



WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING PRESENTATION 22 JUNE 2016

REVD IAN BOOTH

The discussion that is uppermost on the agenda of most citizens in our country in these days relates to the local government elections scheduled for 3 August. The discussion does not revolve around who to vote for, or what the various parties will do for us as citizens of eThekweni, but around what is going on within the ANC, and how the clearly apparent tensions within the party will affect all of us in the years to come.

That there are divisions within the party is undisputed, except for the spin from the top which suggests that there may be some mischief making by the opposition. I share one conversation I have had in the past few days with a lifelong member of the party, whose loyalty to the values and ethos of the party is beyond dispute. His membership is due for renewal, and so he approached his branch to process the renewal. Because it is unclear to them which camp he supports (and he will not declare this as it is irrelevant in his mind) he has been referred to the regional office of the party.

I would be surprised if this is an isolated incident. People are dying, cities are burning, the people are deeply unhappy - and there is still six weeks to go! The ban by the SABC on airing footage of the protests is exceedingly worrying, and is reminiscent of the apartheid State of Emergency era when people across the world knew more about what was happening in our neighbourhoods than we did, if we relied solely on the news for our information. Fortunately, the church networks ensured, and will continue to ensure, that those who wish to be are fully informed. But the censorship, disguised as necessary protection of children from violent images, is of great concern in a society which should be an open democracy.

We see the symptoms of the tensions being played out at various levels of our society, in the hostels, in the burning and barricading of streets, in fear expressed by those in leadership, and we must ask what it is we can do in the short term, and what this means for us in the long term.

In the short term, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has requested the assistance of the churches for the mobilising of volunteer observers in each of the voting stations in the municipality on 3 August. The role of the observers is recognised in our electoral system, and they play a critical role in maintaining fairness and justice in the process. Observers have the right and responsibility to

report any suspected wrong doing to the IEC, and to request that action be taken. If they feel the IEC is dragging its heels on the matter, they may approach the Electoral Court directly and seek appropriate action. Diakonia Council of Churches and the Democracy Development Programme are collaborating in the recruiting and registering of volunteer observers, and would welcome your availability. Please let the organisation know if you wish to be considered for this important role.

In the medium to long term, we need to rise to the challenge to be leaders in the crucial task of nation building and conciliation. I have seen two responses to the current wave of violence: one which says: "One day we will discover that there are no schools and clinics left. We do not have the resources to relocate to another country, and so will have to live with the reality of nowhere to educate our children, and nowhere to take our sick relatives. We will die in our homes in ignorance"; and another which says: "We South Africans are painfully naive. We somehow expect that 300 years of arrogantly exploitative colonisation and five decades of violently repressive apartheid system will miraculously produce a peaceable, anger-free generation after just twenty two years of political freedom under a structurally rigged global economic system. It's like expecting a survivor of thirty abusive years to get over their history in less than two years.....without therapy. I weep for this nation!" What is our role as an organisation, and what is our role as churches in this crazy mixed up divided society we live in?

To begin to answer this question we must focus on our theme for this year's Annual General Meeting, "Who is my neighbour?" The theme has presented itself in response to the violence against foreign nationals from our neighbouring countries last year, the after effects of which are still being experienced by a number of people in our city, and the persistent violence in our hostels, of which Glebelands is the one which has received the most coverage.

The biblical context for the theme comes from the well-known interaction between a lawyer and Jesus, in which the lawyer, on hearing the law reduced to two commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbour as yourself; seeks to have the concept of neighbour defined. Implied in the question "Who is my neighbour?" is the unspoken "Who is not my neighbour?" Who can I get away with not loving as I love myself?

Jesus responds with a parable in which the most despised "other" is the hero because he was the best example of a neighbour, and asks the lawyer to say it. Our response then must begin where Jesus ends off: go and be a good neighbour to others, rather than asking who we can exclude from the definition. But our response cannot end there. The neighbour, by definition, is one who does not belong to our family, who is not like us, who does not live in the same place as us, who speaks a different language, practices a different religion, and makes us feel uncomfortable.

We are told to overcome our discomfort, put aside our prejudice, and be a good neighbour to those who fit this description. But there's more! The message of the Kingdom of God speaks of a new humanity whose identity comes from the image of God planted in each one of us: sons and daughters of God. And it is clear from the scriptures that God excludes none from belonging.

In one of the visions from the Revelation to John we are told of a great multitude in heaven from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and worshiping God. When Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of new birth he speaks of the need to take on this new identity in which the old divisions of race and gender and nationality and economic class into which we are born no longer count, but we are born again with a new identity. In this new humanity none are excluded from being sons and daughters of God, and therefore our brothers and sisters. Our goal as followers of God in the way of Jesus is to turn neighbours into brothers and sisters. And this changes our narrative. We no longer get hung up on who is my neighbour, but start embracing the family.

It is naïve to believe that once the local government elections are over the tensions and camps and divisions will disappear, and we will live together in harmony. These have been simmering for years, and have come to a head in this election cycle. The issue of race as a divider in society continues to plague us as a nation. The issue of economic divides continues to plague us as a nation. These will not go away after the elections. They will rather be exacerbated by the new tensions and divisions intra-party, which will continue to afflict and affect us as a nation for some time to come. It becomes incumbent upon us to change this picture by the way we live and relate to others. The words we speak, the signals we transmit by our unspoken attitudes, the message we convey by our actions, these will be the measures of our commitment and contribution to a new and transformed society.

In an apparent leadership vacuum, someone needs to step up to the plate and take the lead in pulling the nation through the crisis and finding a place of healing and renewal. If it is not people of faith who do this through agencies such as this one, it will be people with other agendas and motives who seek to control the destiny of this nation in ways that feed their agenda. Each of us needs to ask what we can do to rewrite the script and show that there is a different way of living and relating. As an organisation, in partnership with our member churches, our programmes need to speak to the new humanity of the Kingdom of God as the model for a transformed society. And the starting point is how we relate to others.

A story to conclude: A rabbi was having a conversation with two shepherds, and asked how they know that night has ended and a new day has begun. One shepherd said: "When I see a shape on the hill over there and know that it is a shrub and not a predator, then I know that night has ended and a new day has begun" The other shepherd said: "When I see an animal moving and can tell that it is the sheepdog, and not a sheep, then I know that night has ended and a new day has begun" They

both looked at the rabbi, who said “When I look into the eyes of another human being and can see there the eyes of a brother or sister, then I know that night has ended and a new day has begun.”