

Wanted:
A CHURCH THE WORLD TAKES SERIOUSLY
And those who can help it happen
10th Annual Peter Storey Lecture, Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary
7 May, 2021

Rev Prof Peter Storey, DD, LLD, DHL

It is a signal honour to be presenting the Annual Lecture this evening. I can picture you all (sitting properly socially distanced) in the Chapel of Christ the Servant and I greet you in his name. My only regret is that I cannot be with you physically.

What a pleasure it is to be able to address Dr Rowanne Marie, for the first time as “Madam President.” Rowanne was the very first member of Faculty we appointed back in October 2008. For 13 years she and other veterans of those early days have given unstinting faithfulness. Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary has a bright future under this outstanding leader.

I am sad to hear that this Graduation weekend SMMS is shadowed by loss because one of the Seminararians, 38 year-old Lindelwa Dlamini, died from a heart attack last week. Our love and sympathy goes out to her family and all here who mourn her. The news evokes emotional memories for me of our first Graduation, a bitter-sweet day just two weeks after the death of our first President, Dr. Ross Olivier. He had shaped a unique and beautiful community of faith, learning and servanthood and the shock of his death was profound.

That first Graduation weekend also saw Prof Jonathan Jansen delivering the very first of these lectures, and since then we have listened to other great South African exemplars, among them Public Protector Thuli Madonsela, business giant Dr Reuel Khoza, Deputy Chief Justice (and now our Grand Chancellor) Dikgang Moseneke, Prof Njabulo Ndebele, Dr Frank Chikane and Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana. I feel humbled to join them for this, the 10th lecture.

Of course, the 9 th Lecture never took place. Its absence will stand as a silent reminder of all the suffering, dislocation and loss that an invisible virus has brought to our land and to the world. I ask that we remember in silence for a moment all who have died, all who suffer right now, and all the healers who are on the front-line of fighting COVID-19, Thank you.

The lecturers each year are encouraged to be mindful of what Ross used to call the ‘daunting and audacious vision’ of SMMS: *‘Forming Transforming Leaders for Church and Nation,’* and while their perspectives have been wonderfully varied, every one of my predecessors has voiced the same plea: let the church – its ministers and people together -be more transformationally engaged with the world.

The title of tonight’s lecture presupposes that this is a non-negotiable, in fact I believe that without this engagement the church cannot be the church.

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Why? Because God takes the *world* very seriously indeed.

- It was into the world that the Word came to be made flesh and live. (John 1.14)
- It is the world that ‘God so loved, that God gave...’ (John 3: 16)
- It is the world that God in Christ is busy reconciling to Godself. (2 Cor. 5: 19)
- It was at the hands of the world that Jesus died
- It is into the cities of the world that Jesus sends his disciples. (Acts 2:8)
- It is the “whole created universe that waits with eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (Romans 8: 19)
- It is the Kingdoms of this world that must become “the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.”

Engagement with the world isn’t optional. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit drove the Apostles out of their Upper Room sanctuary onto the streets of Jerusalem, into what would often be a bruising encounter with the principalities and powers. This should not surprise us at all because it is there that we have to live out what it means to be Christian. That is where God’s mission happens.

And our part of God’s world is in deep, deep trouble right now ...

A country betrayed ...

If Alan Paton were to write his famous Nobel prizewinning novel today, it would have a different title: not *Cry, the Beloved Country*, but *Cry, the Betrayed Country*. Who would have dreamed, in their worst nightmare, that only 27 years after the bright hope of 1994, a nation born with such joyous promise and world approbation could so soon reach such a desperate state of political, economic, social – and above all – *moral* decay?

Any of us can quote the long list of woes: waterless towns, raw sewage in streets, stripped hospitals, ambulances high-jacked, toddlers raped, crime beyond control, a railway system shrunk to 20% of its previous capacity, a power utility voted in 2002 the world-wide ‘Global Power Company of the Year,’ with R1.6 billion profits, now unable to keep our lights on. A 30% or more unemployment rate. I won’t go on: our country is broken and broke.

