

## **COMMITTING OURSELVES**

By Ms BRIGALIA BAM

I begin by thanking SACLA for the honour of asking me to speak on the last day, and to share the stage with such distinguished Church leaders in Africa. This has been an important week and I am sure for many of us an important event. Christians from all walks of life have all come together to search the Scriptures, to pray together, to think together and to bear witness together.

In the new South Africa it is important for us Christians to broadcast anew who we are and what we stand for. We have to account anew for the hope which is in us. We can no longer rely on anyone else to do that for us, not even our new government. We now live in a time when we as Christians must take the responsibility upon ourselves to ensure that our faith is not misunderstood, nor misinterpreted or misrepresented. Enough misunderstanding, misinterpretation and misrepresentation continues to occur even in our own country.

But this week is not only a marketing exercise for us. It is also, and has been, an exercise I am sure for many of us for introspection. As Christians, we have been faithful to Jesus Christ. At the end of the week we are asking ourselves several questions. One is whether, in fact, we have been and continue to be on an individual level, faithful to Jesus Christ. Have we wrestled, or are we continuing to wrestle, with the demands of the Gospel for us as churches and as individuals, with all the changes and the new nation we have? In the face of all the challenges facing us, have we availed ourselves of the power of Holy Spirit? Has the Gospel message of reconciliation penetrated our hearts? How will we as people of faith confront the seven giants we have talked about in all these days – racism, crime, corruption, violence, poverty, sexism and the crisis of family – and which has been articulated by so many of our leaders? Of course, what torments the people of God and all of us in South Africa is the question of what we are going to do with this young, dying nation.

Thank you for those of you who have organised this assembly and thank you to the leadership for their vision and courage. My mother used to say in our home that there are 12 commandments. She liked the 10 – I don't know whether she took advantage of the fact that she was a daughter of a pastor – but she said: "In this house there are 12 commandments. People must learn to say 'Thank you,' and people must also learn to say 'I apologise.'" Today I am applying to our leaders my mother's 11th commandment...Thank you.

The SACLA initiative must be heard because it has forced us to pause to look at ourselves, our situation and, most importantly, to look to God. This session is one to explore issues of commitment to action and I have been asked to speak about this on an individual level. I became nervous when Michael asked me to do this. I confessed I did not know how to give testimonies. My life is a bit confused and I have no good testimony to give to the world. He then explained what he meant.

I have taken on an interesting ethic, though I am not a theologian, called "Sophosonka ...." The translation is that "we will all die together". It can either mean that there is no place for individual and personal opinion. I am sure many of you will challenge this. I wish to quote Jeremiah 31: "Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord. In these days the people will no longer say the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and that children's teeth are set on edge. Instead everyone will die for his own sin. Whoever eats sour grapes, his own teeth will be set on edge."

From this passage we learn that there was apparently a time in Israel when an action would be taken by the fathers and the consequences would then be felt by the children. In other words the fathers would act and the children would pay for the actions. When the fathers eat sour grapes, then the responsibility would then be on the children's teeth. The parents would perpetrate and then the children would suffer the consequences of the perpetration committed by their parents. I suppose this way of living was in keeping at that time with the 10 Commandments which describe God as a jealous God who for generations would visit the sins of the parents on the children. We are familiar with this from Exodus 20. Therefore, the suggestion that children could and would suffer for the sins of their parents was well established.

It was what I referred to as “sophosonka”, in which generations of sinners and households would be made to pay for the sins of their parents. In a society where community identity, community actions, and community culpability were all established. Issues of individuality, naturally in that kind of setting, took a back seat. But the situation also evoked a number of questions even in that particular historical context. In this “sophosonka” atmosphere, did the individual's thought and actions matter anymore? Was it not better for everyone to know the different status of the group to which they belong, and live with the consequences? Was it no better for everyone to pledge allegiance to the group in total subservience to their predetermined fate? Everything was determined about your life and fate as a son or daughter. In this atmosphere each one must accept their fate and live with its consequences without gripe or complaint.

But there is a change. In John 9, people started to ask about the blind person and whether his blindness was his own sin, or the sins of the parents. We have come from that kind of history and tradition. That has changed. And yet in this brief passage of Jeremiah, where there is a reference to this long passage of the past, the prophet speaks of what we are talking about: the new dispensation. Whereas in the previous dispensation God oversaw destruction and mayhem, in the new dispensation God will oversee a planting, building and rebuilding. But that is not all. He also intends to replace this “sophosonka” ethic with a totally new ethic. Everyone will die for his own sin – whoever eats the sour grapes then takes the responsibility. This is an ethic in which individuals will be held accountable for their own actions.

In this new dispensation, individuals, and not the history and track record of their lineage, would matter. The ethic now is not a resigned “sophosonka”, where individuals disappeared in the history, culture, society and justified everything they did: “I am not responsible, it is the tradition...” “I grew up in this manner...” “Things have always been done this way...” “I am sorry, I am not accountable for that!”

