



**SPEAKING TRUTH IN LOVE:
SOUTH AFRICA - A CONTRADICTION OF HOPE AND DESPONDENCY**

**Presented by Dr Devi Rajab at Diakonia Council of Churches' Annual Meeting
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Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to be addressing you all here this evening.

I feel privileged to be associated with this esteemed organisation whose work in nation building in South Africa resonates well with my personal beliefs, namely that we should search for common threads in our humanity. Diakonia was like an oasis in the midst of a cruel apartheid regime. It stood out like an unwavering candle exuding light and hope to all of us in our darkest hours. I salute you today and thank you for the opportunity to address you on a very important topic: *Speaking Truth in Love: South Africa - A contradiction of hope and despondency*. In making this discussion possible you are taking the lead as a religious organisation to courageously challenge us to think creatively and spiritually of our role in South Africa as true citizens.

Searching for truth through love is a profoundly cohesive principle that unites humanity at its highest level beyond ideology, race, culture, class, caste, religion, ethnicity, nationality or language. I have just returned from Jerusalem the holiest of lands of the three major religions of the book and as I meandered through the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock and its adjacent Al-Aqsa Mosque, I lamented the sorry state of religious conflict amongst the people of this hallowed land, each one claiming superiority and a monopoly on truth. And I saw my country differently. I saw the miracle of how we negotiated our own freedom which unhappily the Israeli government is struggling to forge, a compromise with its Arab brothers. It simply does not have our vision, our Madiba and our magic. This then is our challenge: how do we retain our magic and forge ahead?

From time immemorial sages, philosophers, prophets of religion and scientists have battled to find truth. Each claims through their own narrative that they have arrived at the true path. But finding the truth is as elusive as finding a white elephant in the Kalahari Desert. Mandela said yes to the armed struggle. Evil has to be physically conquered. Gandhi said yes to passive resistance. "An eye for an eye ends up making the whole world blind." Both views have their merits and demerits. For it can be argued that while truth is a relative concept only spiritual truth is an absolute. Relative truth lies in the eyes of the beholder. It is specific to a historical period and a cultural viewpoint. It connects at the experiential level. The wise American Indian claims that to know it from his perspective you have to walk in his moccasins.

The Upanishads speak of truth as a journey, a very long journey of self-knowledge - to grow, upwards, inwards and ultimately out of oneself.

So, today as we lay ourselves before the altar of self-analysis as a nation, responsible South Africans are asking the question is there hope for us after a long fight for freedom and democracy. "The future depends on what we do in the present," warned Mahatma Gandhi and this is why there is a sense of urgency to save our beloved land from the fatalistic prophecy of TS Elliot when he said:

*And the end of all our exploring,
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

South Africans today are grappling with many socio-political issues that are causing them some distress. In the past we would ask the questions: What do you think is going to happen to South Africa? Will there be a blood bath after a revolution? Now, barely twenty years later, we have made one full circle and South Africans are now beginning to ask the same questions they did before: Do our children have a future here? Is it safe for us to stay?

The state of a nation, just like its people can be gauged by its moodiness and South Africa is somewhat crotchety right now. It is frustrated by its leadership and annoyed by the constant excesses of its politicians. It is fed up with non-delivery of public services and its rapidly dwindling health facilities. It is jittery about standards in higher education and the inadequate state of public schooling. It is concerned about the lack of jobs for its own people and about the influx of immigrants from the north. It is uneasy about the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots and between the various racial groups. It is worried about the social stability of families and about the safety of women as an integral part of society. It is anxious about harnessing and channelling its youth along socially acceptable avenues. But most of all, it is in a state of paralysis over the unbearable weight of crime and corruption that is viciously spreading like a cancer with no real ameliorative intervention.

In the years following the transition to democracy in 1994, South Africa's soaring crime rate earned it the reputation of being the most dangerous country in the world outside of a war zone. Despite what ex-MK cadres may want us to believe, crime is not about a Robin Hood type dispossession of material wealth to offset the imbalance of apartheid. It is about law and order and the stability of a nation that would ultimately translate into the greater good of its entire people. It is about morality and economic stability. It is about a quality of life that would allow South Africans to live, work, play and sleep safely among each other. To walk in any veld or forest, to fling doors and windows open and allow our children to run around safely in neighbourhoods. Yet the reality is that the acquisition of mass wealth is the cherry that motivates South Africans to continue to steal from one another.

