



ECUMENICAL PRAYER SERVICE FOR PEACEFUL ELECTIONS

DIAKONIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

EMMANUEL CATHEDRAL – 19 April 2009

It is appropriate that the Church should gather in an ecumenical setting such as this, to meditate and pray for peaceful elections, prior to these elections of 2009. It is appropriate because for the first time since true democracy began in this country in 1994, and we became a secular state providing for freedom of religion and religious expression, the church appears to have been intentionally targeted as a battle ground for votes. The nature of the battle has been perturbing when it has been declared that God has already decided which party should win! This kind of takes away our freedom of choice somewhat, doesn't it?

It is time to put the place and role of the church into perspective regarding elections and the government that follows. I would like to paraphrase Colossians 3¹¹ in this regard, and read it thus: Here, in the post-Easter church, there is no ID or UDM, no DA or ANC, no IFP or Freedom Front, no COPE or ACDP etc, but Christ is all, and is in all. We are here to pray for an electoral process, for the parties that clamour for our vote and for the electorate who will cast their vote. We are not here to pray for one to win, but to pray that all may approach the elections in the spirit of servanthood, and be enabled to accept victory or defeat in the same spirit of humility – for the victors will be entrusted with an immense task of governance and nation building in a depressed global economic atmosphere, and in a climate of increasing poverty and desperation which fosters increased crime. It will be a daunting task, and one for which the majority party in government will need our ongoing prayers. Romans 13 tells us that governing authorities are God-ordained and established – which means that they are accountable to God for the manner in which they govern and manage the resources that belong to the people of the country. That's quite a responsibility, for which whoever has the role will need great inner strength.

A part of John's great vision in Revelation has something quite telling in the context of elections, and government, and God's role in these things: Listen to these words from Chapter 11: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and of his

Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.” These words are painted in a scroll over the place where the monarch of Great Britain is crowned within Westminster Abbey; and they should be printed in full view of whoever is entrusted with earthly governance. God’s governance is the only eternal governance, and therefore the only one to which Christians should pay blind allegiance. In Ephesians Chapter 1 we are told that Jesus has been “raised from the dead and seated in the heavenly realms far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way”

I don’t know about you, but to me these words seem to be pretty definitive regarding the role of the church in relation to elections and governance. It is not the role of the church to get involved in the divisiveness of party political manoeuvring or squabbling: the church must stand above that, for we serve a different authority, one which is eternal. However, because we are to be in the world while not of the world, each individual Christian must exercise his and her responsibility to cast a vote, selecting a party which best and most closely offers the kind of governance that will serve the needs of the people with equity, will manage their affairs and the public purse with integrity, and will know that they govern by the grace of God, to whom they are accountable. We each need to give prayerful consideration to what choice we will make, and to follow God’s guidance in this regard.

The Scripture passages we have read this afternoon have reminded us of what is at the heart of God: servanthood; justice; mercy; integrity; and humility. Isaiah 58 tells us that God seeks honesty and integrity, no exploitation, justice, freedom from oppression, food for the hungry, shelter for the poor, clothing for the naked, above pious fasting and prayer. That means that these things are of extreme importance to God, and therefore we should demand these things of our government. We used to read this chapter of Isaiah during the days of apartheid and long for the day when this would come to pass in our land. It can, if we the church exercise our role responsibly. For while we are not to engage in the divisive machinations of party politics, we are to engage the government of the day as its conscience, for we have seen a new and better land, and we want to see those values being lived out in this land. It is to that kingdom of our God and of his Christ that we should be pointing, and that is the model we should be holding up before our governing authorities saying: If you want to engage the church, this is what we are seeking, can you deliver? And when they don’t, we should be holding them to account because they are appointed by God and therefore are accountable to God. This is the role of the church in society.

When we have a clear understanding of our role in the world, then we are able to recognise the nature of the sinfulness of those who perpetrate violence during election periods: they are guilty of idolatry, of placing a political party above the value of a human life, above relationships with other human beings, sometimes even within the family, above God even. And that is clearly wrong, for it goes against what we have seen is in the heart of God. So, when we pray for peaceful elections, we are praying that God may be at the centre, and that all people and parties may seek to honour God in all their dealings with others.

We pray for proper perspective; we pray for tolerance and understanding; we pray for guidance as we make our choices; we pray for graciousness in the winners and the losers; we pray that there may be visible signs of the Kingdom of God on earth, because there are people of God who live in the kingdoms of this world; and we commit ourselves to being the church for whom Christ is the head over all things, holding to account those who are entrusted with governance in this world when they fail to practice justice, mercy, and love in integrity.

And so, people of God, go into this election week in the faith of the Resurrection and when you make your cross on a ballot paper, keep one eye on an empty Cross, an empty tomb; and a Risen Christ, and know that God in his great mercy has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Sermon delivered by Revd Ian Booth, Deputy Vice-Chairperson of Diakonia Council of Churches.