I have a good friend who has a “Hope List” not a ‘Woe List.’ These are his hopes, shared I believe by millions: “Marcus Jooste and Steinhoff get their come-uppance, Visible action against Molefe, McKinsey, KPMG, Montana, Essa, Myeni and more. ANC self cleanses of the their Magashules. Hlope dealt with. White racists jailed ...”

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And no-one wished us ill, no one attacked us, Covid didn’t do this: we did this all ourselves, mainly with the help of the same movement that liberated us and whom the people of this land trusted with their future. People feel betrayed.

President Ramaphosa’s evidence at the Zondo Commission last week came as near to a confession as I’ve ever heard from a politician and I honour him for that. He admitted that the ANC government was responsible for “Poor planning, incompetent leadership, mismanagement and corruption.” Only

a political party could get away with such an appalling record. Any company like that would be put out of business.

But let's get behind those words: what do they mean when they impact real human beings?

They mean being nearly burnt alive.

The Charlotte Mxeke Teaching Hospital fire started in the parking garage. When the Jo'burg fire brigade arrived, they couldn't connect their hoses to the hospital's system because someone had stolen the crucial brass couplings (presumably to sell to a crooked scrap merchant for a few hundred rand). While the firefighters searched for a hydrant in the surrounding streets, the fire spread, threatening the lives of some 700 patients helpless in the beds above. They all had to be evacuated to other places – an unbelievably traumatic experience which quite probably has cost some lives. On top of this, the fire would have done much less damage if the City's 60 or so fire trucks hadn't mysteriously dwindled to only 7. All the rest, we are told, were “unserviceable.”

Others can discuss the administrative technicalities of this horror story, but for me the fundamental question is about the kind of persons we have become: *What kind of person, no matter how poor, steals equipment vital to the saving of 700 lives? What kind of safety manager cares so little about those 700 human beings in his hospital that he allows those couplings to go uninspected and their loss undetected? What kind of City Councillor, what kind of Fire Chief cares so little about the 4m human beings in Jo'burg that they permit its Fire Trucks to deteriorate from some 60 to maybe 7?*

These are *moral* questions. What price our famous *Ubuntu*?

As I watched the President's discomfort about his Party's corruption, I recalled the open letter that I wrote to him in 2018 after his election as leader of the African National Congress. It was a warm letter full of hope, acknowledging his inspiring life in service of his people. I said:

“ ... you are a uniquely gifted person, remarkably qualified and prepared to lead our country. However, all of these gifts and skills will be useless unless you demonstrate that you have something else that we South Africans have missed for too many years now: I speak of *moral courage*.

Jacob Zuma's most damning legacy is that ... the way he behaved gave people permission to be bad. So my concern, Cyril, is not whether you have the skill to lead us back to prosperity, but if you will have the moral strength to lead us back to *decency*...”

Pardon me this evening for such a lengthy quote, but I believe that unless we get this, we miss the nub of our crisis.

For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic is deadly and horrific plague; its impact has been devastating – but hear this: in the midst of this deep darkness we can see some light. Vaccines are coming, medical science will lead us out of the pandemic. But this other plague, this deadly infection in South Africa's soul, *where is the vaccine for that?*

We need to find answers soon: Right now only the uncaptured part of the media and a thin line of courageous judges stands between us and the total collapse of our country into a failed state.

The ANC, in power for all 27 years of democracy, must bear the brunt of the blame but if we look to politicians of other parties, there is little light there either: the official Opposition appears to have forgotten they are South African: rather than do the hard work of becoming a racially inclusive alternative government, it has reverted to old-style white paternalism – and therefore irrelevance. The EFF, with its pompous military titles and perpetually angry leadership, has little credibility as the “party of the poor” when their Gucci shoes peek out from under their red overalls and charges of criminal self-enrichment hang over their heads.

And the church? What is our response to this crisis?

I suggest that it is only when the church is shaken out of its self-absorption to engage with the injustice, pain and brokenness of the real world ... and the real people who feel the brunt of those things every day ... *it is in that process that we begin to find our role.* The world may struggle with when we do it but it will take us seriously.

