



“Towards a Transformed Society”

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**The Church and Social Transformation:
Prophet, Priest and Political Voice**

by

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Despite the different political and theological perspectives we had on the transition from apartheid to the beginning of democracy in 1994, most expected that fifteen years later South Africa would be ‘another country’. It is, but less so than what we expected or hoped for. In asking me to speak on the topic “Towards a Transformed Society,” Nomabelu wrote: “Notwithstanding the transformation we witnessed in 1994, and the subsequent attempts to deal in many ways with the pain of the past, we continue to live in a society beset by a myriad of social ills.”

I do not want to dwell on these ills: crime, corruption, greed, domestic and sexual violence, racism, xenophobia, non-delivery of social services, joblessness and schools that are places of abuse rather than learning. My concern is rather to seek to discern the causes of our predicament. It is not government, private and public sector leaders, organised labour, doctors, teachers or taxi drivers who are primarily to blame -- although none of them are free of culpability. The root cause of our failure lies deeper. The cause of our failure lies within the soul of our nation – reaching *inter alia*, into the inner sanctuaries of faith communities. Mamphela Ramphela recently defined this failure as “the trappings of insignificance that

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citizens of South Africa have failed to cast off and to break free from.”¹ It has to do with a sense of powerlessness within ourselves to change what we know is wrong.

Reflecting sometime ago on the failures of the African continent as a whole, former president Nelson Mandela observed:

The fault is not in our stars but in ourselves ... We know that we have it in ourselves, as Africans, to change all this. We must assert our will to do so. We must say that there is no obstacle big enough to stop us from bringing about an African renaissance.²

The question I pose concerns the role of the church and other faith communities in overcoming insignificance by taking some responsibility for the spiritual and social transformation which the nation demands. I do so with some hesitation because of my own limited involvement in the institutional church in recent times. We all, however, have a responsibility to concern ourselves with the RDP of the soul

Recognising that I am addressing the Diakonia Council of Churches I have chosen to speak on the prophetic and priestly roles of the church in relation to its political responsibility in the promotion of social transformation, conscious that members of other faiths will need to do their hermeneutics in adapting what I have to say to their own traditions.

Depending on the context within which we find ourselves at any given time the inclination and perhaps the obligation of church, mosque, synagogue and temple is to lean towards one of these roles. Careful reflection, however, suggests the need for faith communities to play a holistic or integrated role in society, incorporating the role of priest and prophet, plus political counsellor, in a holistic paradigm of ministry. The one feeds off the other.

A word about each of these three roles:

Prophet

There is perhaps something of a prophet in most of us – not least in the face of human abuse and suffering. Righteous anger, a sense of fair play and protest against unnecessary suffering are involuntary emotions that well-up in people of conscience and good will in the face of abuse. When the Pharisees rebuked Jesus’ disciples for their proclamations, Jesus suggested that in certain situations if they were to be silent the “very stones would cry out.”

¹ Mamphela Ramphela, “A Lack of Confidence is the Barrier to SA’s Success,” *Sunday Independent*, 12 July 2009.

² Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Little, Brown, 1994).

(Luke 19:40) Indeed, the Hebrew Bible tells us that even the donkey rises up to speak truth to the one who beats it! (Numbers 22: 28)

The prophet is compelled to proclaim justice and the word of the Lord in the face of injustice, whereas many people, even those who recognise evil for what it is, prefer to hold their tongues in the face of evil out of self-interest, in the hope of securing a good job or out of fear. When this level of silence prevails, an extra burden is placed on the few to speak on behalf of the many. We think of people of faith who walked among us as prophets proclaiming justice in the face of evil. Albert Luthuli, Robert Sobukwe, Beyers Naude, Denis Hurley, Archbishop Tutu, Imam Heron, Albertina Sisulu, Emma Mashinini, Ela Ghandi, and others. There were also prophets who located themselves outside of the faith communities: Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Helen Joseph and others – each deeply reflective and in their own way profoundly spiritual people.

There are also prophetic movements – not led by an obvious individual person but a collective or movement of people proclaiming the judgement of God and of history in the name of moral decency. Trade unions, organisations of women, marginalised groups of young people are among them. Faith movements, including the Diakonia Council of Churches, the SACC, the Christian Institute, Jews for Justice, the Union of Jewish Women, the Muslim Youth Movement, and the Divine Life Society have all in various situations raised their voices and contributed in kind to the needs of marginalised people.

