



Liberation

**Now and Then
20 years after February 1990**

SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

THE DIVINE INTENTION

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, General Secretary of the SACC from 1978 to 1984

In 1982 the apartheid government sought to close down the South African Council of Churches by calling it to answer for its activities before a Judicial Commission of Enquiry under the Chairmanship of Justice Eloff. My presentation, on September 1st of that year, made it clear to the Commission that the Council was obliged to act in the way it did in obedience to the demands of the gospel. In what I called 'The Divine Intention' I said:

My purpose is to demonstrate from the Scriptures and from hallowed Christian tradition and teaching that what we are as the South African Council of Churches, what we say and what we do, that all of these are determined not by politics or any other ideology. We are what we are in obedience to God and in response to the gracious Gospel of His Son our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We owe ultimate loyalty not to any human authority however prestigious or powerful, but to God and to His Son - our Lord Jesus Christ alone from whom we obtain our mandate. We

must obey the divine imperative and word whatever the cost. Everything we do or say and everything we are must be tested by whether it is consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ or not, and not by whether it is merely expedient or even acceptable to the government of the day or whether it is popular.

...

I will show that the central work of Jesus was to effect reconciliation between God and us and also between man and man. ... I will want to show that the Christian Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord is subversive of all injustice and evil, oppression and exploitation and that God is on the side of the oppressed and the downtrodden, that He is the liberator God of the Exodus, who leads His people out of every kind of bondage, spiritual, political, social and economic and nothing will thwart Him from achieving the goal of the liberation of all His people and the whole of His creation.

...

And so God sent His Son to effect reconciliation, to bring about the

atonement that would achieve the unity, harmony, peace, justice, fellowship, friendliness, compassion, wholeness which were His intention for His creation from the very beginning. St Paul says: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." (2 Corinthians 5: 19)

...

It is because as St Paul declares: "God has reconciled us men to Himself through Christ, and he has enlisted us in this service of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5: 18 - 21) We are engaged in the ministry of proclaiming the love of God for all His people through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord and to proclaim the message of reconciliation which is another aspect of unity, of peace, of harmony, of justice, of compassion, of love, of brotherliness.

...

The only separation the Bible knows is between believers on the one hand and unbelievers on the other. Any other kind of separation, division, disunity is of the devil. It is evil and from sin. Do I still need to demonstrate that apartheid is evil after all that I have said about the centrality for the Bible of unity and reconciliation? Apartheid is evil for at

least three reasons:

a) The Bible declares right at the beginning that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. I showed why this fact endows each person with a unique and infinite value, a person whose very hairs are numbered. And what makes any human being valuable therefore is not any biological characteristic. No, it is the fact that he/she is created in the image and likeness of God. Apartheid exalts a biological quality which is a total irrelevancy, to the status of what determines the value, the worth of a human being. ...

b) Secondly, the chief work that Jesus came to perform on earth can be summed up in the word "reconciliation". I have already demonstrated that in what has gone before. He came to restore human community and brotherhood which sin destroyed. He came to say that God had intended us for fellowship, for *koinonia*, for togetherness, without destroying our distinctiveness, our cultural otherness. Apartheid quite deliberately denies and repudiates this central act of Jesus and says we are made for separateness, for disunity, for enmity, for alienation, which we have shown to be the fruits of sin. For this reason

alone apartheid is totally unChristian and unbiblical for it denies not just a peripheral matter but a central verity of the Christian faith. ...

c) Thirdly, when moralists are uncertain about the moral quality of an act, etc. then they will ask what the consequences of that particular act or policy or whatever are. If the consequences are evil, then the act being evaluated is declared to be evil. Apartheid treats human beings, God's children, as if they were less than this. It manipulates persons and treats them as if they were means to some end.

...