Some of us recall very clearly when the SA Council of Churches and its members in this land were driven by the Holy Spirit to confront the powers of the apartheid regime. When we entered the public arena with a clear intent to “announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour,” we were soon taken very seriously indeed. I have a few thousand newspaper clippings to prove it. The world was not neutral: those who believed in our struggle showed it by political and economic action and by a Nobel Peace Prize for the remarkable Bishop who led us. Those we challenged had security police harass us, withdrew passports, issued banning orders, and finally put us on trial – and when that was not enough to silence us, President PW Botha ordered our SACC headquarters to be blown up – and it was.

I think you could call that “being taken seriously.”

And then we mostly went to sleep again. During the wasted Zuma years, there was a long and shocking silence before the church began to raise its voice through a revived South African Council of Churches and people like Bishop’s Zipho Siwa, Malusi Mpumlwana and Archbishop Makgoba. Still, one doesn’t hear very much from anyone else.

We clearly need reminders of where we are meant to be.

In Cape Town, at the top of Adderley Street a beautiful wooden arch now straddles Government Avenue. It’s called the “Arch for the Arch,” – a tribute to Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s role in the Church-State struggle of those years. It’s location sends a powerful message: It bridges the space between St George’s Cathedral on side and Parliament on the other, on the exact spot where, on 29 February 1988, 25 of us church leaders and 100 clergy were pounced on by the apartheid police. We were marching from the place where people listen for God’s word to the place where people thought they were God and dared to trample on God’s justice.

The Arch for the Arch stands as a reminder that we are called not only to pastor individuals but to minister to the character of the nation. . In God’s economy the tasks given to church and state are different but, that doesn’t quarantine the church, nor immunize the state. When we leave our sanctuaries to confront the state our presence may be resented by the powers and they may arrest us, but we will not surrender that presence.

Real leaders understand this: listen to Nelson Mandela himself, speaking to the Methodist Conference in 1994: “All governments, no matter how democratic, need constructive criticism from those who live close to the people and who listen for the voice of God. I ask you therefore to

continue to play your prophetic role, always seeking to hold this nation and all its leaders to the highest standards of integrity and service.”

So, what shall our priorities be amidst our nation’s pain?

1. Remember who and whose we are ...

What Christians bring to the interface with our world is not a so much a different set of propositions as a *different citizenship* and the radically different perspective that produces. I have two identity documents: one declares me a South African citizen by birth and the other declares me a citizen of God’s Kin-dom by baptism. Following Jesus is about deciding which of those citizenships will have first claim on my life.

It is not that I am unpatriotic or that I do not love the land of my birth. It just means that I also belong to “another country.” When I worship, when I read Scripture, when I pray, I visit that “other land” – and each time I visit there I believe I am visiting God’s future for this world. Coming home I see the land of my birth with new eyes, because the contours of that other place are in troubling contrast to how we do things and relate to each other here. When you’ve visited God’s future - God’s dream for this world - you want to speak urgently about it, seek to imitate it, bring it to birth in the here and now. You want to help God’s Kin-dom of justice and peace and joy to come on earth as in heaven.

And the paradox is that when we give our highest loyalty to God, that’s when we become the best kind of citizens of our native land.

2. We will Form people of virtue ...

The best safeguard against the abuse of power, injustice and corruption is a population who know, not only their rights, but the difference between right and wrong. I believe Jesus would want us to begin here, in the patient work of growing good people – decent people. That’s what he did with his disciples.

Christians don’t have a monopoly over virtue but producing transformed people is our default vocation as church and when we do it properly, well ... big doors sometimes swing on little hinges:

Think of those leaders who liberated South Africa without hate, or desire for revenge, or lust for riches. Almost every one of them was educated and *formed* in the church mission-schools across the land. Yes, those places may have carried the crustations of colonialism, but their fine education and Christian character-building produced our “Greatest Generation”

Take Nelson Mandela: When told that this Seminary would bear the name of his old housemaster at Healdtown Institution, he became quite animated: “Ah! ... Mokitimi!” he exclaimed, “Mokitimi was our hero! We wished we had the courage of Mokitimi.”