The prophetic voice has come at times from the most unlikely places and often from the most unlikable individuals and movements. Biblical prophets were rarely a likeable lot and frequently on the wrong side of rulers and the elite. I had a conversation with a ‘prophet turned politician’ in Pretoria a while ago. He complained about a particular clergyman who was criticising government for failing to address a particular problem. He spoke of the clergyman as being naïve and unrealistic. Prophets are sometimes that! When, however, the prophetic voice of leaders, both responsible and at times naïve, are shunned and ignored, the temptation is for those who we used to call “*opstokers* and *klipgooiers*” (instigators and stone-throwers) to take to the streets. We would that they find constructive and non-violent ways of making their protest. Should we ignore their cry and fail to respond to their need, however, we are likely to do so at our own peril.

Thank God for the prophets and those who toll the bell of injustice and human suffering. Some who raise their voices and pay the price for so doing are celebrated as heroes (especially the dead ones!), many continue to do so without honour, recognition or respect.

We would do well to listen and ponder the voices that surround us, lest we fail to hear a word of warning, indeed what some who believe would call the Word of the Lord.

In addition to the important voice of the prophet proclaiming the Word of the Lord, whether in brimstone and damnation or graceful provocation, the citizens of our land also need assistance and support to rise above any sense of insignificance and powerless they may feel in the face of evil. For this to happen transformation in this fifteenth year of our democracy, the prophetic voice needs to be augmented with the voice of the pastor or priest – one who stands beside wayward citizens, parishioners and sinners, enabling them to become more than what they may be at any given time.

Priest

As prophets come in various shapes and sizes, and without making too finer a theological distinction between priest and pastor, the latter also comes in different guises. I was recently speaking with the South African ambassador to Sweden Zeph Makgetla, an old struggle type, about our native land. He said that if he were President he would deploy 10 000 additional psychologists across the land, suggesting that we are a broken and traumatised people!

For many years the church was called to be a prophetic church. We were schooled in the need to say a resounding 'no' to the apartheid state. Today we are required to continue to say 'no' to all forms of oppression, corruption and deception by government and citizens alike. We are also called to say 'yes' and 'well, maybe' to programmes of government and others that offer hope and transformation in society. Above all we need to offer healing, inspiration and innovation to a nation that in its better moments knows its shortcomings.

The prophet is inspired to speak in times of crisis and when the need is most urgent. Their names often hit the media headlines. The parish priest, pastor and preacher are required to minister in good times and bad, whether inspired or not – and mostly their voices are do not makes the headlines. Above all the pastor and priest is required to care for both 'those who will' and 'those who won't' reach beyond themselves to the higher goals demanded of South Africa in this difficult period of our history.

This requires the church to offer more than critical analysis, more than a litany of society's shortcomings, more than a loud voice from the pulpit. The church needs also to demonstrate an understanding of the fears of those who languish in their comfort zones or fear what the future holds for their old age, their children and their children's children. In addition to the prophetic word, intransigence often requires a pastoral touch to help people attain their own

liberation and involvement in the transformation process. Sometimes the prophetic voice of censure is required. "Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" was spoken by the one who incarnated tenderness. In other situations, however, the harsh words of judgment need to be augmented by the language of understanding and inspiration. Words of aspiration that lure and draw people towards their better and higher ideals are often needed in the most adverse situations. There was an old lady in the Buitenkant Street congregation in District Six that I served thirty years ago in my days of anger and demand, who used to say "you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." Important words.

I go back to the days when I taught liberation and contextual theology. I understood the prophetic dimension inherent to that theology. It provided a relatively easy albeit costly incentive. I was at the same time fascinated by the depth of spiritual and liturgical praxis out of which this theology came. It is the latter that I fear has to a significant extent lost in parts of the church where it was once present, not least comfortable middle class churches, where we so often fail to promote the kind of priestly theology that gives rise to a prophetic and diakonic ministry.