God declared that He is a jealous God, brooking no rival whatsoever: "I am the Lord your God and you shall have no other gods beside Me." But He was and is the Lord of all life. When Jesus came and found people who were sick or hungry or naked - He did not send them away with a pious "we will pray about it". No, He fed the hungry, He healed the sick, He cleansed the lepers, He drove out demons. And in doing all of these things, He was demonstrating the presence of His Father's Kingdom. (Luke 11: 14 - 20)... I want to underline that these are thoroughly political, thoroughly

mundane things. If we are to say that religion cannot be concerned with politics then we are really saying that there is a substantial part of human life in which God's writ does not run. If it is not God's then whose is it? Who is in charge if not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?

...

Our God does not permit us to dwell in a kind of spiritual ghetto, insulated from real life out there. Jesus used to go out and be alone with God in deep prayerful meditation, but He did not remain there. He refused to remain on the Mount of Transfiguration, but descended to the valley beneath to be involved with healing of the possessed boy. He was the man for others, prodigal in the giving of Himself precisely and only because He was a man of prayer, a man of God. That is our paradigm. He did not use religion as a form of escapism.

...

Our religion is concerned about the here and now because that determines to a large extent the hereafter. Time in the Hebrew Christian understanding has eternal significance and that is why human lives and human decisions are important. All life belongs to God.

...

God can't help it. He always takes sides. He is not a neutral God. He takes the side of the weak and the oppressed. I am not saying so. I have shown it to be so in the Bible. Where there is injustice, exploitation and oppression then the Bible and the God of the Bible are subversive of such a situation. Our God, unlike the pagan nature gods, is not a God sanctifying the status quo. He is a God of surprises, uprooting the powerful and unjust to establish His Kingdom. We see it in the entire history of Israel. I want to say what I said before on another occasion: the Bible is the most revolutionary, the most radical book there is. If a book had to be banned, then it ought to have been the Bible, by those who rule unjustly and as tyrants. Whites brought us the Bible and we are taking it seriously. We are involved with God in His activity to set us all free from all that enslaves us, from all that makes us less than what He intended us to be. He sets us free to enjoy the glorious liberty of the children of God. And all our work is consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of God's love and God's compassion and God's reconciling and forgiving grace

I said that in 1982 and would say the same thing today in relation to the work and witness of the Church of Jesus Christ. Apartheid may have disappeared as we prophesied, but there remain many challenges that divide God's people in this nation and the world. People still go to bed hungry while others wallow in the riches created through greed and status; people remain oppressed by poverty and joblessness; many are frustrated at the lack of fulfilment in the promises of housing, education and healthcare. The poor still weep quietly while the rich and powerful proclaim their entitlement to wealth. The challenge to proclaim and live out in daring actions of faith a life-changing gospel for all of God's people still stands before God's Church. In resisting that challenge and ignoring its demands we bring shame to the name of God and God's Church. God remains a liberating God, a God of the poor and oppressed and our task is not complete until all God's people know that liberation and freedom from oppression as a practical experience in their lives. So be it!

HOW LIBERATED ARE YOU?

Eddie Makue, General Secretary of the SACC

The national and international campaign for the release of Nelson Mandela served to raise awareness about the many legitimate, recognised and respected South African leaders who were incarcerated in apartheid prisons. The Release Mandela Campaign (RMC) was not only about the release of Madiba, but applied to all political prisoners. The SACC provided support to the families and dependants who had relatives incarcerated due to their faithfulness to their conscience and love for justice. We proudly recall the sterling services provided by SACC's Dependant's Conference Department. Such support included monthly grants, assistance with travelling to prisons and laying-to-rest loved-ones who died in exile or in the course of the liberation struggle.

The theological imperatives that informed the SACC interventions were respected by all peace-loving people, legitimate political leaders and adherents of the liberation movement. It was at all times the

SACC's interpretation and understanding of the Bible that informed its interventions. We can today stand tall and be proud of this tradition.

The struggle against apartheid was fought on many fronts. SACC had first-hand information about the scores of South Africans who fled the country, either for fear of their safety and the security of their families and/or to contribute to the struggle from outside South Africa's borders. Exile was definitely not an easy choice and life. But wherever South African political exiles found themselves they were generally welcomed and well received by local communities and governments. Conflicts with locals were there, but were limited and seldom escalated into physical violence. We are forever grateful to those peoples, countries and governments who provided safe and secure places of abode for destitute South Africans.