Or Desmond Tutu, whose journey toward being our foremost prophet and national healer had its genesis in the faithful pastoring of Fr Trevor Huddleston, who visited him through the year he lay in a TB sanatorium – and perhaps just as significant – when he saw Huddleston raise his hat respectfully whenever he greeted Tutu’s mother who was a domestic worker.

Goodness is not out of date. It inspires and transforms.

Which is why SMMS is a Seminary, not a Theological College. The meaning of ‘seminary’ (Latin *seminarium*) is “seed bed” or “breeding ground.” From the beginning we announced that this place

would do more than prepare students for graduation; we would *form – or grow - seminarians for Ordination*. There is no such thing as a perfect minister, but our congregations have a right to require of us that we send them ministers who know the difference between right and wrong and are moral people.

The same goes for the formation of our laity: the calibre and the *character* of church members can have far-reaching implications for good or ill. Let me give a positive example:

In the days after the 1994 election the counting system was too complicated and broke down. Parties blamed the IEC and each other. For two days they argued, some threatening to walk out. The entire election hung in the balance. A simplified system was decided upon, but it needed for 900 people to go out to each counting station around the country to set it up. In the small hours of the morning I got a phone call from the Secretary of Home Affairs: “Bishop, can you please find 900 church members by tomorrow? *The church is the only institution all the parties will trust to do the job*”. There is no time to tell the whole story, but in the end hundreds of ministers and laypeople took train, air and bus tickets and spread across the land to save our first election.

“The only institution all the parties will trust.”

Big doors swing on little hinges. Let’s grow good people.

3. Be Free and Fearless for the truth ...

I pray that the ministers we send out from here will be prophets, not just priests. The powers have never been worried by priests. Prophets? That’s another story.

When we enter the public square we must be sure that *our witness is theologically, rather than ideologically, driven*. We are not called to be liberal or conservative, left-wing or right-wing people, but prophets of the living God. Our passion for social justice doesn’t come from some cold political theory; it is born by gazing into the face of the crucified Christ and seeing there his suffering love for humanity.

Therefore, the church must keep a prophetic distance and guard its freedom. It cannot permit itself to be sucked into any party. Its *moral* power must arise from its disinterest in *political* power. That is why, when we confronted President PW Botha at the height of apartheid’s evil, we could say to him, “You should listen to us Mr President, because we’re the only people who come into this office who don’t want your job.”

Truth is the most powerful tool of freedom and justice. No-one has proved this more dramatically than former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela: this one woman’s fearlessness for the truth brought down a corrupt president and gave us the Zondo Commission, which we pray will be the beginning of a cleansing of our national life.

And when we speak, we can be fearless. When ministers say, “I don’t have the courage to be a prophet, my response is, “don’t worry it’s not about courage, it’s about love.” The Biblical prophets were not superhuman, they were frail and often frightened people, but they had been seized by the power of outraged love.

Such love casts out fear. When I asked Thuli Madonsela what gave her the courage to keep on confronting wrongdoing in spite of threats to her life, she said, “*I try to keep my mind focused on*

Gogo Dhlamini in that rural village in KZN – the widow who is robbed of her social grant because of the corruption – and then I’m not afraid.”

Do we love enough to be fearless with the truth?

4. Choose community over conflict ...

It's fashionable these days – especially among those who weren't even born then – to scoff at Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela's description of us as a "Rainbow people" as if the notion of people living together in harmony is sentimental nonsense. "We're not a rainbow," they say, "we're deeply divided." Yes they are right and we are divided, but does that mean that we toss out the vision, or that we need to work harder for it?