The governing party under President Jacob Zuma has, alas, been too slow in responding to the cries for help from the nation and this reaction has been partly due to the fact that he is actually completely out of synch with his people and their problems. His resistance to react boils down to his inability to fully understand what true leadership is all about, and though he may make international front page news

with BRICS, there is little leadership within the country. Instead government becomes preoccupied with killing the messenger with the message. The colour of criticism is more important than the content of the message. (Angie Motshekga's recent comments bear this out). And so it has been easy to throw herrings in the path of political action by dismissing calls from all quarters for an urgent solution to the crime problem, as being a racial issue. An examination of court records reveals that the most assaulted people are still the masses of black people.

At long last Trevor Manuel has released his National Development Plan which is optimistic about its efficacy. But optimism alone is not enough to initiate and sustain real change. After nineteen years, we are a long way from developing a caring nation. If one could personify a city, a country and give it the qualities of human life, how would South Africa fare? *The Economist* in its April issue asks the questions: "What makes a country? Is it about a stretch of land, the issuing of passports? Is it about beers and flags?" Max Weber, the German sociologist, defined statehood as "the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence." While these definitions highlight the geo-political and economic aspects of a nation, its most important resource is its people. How are they treated and nurtured? How do they in turn respect their country? Do they view their country as a loving, benevolent, protective, caring, open society, or do they view their country as a punitive, autocratic, abusive and restrictive one? Do they view their country as a tax-grabber dispensing little in return, or do they view their country as an equitable provider?

I asked various people how they viewed their country and found the responses interesting. Each one wanted to be regarded as a true *bona fide* South African and yet the feelings of abandonment were ubiquitous. "I find that often one feels like an unwanted and abandoned child. After four generations of enslavement I still feel like a racial statistic - that a black Zimbabwean can take precedence often over my heritage." "We just want to be given the same chances as everyone else," cry a group of white squatters in the Western Cape who claim four generations of birthrights. Without water and electricity they describe their lives as gypsies or Voortrekkers.

But young South Africans are more hopeful. "We are still changing and evolving," says a 30-year-old. "We are still going to get there," she says positively. Affirmative action is reverse apartheid for the right reasons. Though I feel as a minority person left out of the loop I know that apartheid left people so disadvantaged that it is only right for them to be given opportunities. I have faith that our government will get it right. And I love my country." In direct contradiction to this view is that of a domestic worker who describes her country as 'a bad father' who does not care about his children. She says that her life in South Africa today is a hard struggle. Hospitals are a nightmare and so are the government departments where staff tend to treat the public in the most callous and disrespectful ways. "We are made to sit for hours while they chat and lounge around working at a snail's pace. We are often told after having spent bus fare and taken leave from work to come back the next day."

So what makes a caring nation? Looking for the Shangri la has been an internal quest by philosophers and social architects over the years who have tried to use knowledge about human behaviour to create a social environment in which people live productive and creative lives.

In 1948, the psychologist, BF Skinner, wrote the seminal work entitled *Walden Two*. It was about an experimental community located in a rural area with a thousand people. The inhabitants are portrayed as happy, productive and creative in a community that encourages its members to view every bit and custom with an eye to possible improvement, thus adopting a constant experimental attitude towards every aspect of their lives. This process of cultural engineering allowed everyone to optimise the positive effects of a mutually beneficial culture. *Walden Two* was, and still is, significant today because it challenges social conventions, planners and managers to govern a community effectively and humanely through policies that locate the welfare of its people at the centre. We still have a lot of goodwill left among South Africans despite the despair of the bleak and negative side of life for the mass of its people. For real life is the sum of its parts (Bombay Poverty Scene taught me a lesson). To the horror may be added the harmony, to the violence, the peace, to hate the love and to failure the success to racism the tolerance and appreciation of others and to religious and political bigotry the openness to all points of view.

Positive mental state is sustained by hope and optimism. In this regard, South Africans need to come together to forge a common basis of goodwill among themselves. There are many untold stories of charitable and altruistic behaviour that surfaced during the height of apartheid. There were caring people on all sides of the trenches who provided invaluable evidence that there is far more to human nature than exploitative selfishness and in the words of Harold Schulweis, "more to history than the doom of cyclical repetition."

I would like to end my address with a poem written by Matthew Arnold in 1887 entitled *Dover beach* in which he exhorts us to be alive to the possibility of love as he laments the loss of hope.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

So today as we lay ourselves before the altar of self-analysis as a nation, let us as responsible South Africans take heed of President John F Kennedy's words: "My fellow Americans ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

For life is not about hope and love alone, it is about creating our hope through love and understanding. And in the words of Obama, "We can!"