This appreciation is increased when one considers the sacrifices that often accompanied such hospitality

and expressions of our common humanity. Sacrifices were forced upon our hosts by the apartheid 'security forces' and its allies. Such actions failed to deter our supporters from carrying on with the struggle against apartheid, their commitment could be located within the hearts and minds of ordinary people. The bridge built on 'people to people solidarity' enabled peace-loving people to cross from oppression and persecution to spaces of freedom. It created opportunities for victims of apartheid violence to find refuge – however uncomfortable the conditions might have been.

All of us who experienced this terrible period in our history have reason to be ashamed and embarrassed at the way that a small group of South Africans today treats foreign nationals before our eyes. The recent xenophobic attacks that plagued various parts of our beloved country can never be justified. As we drop our heads in ignominy we ought to reflect on how we were treated while we were in exile.

When we today celebrate the release of political prisoners and give thanks for the life and example of Madiba;

when we celebrate the unbanning of political organisations and the return of our exiled leaders, we have to engage in introspection. Such introspection goes beyond how we treat the foreigners in our midst. History requires that we also question the values, ethics and norms that informed our liberation struggle and resulted in these gracious celebrations.

Our humanity and the humanity of this generation will be gauged by the ways in which we respect the humanity of other people. Do we still believe that we are all created in the image of God? Do we still believe that “muntu ngumuntu ngabantu, Botho Batho and Ubuntu” have any significance? While those of us who believe in these African and Christian values are a vast majority, we have to do more in promoting, asserting and protecting them. Our liberation is not merely a personal matter and can therefore not be complete while others are in bondage. As we said during our dark days: “Our liberation is inextricably bound to the freedom of others.”

So: HOW LIBERATED ARE YOU TODAY?

THE BIRD IN OUR HANDS:

Challenges Facing the Ecumenical Church in South Africa Today

Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, Executive Director for Research, UNISA and President of the SACC

1. Long Long Ago...

Every culture has a version of the story of a group of noisy, naughty and stuck-up youngsters who hatch up a trick with which to confront the village sage. In most versions the sage is wrinkled, old, female and black. Other versions add that she was also as blind as a bat. Yet other versions present the sage in the form of a tall, hunch-back, half-blind, toothless and walking-stick dependent old man. Invariably, the toffee-nosed youngsters are a bunch of urban boys.

The arrogant youngsters pitch up at the door of the hut of the sage in a remote village, armed with the enthusiasm of youth and a cruel trick. The famous sage is still sleeping. The aim of the youngsters is to demonstrate that the sage is a fake. They also aim to have a bit of fun and to enjoy a good laugh at his/her expense. The leader of our pack of young pranksters unveils the trick: One of boys has a bird in his hands.

The sage need neither know nor guess which one of the boys has the bird. The sage need only tell the boys whether the bird in their hands is alive or dead. A foolproof trick or so the boys think. Should the old man say the bird is dead, they would release it into his face. If he says it is alive, they will squeeze it dead immediately and then shove its lifeless body into the hands of the old man.

The old man stares blankly past the youngsters. For a long time he is quiet. His wilted hand gently strokes his bald head and his failing eyes twitch visibly. A sense of triumph starts to well up in the boys. They battle to keep the triumphal giggles bubbling inside their chests. Finally, the old man speaks in a slow and measured stammer: 'I do not know whether the bird in your hands is alive or dead. I cannot see it. Nor can I see you. But I hear you. What I know is what you have told me, namely that you have a bird in your hands. The

bird is in *your* hands.' Suddenly, the boys sit up and listen. 'Not only do you have the bird in your hands, you also have the power and the opportunity to let the bird live or to kill it. Which shall you choose and which have you chosen already?' Now the boys are quiet. Their mission lies in ruin. One by one, they leave quietly.