The individual in the new dispensation has emerged. This is the dispensation which has been endorsed, but what I refer to as “the revolution of Jesus Christ”. Jew though he was, he confronted all aspects of his Jewish heritage as a unique individual.

As South Africans, we know the feeling of belonging to groups to which our very faith was tied, but in which individuality was often undermined. If you were black you were destined to a life of inferiority and lack of anything, regardless of your character, your talents which God had given you, regardless of your education. If you were white you were similarly expected to tow the line. If the disadvantages of being black were thrust upon you by virtue of your lineage and skin colour, the benefits of being white were likewise available by virtue of lineage and skin colour. Both situations in our country were not conducive to individual self-assertion. The parameters of what it meant to be human were set and established within the boundaries of blackness and whiteness. In this situation, independent, individual, black or white thinking was not encouraged at all. For this reason, those blacks or whites who dared assert their own individuality realised this was not acceptable by what happened to many of them.

Even the Christian faith was conveniently misinterpreted to suit the racial arrangements, because this racial arrangement had to be justified. Racism kills individuality, and it refused to treat human beings as individuals – it refused to allow them to become individuals. Instead, it sees their colour and their tribe. Racism refuses to see the image of God in human beings, preferring to focus on the colour of their skin and to use that as an important qualification.

This is a challenge to us today. And that is why the challenge as individuals is that we must combat racism as individuals. We can no more blame the system of apartheid. We can no more blame anybody. The challenge is for us as individuals.

If racism troubles individuality, sexism and patriarchy did the same if not worse. Selfish distortions of culture, religion and race were combined to make women slaves of slaves. In this atmosphere women were not allowed to act like individuals at all. They were expected to think alike and to accept their own position of inferiority. Any woman who showed signs of independence, individuality and self rights, is immediately accused of trying to be a man. Some of us live with that all the time. Worse still, women are expected to accept the silent grouping. They are swallowed into this completely by the community of women who themselves have accepted this position, not as a group, but as individuals.

And then there are all sorts of fables and stories that justifies it. At times when I am busy I wonder if St Paul would ever agree, but I think in the context of today he would agree.

There are many virtues people praise about us women but I don't think we want those virtues any more.

I think society needs to look at them and decide if they are the virtues you like for individual people. Because we are individuals as women, we cannot be seen as a group. Patriarchy and sexism are a refusal to acknowledge that women, like men, are created in the image of God, and I want to say we cannot continue any more as individuals to discriminate. As women we can no longer accept our position as being inferior. This is a challenge to us as individuals.

Christianity and access to Western culture has sometimes been blamed for the rise of selfish and rampant individualism and the erosion of the communal aspect of African cultures. While the latter may well be to blame, I think it is a misunderstanding of the Christian faith to accuse it of creating individualistic people. There is a difference between individualism and the individualist. English is problematic for us. The more I was thinking about this difference, the more I wished I could write it in Xhosa! Christianity is a faith that makes it possible for individuals to emerge and to come forth and make a difference. It is a faith that moves us from the tragic office of "sophosonka" ethics into an ethic where it is possible for individuals to emerge and be counted. Christianity's strength is in individuality and does not smother it.

What is important is that the Christian faith makes a space for constructive individuality, and not for destructive individualism. And there is a difference. Just as there is caring of the group, there is also a case of destructive individualism. Here the individual becomes the subject and the object of everything without reference to the role of the community, in the individual and vice-versa. It is constructive individuality and not selfish individualism that the Christian faith brings forth. It nourishes it and nurtures it. And where individualism is rampant there is no community. Indeed one of the greatest lacks in our communities today is that of healthy, constructive, individualism with a healthy self-esteem.

What we need in this country and our churches are men and women who rejoice in their individuality and who are positive enough about who they are before God and before other humans. These are the people also who need courage. The remarkable thing about Jesus was that He was a balanced individual, appreciative of the lineage, but not limited by it, unafraid to assert Himself, but not obnoxious. He was not always critical, but was critical of anything that was immoral. He was also a person who was dismissive of his compatriots. He also respected authority, but He was not in any way a person who is sheepishly subservient. What is more, Jesus recognised and praised positive individuality whenever He saw it and whenever He encountered it.

I wish to suggest that it appears that one of the traits Jesus looked for among His disciples – whom we are now discovering were both male and female – were people in whom He recognised potential for individuality. Although some of the Gospel writers give us the impression that Jesus randomly and haphazardly selected people, I believe Jesus was more discerning and selective. The Gospel writers, for reason of brevity, probably skipped the stories of the interviews that Jesus conducted with each of His disciples. I am sure He did this using the criteria and context of the time. But I am sure Jesus must have turned down many of the applicants because they lacked any strength as individuals. He must have found ways of recruiting a number of people. He also observed that others would work better working in a group. But He carefully observed while they were at work, He said: "Come follow me, I will make you as an individual fishers of human beings." Then He saw that they had initiative and a sense of purpose in life. All those colourful characters constituting His disciples were not chosen randomly, I want to assure you.

