

al Diakonia Lecture

Who is my neighbour?" Who is my neighbour? – A Right or Responsibility

Delivered by: Fr Michael Lapsley, SSM, Director, Institute for Healing of Memories
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I wish to dedicate my speech to the women of South Africa.

Who is my neighbour?

I would like to pay tribute to all Diakonia has done since it was formed to love our neighbour, especially the poorest and most downtrodden in the name of the church, and in partnership with the churches

On Good Friday 2008, here in Durban my great friend, Fr Albert Nolan preached a wonderful sermon on who is my neighbour. He said and I quote: For Jesus our neighbour is everyone - absolutely everyone without exception.
No matter who they are or what they have ever said or done.

I am sure we would all want to agree. It is easy to agree.

When I was a child, someone came knocking at our door. My mother answered and found someone trying to convert her. The person at the door told her that loving her neighbour did not mean literally having to love the next door neighbour. After her would be converter left, my mother rushed next door, to tell her next door neighbour, who was actually a dear friend, with great glee, that she had been told that loving her neighbour did not apply to the woman who lived next door. I guess they had never heard Albert Nolan explain that there are no exceptions.

I would like to suggest to you that even the most faithful Christians among us, constantly choose which neighbours to help. In reality none of us help every person we meet. We don't even help all the people we meet who are suffering. How do we choose? On what basis do we decide which neighbours to help.

Let me give a complicated and challenging example.

Recently we witnessed shameful xenophobic attacks in different parts of the country. The consequences of those attacks continue to play themselves out. It brought out the best and the worst in us as a nation. Many of us rightly felt guilt and shame about what was happening.

In the midst of the horribleness there were many acts of kindness and generosity, not least from some among the poorest. Some in the middle classes were motivated to provide food and shelter to desperate foreigners. Curiously some of us seem to have been unmoved by the situation of our fellow South Africans living in similarly appalling conditions. What does that say about us and about how we choose our neighbours?

Equally how do we decide that particular people are *not*, my neighbour?

...atched down in Durban. During that first period in
...o be a follower of Jesus Christ. I sought to be
...ove God with my heart, soul, mind and strength and to
love my neighbour as myself.

I found that under apartheid I could not be a neighbour to a black person. The colour of my skin made me an oppressor just as it defined all black people as oppressed. I could fight against apartheid and I did, but I still had all the advantages of a white skin. When I look back, joining the liberation struggle was for me, about recovering my own humanity, about dealing with the ~~other~~, about the possibility of becoming neighbours.

Having been a committed pacifist, since early adolescence, I travelled a journey similar to that of the nation. From the perspective of those fighting against apartheid, I eventually became convinced, after the killings during the Soweto uprising, that in our context, the Augustinian and Thomist arguments for a just war were all fulfilled. we had just goals, just means, it was a last resort to mention just a few of the classical arguments. I always remember an interview with Oliver Tambo about the armed struggle. His voice reduced to a whisper as he said: ~~They~~ forced us into it. No romanticisation of armed struggle and, I suspect, a spirituality that made him intuitively aware that there would be an enormous moral and spiritual cost for that option. While others equivocated about ~~necklacing~~ it was Tambo who used his moral authority to say that it was unacceptable.

We in the faith community, step by step, resolution by resolution, finally faced the fact that we were ruled over by an illegitimate government. However, even to the very end, the churches continued officially to provide military chaplains only to the SADF and never officially to the forces for liberation.

Of course it is true to say that as church people, we tended to be better at the orthodoxy of our teaching than the orthopraxis. If church resolutions could build the kingdom of God, South Africa would have become heaven on earth a long time ago.

Why do I mention these things today. this is 2008 after all.

That was that time. Now is another time.

What time is it now in South Africa?

As the book Ecclesiastes says:

- 1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
- 2 a time to be born, and a time to die;
- 3 a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- 4 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
- 5 a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- 6 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
- 7 a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- 8 a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
- 9 a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- 10 a time to seek, and a time to lose;
- 11 a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
- 12 a time to tear, and a time to sew;
- 13 a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

Some of the voices we are now hearing in the political discourse belong to a previous age. They are out of sync. It is not a time for killing, but it is a time for healing. It is not a time for war, but it is a time for peace. It is not a time to keep silence it is a time to speak.