2. Our Elder Sages

Let us suppose that the old sage in the story was an ecumenical church leader and we – this generation of ecumenists and church leaders – were the naughty youngsters. Whom shall we make the old sage? Let us not worry about whether our chosen sage is still alive or has passed on. Let us not worry whether our sage is male or female, South African or a citizen of another country. The old sage could be Phillip Porter, the great leader of the World Council of Churches. It could be José Chipenda, the long-serving general secretary of All Africa Conference of Churches. Or shall we nominate the indefatigable

campaigner for women's dignity in the church, Mercy Oduyoye? Come, let us suppose that the old sage in our story is Beyers Naudé¹ – that old fearless cleric who chose love when most around him were hating, courage when most around him were fearful. We could install into this character the person of Brigalia Bam. Our sage could be Manas Buthelezi or Khoza Mgojo. How about Emma Mashinini as the sage in our own story? Or shall we make it the soft-spoken, but fiercely brave Wolfram Kistner? Sheena Duncan? Virginia Gcabashe? Mary Mxadana? Sophie Mazibuko? Anne Rathebe? Thembi Mutloatse? Could the old sage be Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu?

Imagine us, this current generation; arrogant as we are about our few achievements; presumptuous in our eagerness to show them; pompously ignorant of the salient lessons of history; ungrateful for and dismissive of the sacrifices of those who went before us; naïve if not downright clueless about the rigour of Christian

¹*Beyers Naudé: Acting General Secretary from 1984 to 1987, Brigalia Bam: General Secretary from 1994 to 1997, Manas Buthelezi: President from 1983 to 1990, Khoza Mgojo: President from 1993 to 1995, Emma Mashinini: Justice Programme of the Church of the Province of SA (now Anglican Church of SA), Wolfram Kistner: Director of Justice and Reconciliation Division, Sheena Duncan and Virginia Gcabashe: Vice Presidents from 1987 to 1993, Mary Mxadana: Director of Interchurch Aid, Sophie Mazibuko: Co-Director of Dependant's Conference, Anne Rathebe: Director of African Bursary Fund, followed by Thembi Mutloatse, Desmond Tutu: General Secretary from 1978 to 1984.*

witness in a globalizing world of plurality, rights and violence. Imagine us, standing at the door of one of the great leaders of the ecumenical church.

3. The Bird in Our Hands

Suppose the bird in our hands was the ecumenical church and the broader ecumenical movement. Consider that the bird in our hands has been bequeathed to us by this assemblage of illustrious ecumenical sages. Informed and inspired by their faith in the God of liberation, they campaigned for the WCC's Programme to Combat Racism. They campaigned for sanctions against apartheid South Africa. These leaders of yesteryear marched in protest, hand in hand with members of other religions. They campaigned for the release of jailed political leaders and inspired thousands to do the same. For these and many other brave initiatives, some of our ecumenical sages fled into exile while others were thrown into jail. For the bird in our hands they have given their lives.

4. Our Approach

Our approach to the sage of our choice will be marked by a sense of urgency. Unlike the naughty

youngsters in the fable, our question will not be the playful 'Is the bird dead or alive?'. Our situation is a little more dire. It does not allow much space for fun and games. The bird in our hands is not looking well. Our question will be 'Will the bird survive?'. Like the sisters of Lazarus – Mary and Martha – approaching Jesus, we will be going to report to the sage of our choice that the object of our mutual love is sick. Ours will be a desperate appeal for intervention. Like the bird in the fable, the ecumenical church is both fragile and vulnerable, especially at this point in its history. We will be desperate for a reassuring word for we are most aware that there is no guarantee that this bird will survive. History tells us that the bird can die and be extinct in regions and areas where it once thrived. Think of the Christian Europe of the medieval and enlightenment ages. Where is it now? Think of Christian North Africa in the first few centuries. Where is it now? And yet, except for agreement about the sickness of the bird in our hands, there will be among us many views as to what it is that makes our beloved bird so ill. United in our diagnosis of the problem we will nevertheless be deeply divided as to the causes of the problem.