See, the Rainbow wasn't Tutu or Mandela's invention; making a rainbow people out of divided humanity has always been God's project. If there is a universal longing in all of humankind, it is the longing for an end to conflict and the beginning of true community. Percy Qoboza, who was the Editor of the *Sowetan* in the darkest days, summed it up perfectly: *"If we have a bloodbath in South Africa, what will be left at the end of it? A black majority and a white minority who will have to find a way to live with each other. Well, that's what we've got now, so why not skip the bloodbath and get on with finding a way."*

Before you scorn the Rainbow think of the alternative: identity politics is the surest road to strife and violence. Those of us who worked so desperately to stem the horrific slaughter that preceded the 1994 election will tell you about in all its gruesome detail. It troubles me deeply that Economic Freedom Fighters, whose voice is important, seem wedded to divisiveness. It's almost as if they sit down and discuss, "Who shall we hate this week?" It's a dangerous game.

By contrast, know that there was a moment when the whole world stood in awe of the Beloved Country as they watched us, led by moral giants who had learned the way of peace, reaching up and touching the promise of the Rainbow. – even if only briefly.

5. Join the energy for change ...

One of the discoveries – long overdue I confess – that we churches made in the anti-apartheid struggle was that no-one could prevail over such an evil alone. It needed the combined energy of hundreds of very different organisations and institutions, and millions of very different people. The United Democratic Front was a miracle – 400 different NGO's, activist movements, churches, atheists, agnostics, Christians, communists, all pulling together with one aim: freedom with justice! Different church denominations found each other and the different faiths worked together as if we'd done it for years.

The present crisis calls for that same united energy, this time to defend the freedom they won, to uphold the rule of law, promote a society of civility, decency and hope, and above all, guard the Constitution that guards us all. Every church body should unequivocally support those last survivors of the "Greatest Generation" who have called on us to do so.

Remember when Desmond Tutu said about the Bible? "When the whites arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. Then they invited us to pray and when we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible." Said Tutu, "They made a mistake, because this book is about liberation and we intend to take it very seriously!" Well, the Constitution is the closest thing to a Bible that secular society has, and we need to show those who try to undermine it that we intend to take it very, very, seriously indeed.

There are other actions, every congregation can take to build the energy for change:

- Educate our people about what constitutes ethical behaviour and what is corrupt.
- Identify fellow congregants who hold any kind of public office, get alongside them, offer to support them in the work they do, to pray for them, to be there to unburden. But remind them that the eyes of the congregation are on them to be honest and incorruptible;
- Harness the passion and idealism of youth. They demand a clean society and they will work for it. In 1976 the “Young Lions” burnt the township beerhalls because they saw their fathers hooked on the government-supplied liquor. In 1993/4 the thousands of Peace Monitors who laid their lives on the line to bring us our first free election were mainly unemployed kids from the townships. If today’s youth find us about cleaning the mess this nation has become, they will be there.
- Identify and support Independent Candidates for office so the parties don’t have the field to themselves. Let’s inject into every level of government people of moral stature who are not beholden to party bosses.
- Join the call for a Basic Income Grant across the board. Instead of jobs and prosperity in the never-never future, give some money to each person who right now has no hope of ever being employed, and see their creativity explode, see hope come alive, see a resurrection of life!

Oh yes, and don’t forget to pray!

*

Of course, the important thing is not so much that the world takes us seriously, but that we bring to the world the good news of a God who cares deeply for all God’s children, that they should be treated with dignity, compassion and justice.

One of that “Greatest Generation,” Jay Naidoo, the first minister of Reconstruction and Development in the Mandela cabinet, wrote something very beautiful for Freedom Day. Jay is a Hindu and a beautiful human being, so in the spirit of this amazingly diverse and beautiful land I quote him:

*“If Madiba and many of his generation made such tremendous sacrifices to bring us to this point, then who am I not to be of selfless service to others?
Why should I not find the courage to make that journey from my head to my heart and heal myself?
Mandela once wisely said, ‘It always looks impossible until its done.’ Let us ask ourselves how the seeds we plant today will yield a harvest of hope and joy ... so that our children and grandchildren have a tomorrow.”*

Walter Wink, the theologian who has taught us so much about the powers that hold sway in this world, and which so desperately need to be redeemed, has a word for all of us in the betrayed country “It is not enough to be politically liberated. We also have to become human.”

Peter Storey,
Cape Town,
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