one diplomat and even in retirement.

Now Praise We Great and Famous Men

We can today say of Kofi Annan, what the biblical epistle to the Hebrews says of those who served God and their generation in biblical times: “...Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.” The list of people about whom it is said that “God [was] not ashamed” includes such saintly characters as Enoch who “walked with God.” However, the list also includes some whose pasts were not that glorious such as Abraham, Moses, Samson and Rahab. Those listed in God’s Hall of Fame were not infallible. Abraham, the custodian of the Old Testament covenant had an issue with his housemaid; Moses was a murderer; Samson made terrible moral choices that led to the compromise of his charisma and Rahab in her previous life, was a prostitute. How did such persons end up with pride of place in God’s Hall of Fame? The answer lies in Hebrews 11:6, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who diligently seek him.” These persons about whom the Bible speaks may have had their failures and weaknesses but in the midst of human vulnerabilities, frailties and fallibilities, they served their generation with the gifts, graces, talents, abilities and potentialities that God graciously granted them.

To that end, it would amount some error of judgment to present another human being, in spite of all his achievements in idioms that may suggest that we are celebrating a perfect man. What we are doing is memorializing the heritage of a man who placed all his gifts and graces on the altar of divine wisdom and served without taking into consideration any material rewards that the world had to offer. In a world obsessed with material things, power, titles, public recognition, name them, I find it paradoxical that I am calling Kofi Annan’s name without the prefix “doctor”, “professor”, “nana” or anything of the sort. And yet, he did not only receive his fair share of honorary doctorates from around the world, but he was also a Fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences. We ought to keep uppermost in our minds that we are also celebrating a Nobel Prize Laureate. I, like many of my more senior colleague fellows, feel exceptionally proud to belong to an academy to which this illustrious son of Ghana also

belonged. When I received the letter asking me to bring some biblical reflection at Kofi Annan's memorial, the words that crossed my mind immediately were the first lines of William George Tarrant's hymn, "Now Praise We Great and Famous Men." The second stanza speaks directly to the reason why a Remembrance Service of this kind is relevant:

Praise we the wise and brave and strong,
Who graced their generation:
Who helped the right, and fought the wrong,
And made our folk a nation.

In my personal international travels and lecturing, it has become virtually impossible to explain my name, Kwabena, without references to the names of at least three other Ghanaians: first, is Kofi Annan; second, the Kwame Bediako and third Mercy Amba Oduyoye, both outstanding Ghanaian theologians. When people have asked what my name "Kwabena" meant, I have explained that it is the Akan name for a Tuesday born male child. To drum the meaning home, I would then add, perhaps you know the most popular Ghanaian in world history, Kofi Annan. His name "Kofi" means a Friday born male child and then I would proceed to refer to the two other examples who are both mentors of mine, Kwame Bediako and Amba Oduyoye as bearing Saturday born male and female names respectively.

Today is about Kofi Annan and we celebrate his heritage with pride because he represents a heritage that each of us are happy and proud to identify with. He has played his part to make the world a better place than he found it and today, it has become impossible to talk about world peacekeeping without reference to the Kofi Annan Peacekeeping Center. One only needs to read the introduction to the preface of his book, *Interventions*, to appreciate how he cared about peace and stability in the world:

What do we stand for as a global community? What are the responsibilities for our common fate in a world that is simultaneously coming together and coming apart—and how do we exercise those responsibilities? How do we strike the balance between growth and development, equality and opportunity, human rights and human security? (p. ix).

These questions and his responses to them help us to understand why eventually he set up the Kofi Annan Peacekeeping Center that we are all now very proud of:

It was vital that we integrate development, security, military, and political activity in our interventions in war-torn countries. The motivation was not just the need for an integrated effort in peacebuilding: it was recognition of the intimate connection between economic development and the resolution and prevention of civil wars (p. 220).

Today many people—soldiers, police, nurses, doctors, engineers, ministers of the gospel and many others—come from the North and South, East and West into our country Ghana where, Kofi Annan, having left us this monumental legacy of an institution of higher learning, acquire skills in the art and science of peacekeeping and diplomacy—skills that must remain at the core of stability and harmony in a world otherwise characterized by greed, chaos and the pursuit of selfish interests to the detriment of the poor, weak and marginalized of our societies. The world was treading a path of destruction. Kofi Annan showed us how to make it better. In his memory then, we can sing:

Praise we the glorious names we know;
And they—whose names have perished,
Lost in the haze of long ago—
In silent love be cherished.

In peace their sacred ashes rest,
Fulfilled their day's endeavor;
They blest the earth, and they are blest
Of God and man forever.

Human beings make their contributions to the world during our lifetimes but that which endures are the positive influences that we leave on others. Thus, the famous men and women of Hebrews 11, are described as people “who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (verses 33-34). These are what the art and science of diplomacy are about, and that is, “administering justice and putting foreign armies to flight” by brokering peace treaties through dialogue and negotiations and making sure that the world becomes stable for progress and development. Speaking of these efforts in his work as the Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan wrote in *Interventions*:

As often as we succeeded in alleviating suffering or halting a conflict, we found ourselves powerless to do so before far too great a toll had already been taken. As the first secretary-general elected from the ranks of the organization, I came to office with a hard-won appreciation for the limits of our powers, but equally determined that we would not simply give up in the face of setbacks—that we could do better and would do so in the name of the peoples for whom the Charter of the United Nations was written (p. x).

That is what Kofi Annan stood for and I believe he died for those convictions too. One of my favorite lines from this book comes from what is written beside a picture of Kofi Annan as a

recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize: “I began my Nobel Peace Prize address imagining the fate of a girl born in Afghanistan that day and urged the world to unite around the idea that sovereignty should never be considered a shield for gross violations of human rights” (see pictures between pp. 192-193). That is what you call a man of peace!

Conclusion: To Everything, there is a Season

Indeed, to everything, there is a season. Kofi Annan was a man of “his season”, that is the opportune times that God gave him to serve his generation and beyond. The closing words of chapter 11 of the epistle to the Hebrews are these:

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect (verses 39-40).

Ultimately, perfection belongs to God. On this side of eternity, we will continue to “wrestle with sins, doubts and fears.” What this should inspire us to do, is to recognize the seasons of time and the opportunities they hold for us and make our contributions, wherever we are called to serve. These thoughts bring me to the words of the wise man, “to everything, there is a season.” There are two words for “time” in the Greek, *Kronos* which is real time on the clock and *Kairos*, which refers to opportune time. Kofi Annan recognized his *Kairos* moments, those difficult periods in his working life that required of him to engage with governments and nations in the running of the affairs of our world:

So, praise we great and famous men,
The fathers named in story
And praise the Lord who now as then
Reveals in man his glory

May the Lord of all grace comfort Kofi Annan’s wife Nane, his immediate and extended family, friends—international and local—and may his heritage be eternally blessed. In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.