If we are to have a neighbourly society the time has come for the faith community to come out of early retirement. We used to speak to pharaoh with great clarity. And then Joseph became pharaoh and we lost our way

It is time for the faith community to find its voice again . we need to stand for the truth.as we did so well in 1989.

As more South Africans become increasingly disenchanted with the behaviour of the political class, there is a space which we in the faith community along with civil society can and should occupy. Are we ready, are we willing?

What is the truth for which we must stand . it is the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ - the truth of a partial and partisan God who is in favour of everybody from the side of the poor and oppressed.

In the wake of the democratic elections of 1994, the churches began to use the term critical solidarity in relation to a legitimate and democratically elected Government.

We should be fearless in supporting government when it acts in the interests of the poor. We should be equally fearless in opposing government when it fails to act justly.

Here in the province where Mahatma Gandhi walked it is good to assert the need for *satyagraha* and a spirit of compassion.

The recent attacks on the judiciary should alarm all of us. Our grandchildren might not forgive us if we stood idly by and allowed the rule of law and a respected and independent judiciary to be compromised for short term political gains by the loudest voices in the political class.

When we think about who is our neighbour as South Africans we cannot fail to think about Zimbabwe. In the early years of this millennium we failed Zimbabwe. During our liberation struggle we did everything in our power to make sure that the issue of apartheid was on everyone's agenda. As a country, during the last decade we used our power whenever we could to protect and shelter the government of Zimbabwe as it systematically violated the rights of its own people. This will not be quickly forgotten by Zimbabweans.

We can be proud of the prophetic action of Bishop Rubin Philip and others to seek to prevent Chinese arms being sent to Zimbabwe.

For years, I pooh-poohed those who made comparisons with Zimbabwe and what South Africa might become. Today I am less sure, after recent events in our country. Much depends on you and me.

Christians, we have much to learn from a little island in that it means to be a neighbour. Although I have witnessed practical solidarity across the developing world during our liberation struggle and since 1994. Fidel rightly says that solidarity is the opposite of xenophobia and racism. There are 5 Cuban patriots languishing in US prisons because they tried to prevent terrorism against their motherland. I have visited one of them, Gerardo Hernandez 4 times in a US jail. When Walter Sisulu died, Gerardo wrote from his prison cell to express his sadness. Cuba gives a lie to the expression %harmony begins at home+which is often used as an argument for not showing support beyond our immediate circle

In many of our churches, not least in my own, debate rages about the place of same gender loving people. Often the debate creates more heat than light

In my experience, whenever there is conflict, there is an %us+and a %them+. In the Gospels Jesus told stories that encouraged listeners to see that we are one human family.

In the faith community, not least in my own church, homosexuality has been an issue that has caused sharp divisions.

Same gender loving persons become political football in the battle between liberals and conservatives. Personally I have a dream that in my lifetime, all the leaders of the worlds great religions will make an unequivocal apology to gay, lesbian, and transgendered people for our part in their oppression and for the hurt we have caused. Many across the world admire us as a country for the constitutional provision outlawing discrimination on the basis of orientation. That has not stopped the rape of black lesbians in our townships.. Are our churches safe places where people can tell their stories and be honest about who they are?

In our Institute for Healing of Memories, we love to say that every story needs a listener.. But it is true isn't it that in all our churches, across the different traditions, we are much better at preaching than we are at listening to one another's pain?

The Bible tells us that we should love our neighbours as ourselves. But what happens if we don't love ourselves? What hope is there of loving the %other+if our experience of life has made us feel worthless? I have long been convinced that the greatest damage that apartheid did to all the people of this country was spiritual damage.

Researchers are helping us to understand that trauma and damage can be intergenerational. What do I carry inside me as a consequence of what happened to my parents and grandparents and even further back?

On the day Martin Luther King was assassinated he led a march of the sanitation workers. They were all black men. Each of them carried a placard which simply read: I am a man. 30 years later I participated in a march in New York City and we all carried the same placard which said: %am somebody+.

The words of Jesus invite us to be neighbours. To become neighbours we will need to recognise our own woundedness and the woundedness of others . to cooperate with God in Gods own healing work



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ation are not optional extras. They are integral to the suggest that as a faith community we need to add Millennium Development Goals.

Is this work of healing and reconciliation something for which we need a new Messiah?

No, we are all, the people God has been waiting for.