

Don't let our differences devour us – we have a common heritage

After years of wandering in the desert, the first reports of the promised land of the Israelites said it was a dangerous place which “devours those living in it” (Numbers 13:32).

But, God had prepared a future for the people of Israel after delivering them from years of oppression.

It was a future that only two of the 12 scouts sent by Moses into the promised land had faith in. The others just saw unassailable challenges and hardships ahead.

Perhaps this is exactly the way many South Africans would describe our country. It is killing us.

Think of the horrendous crime, violence against woman and children, corrupt politicians who divide and rule and the lack of prosecution to bring the mighty to book. Think of a government disconnected from the people. It fails our basic need of safety and security.

Joblessness, poverty, murder, economic despair and xenophobia reign.

We desperately need a land that nurtures and heals its people.

We South Africans should use Heritage Day to pause, sit back and reflect on who we are and what we are called to do.

Heritage Day points us in the right direction. It prioritises unity and cooperation. It asks us to honour the rich culture and diversity of beliefs and traditions of all South Africans. The day reminds us our destiny is tied to our ability to view each other as assets in building a thriving nation that nurtures its people.

In an address marking Heritage Day in 1996 President Mandela stated it was instituted "because we knew that our rich and varied cultural heritage has a profound power to help build our new nation".

Mandela was right. Our differences will devour us if we turn against one another and allow our national leaders to get away with corruption and self-enrichment.

Fighting and blaming each other will kill us. It only serves the agenda of corrupt leaders.

Division will draw our attention away from the real challenges.

What can we practically do to unite ourselves behind constructive national goals, such as unity, co-operation, quality education and a productive job for all?

- Prejudice towards others must be dismantled. Divide and devour flourish on stereotypes and ignorance about each other.
- We need to cultivate an appreciative stance towards others. This is the basic tenet of Heritage Day. Our diverse ways of being and doing is good. It is an asset. It helps us to integrate different perspectives on the common good. It mixes the strong mortar that can build a sustainable future.
- We need patience. Our diversity means we will take a longer time as nation to reach consensus and develop balanced national priorities and strategies.
- We need to build a strong public alliance against corruption and slack officialdom
- Cultivate friendships across all possible boundaries of colour, sex, class or age. We should talk to, listen to, learn from one another. What are our stories, desires, hopes and fears? Wherever we meet, be it in the row at SARS or the licence department, in a bus or an Uber: Talk to one another, become friends.
- We must learn to listen well to each other. Good listening is driven by being inquisitive, longing to understand the other.
- We also need shared perspectives on our past.

Our long history of division robs us of a joint legacy. We know only our version of what happened and why. We need to delve into our history and broaden our understanding. This will create both empathy with others and a unity of purpose.

As a practical strategy I personally want to trace my origin to more than just my pale genetic forebears.

Genetically I am descended from religious refugees out of France, to whom Africa gave a new home in 1699.

Heritage Day challenges me to choose additional forebears who embody values and initiatives important to our society.

I choose to adopt the Sotho King Moshoeshoe as my forefather.

In the 19th century he built a strong and proud nation out of dislodged and wandering tribes.

Moshoeshoe was a troubled and wild child, but his father had him mentored by Mohlomi, a wise man, an African Socrates who taught unifying wisdom and non-violence.

Shaped by Mohlomi, Moshoeshoe became the Mandela of his age.

This heritage opens me up to Africa's nurture, the strength flowing from previous generations.

Think about the God of the Bible, who chose to be born in a manger in Bethlehem in order to save all of us, whatever our heritage and background.

The baby Jesus embodies the serving, life-giving God.

Through Christ I am descended from God's mission to bring justice, mercy and compassion to the multitudes.

Therefore, I am born in Sharpeville, Langa and Boipatong too.

By claiming and celebrating a joint heritage we will heal and prosper. Our land will feed us.

Ds Danie Mouton is the executive director of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Eastern Cape.