

PERSONAL AND NATIONAL REPENTANCE

By Bishop Mvume Dandala

I have been assigned the task of calling the Church and our land to repentance. This call is based on the great promises of God as recorded in 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from Heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

This is not the only Scripture that captures God's promise to offer healing to His people and to His creation. Rather, the entire plan of salvation as we heard it in Christ Jesus, seeks to convey the message that we are not prisoners of our sin, we are not prisoners of evil. This, in Christ Jesus, has been defeated. The power of God's forgiveness sets us free and the Holy Spirit is available to us by grace to empower us to live as children of God, forgiven and set free. The central belief we hold is that the Kingdom of God is in our midst. Because of this we are called to repentance.

Because of the nature of this assembly, I have decided to talk primarily to the Church, the Body and Bride of Jesus Christ, mandated not only to declare the Good News, but also established as the first fruits of the Kingdom. The Church in South Africa in this century must reflect with sincerity on its contribution – or maybe lack of contribution – that may have led us to the problems we face today. It is my view that the greatest challenge facing the Church today is that of helping to restore the family in its rightful place. We have to reflect with sincerity and accept our own contribution as a Church to the break-up of the African social fabric, which in turn has played no small part in leading us to the troubles that we are in today.

It is important for us to think carefully about the family structure in the African setting. We need to acknowledge those things, to which we have contributed, which have removed from the centre of the life of our people and which have destabilised the African family. We, as a Church, are challenged to face the truth that there are some African practices in the way of life of the African people that we have refused to baptise and embrace, and which we have refused to sanctify with the message of the Gospel and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

If the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to have any future, as we believe it should have in this century, the challenge is for us to try to incarnate the Gospel in Africa. Now is the time for the Gospel to take root in the continent of Africa.

I stand here with deep love for the Lord Jesus Christ, indebted to the power of the Holy Spirit and certain that God will not abandon South Africa and Africa. I believe that it is our responsibility as Christians to acknowledge and repent of the manner in which we have sometimes denied this continent its life, thus opening a way for the defilement of the spirit of the continent by foreign cultural practices that have led us to our present troubles. When one speaks this way, one is often simply written off as alarmist, pathological and, at worst, syncretic. I do not intend being any of those. Rather, I desire to state evangelically what is often recognised intellectually with no clarity as to how to respond to it practically. I am deeply concerned that unless this truth is recognised and acted upon by the whole Church of God, Africa will not only be lost to the Gospel of Jesus, but also that those Christians who embrace the Gospel will be seen as irrelevant to the continent of Africa and its needs. If we are serious about the Gospel of Jesus Christ being essential for healing and transforming Africa, we have to ask ourselves whether the Gospel has actually been adequately incarnated to the continent of Africa. We have to ask if Africa can unequivocally accept that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been authentic good news to Africa. I have no doubt whatsoever that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to Africa, but I have questions about how we Christians have been witnesses to that Gospel.

To say this is not to deny what the Gospel has meant for millions of individuals in Africa. Indeed, it is to raise questions about our ability to so proclaim the Gospel that it means much to the collective psyche of our people, of our communities and our nations, so that they will be empowered to live a liberated life as divinely intended in Christ Jesus. Heather Dugmore and Pierre Crockay in their profile on Mozambique write: "Freedom comes in Mozambique in many forms as we discover when we chance upon an African Zionist Church baptism in the ocean near Costa Dolasol. Life revolves around the sea in this part. And the Zionists incorporate it in all their rituals. First, their gathering heads fully robed into the sea. In front is a

man dressed in black being led by the priest. Once they reach chest high in the water they start chanting and wailing and frantically tearing the clothes off the man in black, who is visibly in a trance. Knives, sticks, hands, everything is used. Once the man is stripped of his black clothes, the priest slips on a white robe over his head and the entire congregation goes quiet. After a few moments, they start singing a melodious gentle refrain before returning to the beach. The man dressed in white now looks serene and happy and we asked the priest to explain. His wife died a year ago, he says, and he was in mourning for this time. But a year has passed and this ritual ends his mourning. He has paid his respects and he is now relieved of his pain. He is free to love again."

It is this kind of symbolism that the Church has failed to understand and deal with in the life of Africa. Paralyzed by our paranoid fear of possible African syncretism. The result is that the Church often appears impotent, unable to offer effective healing that Africa needs, with African Christians becoming spiritual schizophrenics, Western believers by day and African spiritualists by night, condemned by the Church as idol worshippers.