5. The Challenges Discussed

Sensing our state of united-disunity, our chosen sage might throw a few questions back at us. She/he may ask: Is the heart of your bird still beating? Is the bird still breathing? What have you done for the bird lately? When last did you feed the bird? Are the wings of the bird in working condition? Come to think of it, we might actually struggle to answer some, if not all of the questions. Our churches may be full. Our associations and councils may still exist. But is the 'heart' of the ecumenical church still beating? Is the 'heart' still in there and are our hearts in it? Maybe all we remain with is the knightly armor of the ecumenical church but the 'knight' is no longer inside the armor.

I can imagine us sitting down in a circle – smack on the warm cow-dung smitten floor – ready to share our deepest fears about the prospects of the sickly bird in our hands. Such is the myriad of challenges, we shall not know where or how to begin. We will compete for space and time to speak.

Some among us will speak about the financial cut-backs by our erstwhile donors which have led to massive programme shrinkage, staff lay-offs

and the flight of quality staff. We will explore the explanations and the excuses for the dried up financial sources. Others will lament the inability of local churches, several hundred years later, to take financial ownership and responsibility of themselves. The theological types among us will suggest that behind the smokescreens of financial recession in the North and lack of financial commitment in the South lies the problem of theological bankruptcy. We must not allow the material wealth of the North – albeit a dwindling wealth – to mask the gaping absence of a riveting theological paradigm. Nor should we allow the South to use their material poverty as an excuse for the theological desert into which they have landed themselves. This, the theological types will argue, is the real cause, and not the lack or abundance of material means.

Others will be eager to speak of the changing face of the (South) African church. They will also point out that while the historic churches may be gradually emptying, revival tents and the buildings of newer types of churches are filling up with the young and disenchanting. Indeed, it will be

observed that the historic mission churches are joining the bandwagon. The music has become more upbeat, usually sung to the background of a full band, complete with foot-stomping, hands lifted up in the air. Similarly, the sermon messages have become increasingly charismatic. And yet in the middle of all this many are suggesting that the South African Christian church is reaping what it has sown. It was, after all, not merely a beneficiary, perpetrator or victim of apartheid. The church was the author of apartheid. Just because a handful of quarrelsome members of the church struggled against apartheid does not remove this blot. Any wonder that many Africans are retreating into the religion of their ancestors – some practicing it defiantly in the midst of the church? Any wonder that many Afrikaners are either going charismatic or atheistic? Who can blame these people? Did you really expect South Africans to applaud the church and flock into its buildings at this time?

Yet some among us will protest this 'easy' characterization of the church in (South) Africa. They will suggest that in order to understand what looks like capitulation to certain

versions of American-type evangelicalism one must understand the existential condition in which South African society finds itself now. Ours is a society under siege. It is a society under attack from the scourge of HIV and AIDS, a society deeply marked by the long-term effects of apartheid and racism. So intoxicating is the force of the attack that the church has neither theological grammar nor liturgy to deal with the impact of the scourge. Ours is one of the most unequal societies in the world. We are a violent society where men rape infants and women alike. Ours is a society in which incidents of crime are high and brutally violent. Surely, a society this messed up can only produce a church that will survive on a hyperactive and exuberantly cathartic brand of crisis Christianity.

But there will be other views – especially from those among us who have tasted power in the belly of the beast called government. The problem, they will suggest, is not only that the church has lost its prophetic voice but that it has been overtaken in terms of progressive thinking, by society in general and by government in particular. It will be pointed out

that a large section of the church remains more conservative than the rest of society when it comes to a whole range of issues: e.g. sexual orientation, abortion, death penalty and women's rights. But who said that abortion on demand is necessarily and in all cases progressive, others will ask? Should rights not go hand in hand with responsibilities? Is there nothing sacred anymore? The problem, some will say, is not merely a church left behind by so-called progressive forces. The problem we have is of a church whose feet are cold and whose voice is incoherent in the face of a powerful network of new forces at the helm of which is a government using its novel authority of legitimacy to relativise the legitimacy of all rival institutions perceived as threats.

