

Act against group prejudice, at all cost

Just recently a new political party, the "Compatriots of South Africa," was registered to focus on the needs of disillusioned "brown people" in the Bay's northern areas. The founder had grown tired "watching how his people were side-lined from the mainstream economy" (Herald 11.02.2019).

Identity politics based on race, ethnicity and class is on the rise in South Africa.

According to Wikipedia identity politics "refers to political positions based on the interests and perspectives of social groups with which people identify." People's politics "are shaped by aspects of their identity through loosely correlated social organizations".

Identity politics close ranks around a specific grouping and often views another identity as the enemy or the cause of all troubles.

In South Africa race, ethnicity and socio-economic class are the favourite markers. Given our divided history identity politics represent low hanging fruit for politicians. Those sharing a particular identity are seen as the in-group. They are set against the out-group. The out-group is the threat against which the in-group is mobilised.

Although the Compatriots of South Africa seems to be a responsible group, the seeds of division are always sown in identity politics.

Cultivating fear and aggression against the other is the mainstay of identity politics. Fear-mongering and scapegoating empowers politicians. In this process the out-group is dehumanised, blurred into a faceless threat. "They" are no longer valued as human beings, but become animals, insects, the enemy that needs to be annihilated.

Prejudice and hostility against the other are the destructing driving force between in- and out-group mobilisation. This happens not only in South Africa. Prejudice allows US president Donald Trump to ignore large parts of his country's own population. All those who differs from him and his group are viewed with fear and rejection.

The church should be diametrically opposed to prejudice, hostility and fear on the basis of racial, ethnic or socio-economic identity. The Gospel witnesses to God's inclusive movement of love to all people. One becomes part of the church only on the basis of grace and faith, notwithstanding racial, ethnic and class associations. God's church transcends human division.

The Gospel is God's judgment on all efforts to divide, rank and dehumanize human beings. We all were created in the image of God and needs to be treated with the dignity God bestows on each of us. This includes those from other faiths as well.

The New Testament witnesses to the inclusive new humanity created by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul writes that "in Christ" there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, free or enslaved, male or female (Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11). These were the huge, impenetrable social categories of Paul's world. All were dissolved by Jesus Christ.

The church is not blind to diversity, but acts in love, cares, sustains and seeks human flourishing regardless of race or class, gender or ethnic origin.

What can the church practically do to oppose prejudice, fear of the other, dehumanization and hostility?

Firstly, we need to constantly remind ourselves of our Christian identity which supersedes other identity markers. We are bound to the commandment to love others as we love ourselves. We need to do to others what we want them to do unto us.

Secondly, the church needs to cultivate responsible citizenship. Although we belong to all kinds of groups, our well-being as citizens is bound up in our collective identity of a bigger unity, that of being South Africans. We seek the common good. We therefore need to become a listening community, bringing diverse interests together, seek to understand, and act in the way that will benefit all.

Thirdly, we need to recognise that our history is littered with the most terrible injustices of racism, discrimination, extortion, and exploitation. The church often turned a blind eye to or justified those atrocities. As churches we need to proactively work towards restorative justice, supporting and promoting the well-being of fellow human beings. Intentions are not good enough. We need to be seen doing so.

Fourthly, the church needs to cultivate friendships across the boundaries of our divided society. Sadly, church gatherings on a Sunday morning still reflect our divided country. Cross-cultural and cross-racial friendships have a huge effect on the lowering of prejudice in societies. We need to open up our church buildings, but especially our homes and our dining tables to each other. We need to meet others on a basis of mutual equality and dignity. Our common humanity will surprise and energise us.

Fifthly the church needs as collective public witness against all examples of public prejudice, discrimination and fear-mongering. We need to affirm a public morality that embraces the other and love unconditionally. Politicians must not get away with relational murder.

Lastly, growing religious extremism has the potential to politically destroy the world. While Christians find truth in the Lord Jesus Christ as the way to the Father, the church needs to publicly cultivate tolerance and respect for other faiths. All faiths share a mutual interest in the public good.

By lowering prejudice, we can jointly deal with the real enemy: poverty, inequality and unemployment.

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