And to us today, I want to say, we are confessing to be Christians. And I am sure all of us are not chosen randomly. We are chosen here as individuals.

Similarly with the women: Mary Magdalene, who was not a dull character, and Martha, in my opinion were woman who had remarkable initiative and resolve. I believe that had their story not been heavily edited, we would have realised that Jesus spent as much time with Mary as He did with Martha, for He was able to see each other's unique talents and gifts. Note the resourcefulness with which they responded to their brother Lazarus' illness. I am not suggesting that Jesus' disciples were perfect characters. I don't think that is what we are searching for, that we wait until we have become perfect human beings and individuals. I am suggesting and noting that we are people who have the potential, because we are people who believe in the principles of Jesus Christ. And because of that we can today build this nation and make it a nation with all the morals we want.

Not only did Jesus look for initiative in His disciples, but wherever He was and met people, He always would speak to them as individuals. When the Samaritan woman took Him to task for daring to ask water from her, Jesus in an enthusiastic manner takes up the challenge and recognises her honesty about her marital status. When near the city of Jericho, a blind man defies those who implore him to be quiet when

Jesus passes by. Jesus rewards this individual by giving him back his sight. Remember the woman with the flow of blood who defied the purity laws and pursued Jesus in the crowd? And so on, and so on. There are many stories of recognition of individuals for the work they have done. This recognition of us as individuals will always continue.

From the above reflections it will become clear how much individuality is needed in the Christian faith. I want to go further and suggest that our society today needs these individuals. Healthy communities are made up of healthy individuals. Healthy churches are also made up of well-balanced, wholesome, individuals of faith. Indeed there are times when the weight of tradition and culture is such that institutions bearing them are unable to forge ahead. It is possible for the history of a country to be so bitter and so sad, that the country is unable to pull itself up. Where there is too much pain and division so that all that happens is more pain and division, each generation referring to the previous generation to justify their lot. I want to argue the situation into which South Africa was sliding between the 1970s and the 1980s. Tradition, conventions and cultures can become so heavy that they lead to vicious circles. It is possible for the traditions and conventions of a church to be so heavy that little innovation is possible. We must engage in this dialogue so that we are able to liberate the individual from that kind of stifling tradition and culture. At these times what we need are Christian individuals who are able to break out of the mould in the boldness and in a very creative way. In this country we have many such persons, and we are always quoting Archbishop Desmond Tutu, people like Beyers Naude, but in our communities we have many people who are not even recognised for the things they are doing.

It is individuals like Mandela who, drawing on the traditions of their people, nevertheless were strong enough individuals to be critical of both black and white. When changing an institution will take a 100 years, what we need are a few committed individuals, men and women, whose witness will be able to change the temperature and the mood of institutions who are too steeped in tradition. Without the witness and input of such visionary individuals, change would never happen. That is what prophets were, that is what Jesus' disciples were. When we venture and dare God, I want to assure you that God doesn't abandon us in any way.

When I was appointed to this position of being the Chairperson of the Electoral Commission, I first refused because I lacked the confidence as an individual to do the job. I was a very nice, respected church lady, a woman of faith and prayer. How could I be mixing with these politicians, when we think politics are not clean? My own ego was rather violated by this request. Finally I accepted. The reason I was accepted to this position is that before the elections of 1994 many, many people had died in our country. When we were approaching the 1999 elections, the thought was that we needed a person who was coming from another constituency. When I meet politicians today, I am proud that my constituency, the Christians of South Africa, continue to contribute in an amazing manner.

When we had our elections in 1999, the people of South Africa prayed and fasted and as a result we had no deaths because of the elections. Though we were in places as individuals, it is important that an individual strengthens the support system. You cannot as individuals do everything. You need somebody to empower you, to pray for you. On a lighter note, the Bishops of my church, the Anglican Church, called me to George where they were meeting two weeks before the election, and they all placed their hands on my head and prayed for me. It was the best thing that happened in my life, though their hands were very heavy! Things happened in my country. I want to mention that as a personal testimony because even now in our country my own faith and hope is that the churches and the people of South Africa and their prayers will see us through this election as well.

Taking our cue from Jesus, we as Christian churches must make it our business to recognise, nurture and reward individuals because those individuals can really make a difference in our lives.

The concept of the conscience is a good one where we say we need to develop a way in which our own consciences can help us. We need to develop Christians who have a good conscience. None of us in God's eyes is nobody! We are all made in God's image and we are somebody. We can all do something, no matter how small, because God will give us all the support and make sure that whatever we bring to Him will multiply, as happened with the young man who brought the loaves and fishes. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.