The debate will progressively move to church-state relations since 1994. It will include an analysis of the euphoric theological experiments with which influential sections of the ecumenical church have flirted since independence. The Gorbachev inspired 'theology of reconstruction' which started with enthusiasm but ended virtually as a non-event will be a case in point. Sometimes it was

called the theology of democracy. Later on it was called the 'theology of public life'. More recently it is simply called public theology. An essential element of that theology is the notion of 'critical solidarity with the state' – an idea stolen from the Latin American Liberation Theology notion of 'solidarity with the poor'. Though never expounded fully – perhaps deliberately – the notion intended to authorize, underwrite and justify a greater cooperation between the churches and the new legitimate government. Except for the adjective 'critical', the precise nature and parameters of the cooperation were generally left vague. It was not explained how church leaders-turned-state functionaries would be 'critical' in their 'solidarity' with the state and when. Under the safe umbrella of the confusion spread by the notion of 'critical solidarity', a blurring of roles and missions occurred. Suddenly the 'ecumenical church' was to be 'found represented' in all sorts of strange places. In Parliament, in the Presidency, in political parties, in the TRC, in the army, in the police force and many other places. For its part, the state responded by convening religious leaders into a forum to be

invoked at the pleasure of the state president. So, it seems that we have moved from a prophetic church, to a critical solidarity church and now to a service delivery church – maybe not in a linear fashion.

At this point the debate between us on the one hand, and between us and our elder sage on the other, is expected to become more bitter. Some among us will not resist the temptation to point a blaming finger at some of our hallowed sages: 'The bird you bequeathed us was already sick and dying! We suspect that when you handed this bird to us you first triggered the ticking bomb in its bosom – now we are expected to detonate the bomb before it explodes? In fact this bird was dead when you delivered it to us! You gave us an ecumenical church that was thoroughly dependent on overseas donors. You led this movement like patriarchs and in a few cases like matriarchs. You marched in the streets, campaigned in church halls of faraway lands, preached memorable sermons (many of which have not been recorded) but left no veritable theological legacy to nourish us at this, our greatest hour of need. You were all attracted to the new

'legitimate government' like moths are attracted to light. Now, see the mess you have landed us in! Each political party is demanding the allegiance of the ecumenical church. Each successive government wants us to sign up as a service delivery tool. When we protest, they simply replace those among us not cooperating with others among us willing to serve. Is this not what has happened with the formation of the National Interfaith Leaders Council? You and your contemporaries are not entirely blameless for the growing divisions among and between us, with all sorts of new groupings emerging to contest the dwindling space of ecumenism. Indeed: At the heart of many of the current rivalries among and between South African ecumenists lies the blight of competition for resources, local and international, for recognition by government, for acceptance by powerful political formations and for adoption by powerful overseas donors. See, we have learnt well from you!

6. No Conclusion

Finally, someone among us will intervene and admonish us against the increasingly strident tone of our

discussions: 'Brothers and sisters, have we come here to insult our elder or have we come to seek advice and wisdom? Shall we treat the hospitality and generosity of our sage with disdain?' At that point, the noise of argument will die down. Avoiding eye contact with the old sage, we shall look down and anywhere, except into the face of the elder. Yet from the corners of our eyes, we shall see tears rolling down the face of our host. Finally, s/he will speak: 'You want to know if the bird in your hand will survive? How can I know? The bird was once in mine and my contemporaries hands. It is now in

your hands. The bird is not dead. It is only sick. Your actions – or lack of actions – may turn this into a sickness unto death. Your differences and the bitterness of some among you notwithstanding, you have a rich grasp of the ailment. The choice you have is whether you will use your understanding of the ailment to heal or to kill the bird. But let me tell you something: God is already at work, healing and strengthening the church. The question is, will this generation of ecumenists participate in God's mission of healing or shall you join the other mission of hate, killing and death?'





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