The burning question in our present context is how to build a church and a nation from a range of people drawn from different ideologies, races, backgrounds, classes and historic experiences. This includes people who by design or accident were on opposite sides of a deeply divided nation. I spoke with Govan Mbeki a couple of years before he died in 2001, asking what it would take to ensure the success of a democratic South Africa. His answer was crisp and clear: "having and belonging". He suggested that unless the "have not's" are able to share in the material wellbeing of the nation those who "have" will not sleep well at night. We went on to say that unless those who "have" are in turn made to feel part of the South African family they will resist sharing what they have with others. He was speaking about the prophetic need to share and the priestly need to reconcile.

It will take the cultivation of a generosity of the human spirit by blacks and whites, rich and the poor in South Africa for Oom Gov's vision to be realised. If his word is correct -- and it does not take the Wisdom of Solomon to realise it is -- the question is to what extent are our churches, mosques, temples and synagogues challenging (prophetically) and enabling (pastorally) their congregants to realise this double-edged vision. It is a vision that draws the prophetic and the priestly into a common form of ministry.

Political Voice

What do the prophet and the priest have to say to government and state? What is the political responsibility of faith communities in this regard? The prophet needs to speak truth to power. The priest needs to nurture souls and liberate all South Africans (not only the nice ones) of their anxieties, fears and self-centeredness. The prophet and the priest needs at the same time to understand the limitations within which the politician, the leader and state is obliged to operate.

I am suggesting that in being both prophetic and priestly, often to the annoyance of those to whom the church ministers, the church needs to be more than the purveyor of what the 'prophet-turned-politician' (to whom I referred earlier) saw as 'naïve and unrealistic' niceties in the face of hard political realities. Without surrendering the importance of the prophetic and priestly voice, both prophet and priest have a responsibility to speak to the real world in promoting concrete possibilities for resolving of the social problems facing the nation. The church cannot afford to speak only at the level of principle, absolute standards and what would be nice in an ideal world if it is to promote real transformation. In some such situations the church has an important mediatory role to play between leaders who often tend to dwell on the difficulties involved in promoting a social agenda and those who are demanding change.

Speaking at the Oxford Conference on Life and peace in the 1930s, that gave rise to the establishment of the World Council of Churches, J. H. Oldham spoke of the need the church to develop what he called "middle axioms". Emphasising that these did not involve the ultimate step required to resolve a problem, their "middle axioms" were designed to anticipate "the possible next step" that could reasonably be taken to alleviate a crisis and open the way for further steps to be taken later in finding a more sustainable solution to a problem.³ This requires the church to engage in down-to-earth, concrete and often a time-consuming ministry. There are no quick-fix solutions to many societal problems. This is a form of ministry to the structures of government that requires prophets and priests to role-up their sleeves, get dirt under their finder nails and be a meaningful player in society.

I would suggest that the biggest challenge facing the churches, at least in some parishes (recognising that there are some obvious and celebratory exceptions) is the lack of direct involvement by parishioners in development and aid work as opposed to charitable giving. It is this that often distances many priests, would-be prophets and parishioners from the harsh

³ See Duncan B. Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 22.

realities of what is involved in the promotion of the kind of realistic policies that politicians, bureaucrats, civil servants and social practitioners face on a daily basis.

Bluntly put, there are people in government, the private sector and civil society who are looking to faith communities to help them weld together moral ideals, practical possibilities and a spiritual incentive to realise their intensions. Political leaders are looking to faith communities to keep them in touch with the needs of grassroots' communities and to provide the kind of spiritual, moral and prophetic leadership that is required to move the nation along the transformation track. The nineteenth century philosopher G. W. F. Hegel once argued that a successful leader needs to be one step ahead of his or her people, but never more than one step. Ahead in order to lead; not too far ahead in order to ensure he or she understands and gives expression to the needs of the community. It is this leadership that faith communities need to offer.

Towards a Holistic Ministry

Some are called to be prophets, some to be priests and pastors, others politicians and civil servants. The question is how to ensure that the one enriches the other. Ministry in this period of our history as a nation involves finding a way to integrate the roles of prophet, priest and political counsel. This, I suggest, is a contribution that faith-based spirituality can make to realistic transformation and the burning need for a nation to rise above what is sometimes a sense of insignificance and powerlessness in the face of the challenges that confront us. This is a challenge every bit as demanding as the challenge we faced in the struggle against apartheid. The transformation challenge is a huge one, an urgent one and clock is ticking.