

ADDRESS TO THE ARCHBISHOP HURLEY OPEN FORUM

‘Say this word to them, “Tears flood my eyes night and day, unceasingly, since a crushing blow falls on the daughter of my people, a most grievous injury. If I go into the countryside, there lie men killed by the sword; if I go into the city, I see people sick with hunger; even prophets and priests plough the land: they are at their wit’s end.....
Why have you struck us down without hope of cure? We were hoping for peace – no good came of it! For the moment of cure – nothing but terror!’” (Jeremiah 14: 17 -19)

The same experiences of suffering, the realities which outraged the prophets, are things which happen every day in the world of today. But what is the reaction of so many in the different societies of our world? What is our reaction?

It seems that this world has become so numbed to reality that crimes against humankind, and so many forms of injustice perpetrated against the poor – realities which horrified the prophets – all these are “just the way life is at present”; all this is just another example of current social dynamics; this is “normal” in the world of today. Have people become so dulled within that acts of injustice, e.g. exploitation of and violence against the poor, the taking and giving bribes, corruption – becomes but a passing blip on the screen, whereas to the prophet it was a catastrophe? Yes, the analysts might agree, injustices will have negative results for the welfare of the poor – but to the prophets injustices compromised their very existence. To the powerful ones of today, atrocities seem to be a regrettable but nonetheless passing episode – to the prophets such happenings were a threat to any possible future.

Perhaps, as we sense the depth of moral outrage in the prophets, there might be a feeling that, given reality as it is, their word was a bit “over the top.” We live in a world, on a continent, and in a country where we witness daily all manner of misery, falsehood, hypocrisy, and systemic injustices which condemn countless millions to a poverty trap from which they cannot escape. But do people ever really get angry and feel outrage at what they see and hear? Do we as human beings ever approach the indignation of the prophets for whom any form of injustice took on almost cosmic dimensions?

For the prophets, life and everything to do with life was intimately connected and inter-connected – and so they possessed a deep empathy with all that was happening.....Jeremiah 2:12 13.

Today we remember with gratitude our well-loved leader and father, Archbishop Hurley, whose pilgrimage of faith in the midst of injustice and oppression continues to be our inspiration as we reflect back on the inner fire and passion within his spirit which drove him to name what needed to be named. As with the prophets, he had to make every effort to move away from an appalling indifference to the evil and misery which surrounded him, and in its place feel an outrage and passion which can only happen when one’s very soul becomes sensitised to the least blot on the dignity of any human being. His life calls us today not to allow our hearts to become unfeeling, not to let go of the memories, or worse still to deaden our conscience. He shows us the way to understand that, like the

prophets, we need to be people who feel deeply and even fiercely – with a passion which cuts to the heart of truth and justice.

His life, and his struggle with personal honesty and the need for constant conversion led him to see clearly that the answer to Jeremiah's cry "we were hoping for peace...for the moment of cure – nothing but terror" (Jeremiah 14:19) was to look within and to respond to the truth: "Yahweh, we do confess our wickedness and our father's guilt: we have indeed sinned against you." (Jeremiah 14: 20).

The daily journey of conversion was a call to Archbishop Hurley, and it is a call to the Church and the faith communities today. It is a call to confront our prejudices, our apathy, and any tendency to become "used to" the misery, suffering and oppression of the little ones of the world – to humbly recognise that "yes, I/we as Church have sinned, O God, we share in our own people's guilt."

But, in this journey we must also move from recognition and awareness to an empathetic anger, to accept that each of us is called to be *passionate* in God's hands, to be the prophet in God's hands, to be a voice which cries out against the way the poor have been exploited and crushed, and the resources of our world abused by selfishness and greed. As in the past, the prophet today is the meeting point between God, humankind, and creation.

For me, Archbishop Hurley was such a prophet – a person with a clear mind, an extraordinary intellect, and yet such a warm, truly human being. The stories of his after-dinner speeches, during which he used examples from his beloved cricket and rugby, are legendary. I remember one in particular, and I ask you to think of it in cricketing terms – the bowler sending down "bouncers", and the batsman "ducking and weaving" to avoid the bouncer.

Less than 2 months after he had ordained me bishop of Rustenburg, I led a protest march against human rights abuses in Bophuthatswana together with pastors from other Christian churches. The Bop security forces opened fire on us with live ammunition and lethal gas projectiles; they fired these gas projectiles straight at me and I ducked and weaved to avoid being hit. The police went berserk, shooting in windows of houses, beating up women with sjamboks, and we ran for cover – discovering later that a young man had been killed and scores injured. Later that evening, I came back to my house in shock at the mayhem, not knowing that someone had phoned Archbishop Hurley to inform him of what had happened. As I came into my office, the phone rang: "Hello, Kevin, this is Denis. I hear you have been ducking the bouncers today!" It was the first time that I was able to laugh. But he went on to encourage me to keep walking that path of sacrifice for justice and human rights.

Jeremiah experienced in his personal journey the heart of God which burns with a twin expression – outrage and indignation at all that is unjust; and compassion and love for the weakness in people and nations. He could lament: "O Land, land, land, listen to the word of Yahweh" (Jeremiah 22: 29), mirroring the anguish in the heart of Jesus: "Jerusalem,

Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you. How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused....” (Matthew 23: 37).

Indeed, as we face the sheer enormity of greed, apathy, indifference to pain and misery, sinful oppression and dehumanisation of people, sinful destruction of the world’s resources, sometimes our first recourse may have to be a prayer of lamentation, a grieving prayer for our world, our nation, our church, our individual community, ourselves.

But, if like Denis Hurley, our hearts are filled with a passion for truth, justice, and peace, we will also be driven by the Spirit within to heal and restore what has been so cruelly broken, to reach out and touch the woundedness of the other with the empathetic healing love that becomes a window and a door of hope, to bring about the promise of God articulated so beautifully in Jeremiah 31: 31 – 34....”See the days are coming....when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel....Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people.”

Today, as we reflect back on the life and witness of our brother and leader, Archbishop Denis, our faithfulness to the call of God in today’s reality is surely to commit ourselves to becoming a little more “prophetic” in personal and community commitment rather than being satisfied and comfortable with what I/we have and have achieved; to become a little more involved and engaged with an empathetic spirit rather than to remain distant from the experiences and the causes of misery; to become more truly honest with myself, and as a community, to be more honest about what is happening in life rather than being accommodating and polite because of a fear of being marginalised and rejected with the poor; to bringing realistic hope rather than resorting to what may only be lip service, or to speaking words which are felt by the poor and suffering to be rather like platitudes.

Let us hear God calling to us in the words of Jeremiah: “Do not say, ‘I am a child’Go now to those to whom I send you, and say whatever I command you.....Do not be afraid of confronting them.....Today, I have set you among nations and kingdoms.....to uproot and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1: 7-10). Yes – “to destroy and to overthrow” – anything that diminishes and crushes the dignity of human beings and the integrity of our creation; and “to build and to plant” – to “build” the sense of worth and self-belief in the poor and marginalised; to “plant” the seeds of true hope in the hearts of people that they and God’s creation can be protected and develop, so that Jesus words may be fulfilled: “I have come that they may have life, and life to the full.” (John 10:10)

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