The simplest pointer to this dilemma is our inability to find a collective response to the cry of many after the violence of the mid-90s that enveloped our country. The people who had been involved in violence and conflict in South Africa and who had subsequently made peace, made their plea to the Christians that Christians should arrange religious occasions to confirm forgiveness and offer cleansing in the way of religious rituals. They contended that those who had been involved in the acts of murder and general destruction of life, could not simply take the transition from being killers, even if this, in their view, had sometimes been justifiable, into being responsible citizens. They contended that the yearning for life of destruction among those who had been involved in these wars would continue to be overpowering, resulting in rampant criminality in an African worldview. This is true for all our conflicts, which were bloody, including the violence of apartheid as well as the resultant wars of liberation.

Given the recent report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it must be obvious to all who have taken time to study and understand its contents, that this challenge continues to stare us in the face. It is obvious that very few of our churches, if any, are able to make sense of this collective yearning of Africa. We simply do not know how to respond to it. Yet Africa has a profound understanding of life that can never be met and satisfied by the individualistic emphasis of the Christian preachers and pastors. We have to allow the Gospel of Jesus Christ to find a home in the African context as the Gospel of John would require.

The Church agenda for this century must be a quest for space to look afresh at the Gospel of Jesus Christ with African eyes and through serious African questions. I do realise that there are ministers who try hard to respond to this quest, despite the hostile protestations of those who, while concerned about the possible defilement of the faith by the African experience, are blasé to the fact that the growth of the Church as an institution was effectively characterised by a major incorporation of Western cultural practices that were, in fact, not Christian in their origin.

It is my view that the collective weight of a Church imprisoned in the Western paradigm prevents those who are serious about the Gospel of Jesus Christ finding a home in Africa, from freely using their creative gifts to liberate the Church for effective work. I raise this matter in this assembly for the following reasons:

Firstly, together we need to recognise and confess the damage that has been done to Africa by this religious fixation. It has destroyed what Africa had without offering a satisfactory substitute. I am calling for repentance from all of us – the Church.

Secondly, because of this spirit we have missed out on opportunities to allow the Gospel to take upon itself the clothes of Africa. We have excluded those groupings that have tried. The indigenous Christian churches tend to be treated by us as peripheral, semi-Christian institutions. I am part of this problem and I am not always sure how to correct it. All I know and wish to do is to confess it as wrong in order for us to genuinely search for an authentic incarnational position of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Africa. I desire for us to collectively repent of this sin in order for us to find a way to be strong in our proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Africa.

The six giants we have identified for this assembly require a profound response from Christians. The scourge of HIV/Aids requires that we do more than merely preach at our people, particularly the young. It requires more than safe sex, condoms and anti-retroviral drugs. It requires of us to examine carefully the social support structures of our communities that protected the sanctity of sexual relations which may have been eroded over time. We must identify ways and means of reclaiming these. African culture often

led to the creation of social and support structures within which tragedies like the HIV/Aids pandemic could be addressed. We regard calls for virgin tests in KwaZulu-Natal as barbaric and outdated. I ask: what do we have that is of social value with which we can replace these outdated practises if they are? What do we offer?

Dr Matole Macheke said that in the past the Balobethu people of the Limpopo Province spoke of their divinities as virgins. This, according to him, provided a religious base for a social structure that put value on sexual abstinence before marriage for both boys and girls, and that required the entire community to provide valuable support to the young people. While Christian faith has succeeded in replacing the religious divinities of these communities with new forms of belief, I submit that we have not succeeded in providing equally strong structures to support the values that the Gospel of Jesus Christ enunciates. Instead, we, as a Church, have reduced to an individual burden a responsibility that was commonly shared by the people as a community. And I say it is time that we stopped to examine some of our actions in this regard.

This assembly is correct to see family life as key to a renewed society. The social troubles we are experiencing are largely because we have allowed family life to fall apart in South Africa. It will take decades for us to reverse the damage brought upon us by the laws such as the Migrant Labour Act, that tore families apart, subsequently destroying many generations to come. I have directly linked to this legacy the levels of violence and absolute disregard for the sanctity of life. They will not be reversed merely by moral prescriptions for an individual. It will take a well worked-out vision and bold plan by communities if we are to restore family life. I am conscious of the fact that Christians themselves cannot always claim to be entirely exemplary in maintaining high standards of commitment to family life. We must repent of this, for failure on this goal is a let-down for our nation. The African extended family structure has broken down and still continues to do so. Should not the Church which, by virtue of being the Body of Christ, is a new form of extended family, be at the forefront of the revitalisation of the African extended family structure? Could the Church not so develop this African extended family concept so that it crosses divides such as race and class?

I dare make my last bold claim: that were we to be ready to repent of these, we would be more effective at being Christ's instruments of healing the wounds of South Africa, the wounds of poverty, the wounds of violence, the wounds of racism and the wounds of moral perversion that threaten our life.