

NMB church Leaders for “Good Values, Ethics and Clean Living” – 2020

‘They worship in our churches’ ‘What then can the righteous do?’

Col 2:15 (NIV)

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Reviewing the situation

We have seen so far that corruption is morally wrong. It can never be excused by saying that you have to be corrupt because you have many relatives to support etc. The end never justifies the means. Doing wrong always has unintended unfortunate consequences. This is illustrated by what is happening in our nation at the moment.

Last week our nation was once more sadly racked by xenophobic crime and murder, necessitating the intervention of the SANDF in certain areas. Researchers attribute this to a complex series of factors. At the top of the list are said to be the failure of the government to ameliorate the poverty, disparity in wealth, and joblessness through adequate service delivery and expanding the economy. These are all factors that corruption is indirectly exacerbating. So, corruption may be said to be one cause of xenophobia in South Africa.

This serves to reinforce the stark conclusion from my first two articles that if we continue on the downward path of not checking increasing corruption South Africa could well end up as a failed state. Even if it does not go this far, millions will be forced to exist in dire poverty producing much worse violence than we have seen so far and mistrust of all government, so much so that our nascent democracy may even be aborted.

What then can the righteous do?

If it is conceded that corruption is seriously hindering service delivery, and that in turn it will have serious consequences politically, economically and for law and order, then it should be a matter of grave concern to all. No more so than in the church which has a God-given prophetic mandate to care for the well-being of society. Then we must ask, “Can we, as the church, do anything? Do we have to stand by and helplessly watch the foundations our state crumble?”

The answer is a resounding, “No!” When we go to the bible, we discover that God’s people faced similar problems in the past. The societies they lived in were similar to ours in South Arica today, in that they were being devastated by unbridled corruption. Two psalms, 11 and 82, appear to have been written as a result of this, and, despite being written so long ago, are amazingly relevant to our situation. Human nature is the same today as it was then!

These psalms not only demonstrate that from the earliest times corruption was commonplace throughout the ancient near East but they also indicate ways in which the people of God have reacted to this corruption. Both psalms express the hope that God will deal with it but also emphasize the serious consequences if those who are concerned do not do anything. In addition, they give us guidance as to some of the solutions that will be effective in today’s world.

The starting point – dismay at corruption.

These two psalms indicate that we need to begin by seeing corruption as so morally wrong and producing such terrible consequences that we become agonizingly concerned about it. They tell us that although God is concerned about corruption and judges those who practice it harshly, that he uses and empowers people who share his concern and who are dismayed at it. Perhaps it is even He who lays this concern on their hearts!

The author of psalm 82 experiences this concern because he realizes the results of having people in authority who are corrupt and, as a result, are not concerned about justice and the poor, or anyone else other than themselves (v3). In fact, God speaking through him tells us that the traumatic results of corruption are that 'all the foundations of the earth are shaken' (v5). This is his way of saying that the whole order of society crumbles. When leaders do not set a good example or do not enforce punishment upon the corrupt, then people become cynical, disillusioned and insecure. Everyone's motto becomes. 'If you do not look after yourself, no one else will.' So, all begin to practice corruption, from the greatest to the least, in order to grab 'what's mine' at the expense of everyone else. Ubuntu goes out of the window!

The author of psalm 11 reacts also by expressing dismay. What adds to his dismay is his sense of powerlessness and fear to do anything about it. 'When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?' His advisors do not help him since they tell him to flee rather than fight. They advise the psalmist to flee because the enemy is poised to launch a deadly attack. In such a lawless and chaotic situation godly people like the psalmist are tempted to believe that they can accomplish nothing, and will suffer if they try, so they might as well retreat to a safe place.

It is so easy to give up because you do not see what you can do in the face of corruption. The corrupt often have friends in high places, an extensive patronage system formed by those who profit by their corruption, large financial resources to hire good lawyers and the ability to make life very difficult for those who are whistleblowers or will challenge them in any way.

Yet these two psalms encourage us to realise that our God knows all about what is going in our country, is angry about it and that in Him we have the resources to stand strong to begin to combat corruption through 'prayer power', and 'people power'.

Psalm 11 is an example of discovering the resources that God provides to withstand evil

Psalm 11 speaks about a group of people called the righteous. They are called the 'righteous' because they honour God and order their lives in all things according to his will. They are concerned about corruption because they remember that it is God's desire that power and authority (of whatever sort, domestic, social, political, economic, religious or intellectual) are to be used to bless, not to exploit. In today's world when roads are not built, RDP houses fall down, sanitation is not laid on, schools and teachers are not provided, and hospitals deteriorate, so that the ill and infirm are not cared for, then God-given power and resources are not being used to bless.

What then are they to? The answer the psalmist gives is that they not to run away from thinking about the problem or to emigrate to another country where it is not so bad (to fly away like a bird as v. 1 puts it). This is a tempting option for the righteous, because they are being intimidated by the 'wicked' (those who are not interested in

obeying God's laws and think they can do what they like). They are rightly (see v. 5) fearful and feel powerless to do anything. Instead, the Psalmist encourages himself and others to begin to stand firm and fight moral corruption by looking up to God in His holy temple in Jerusalem (v. 4). This visual spiritual imagining of the Temple links the concerned Israelite to the reality of the invisible God. Looking at the Temple, which is just his footstall magnificent as it is, he/she begins to imagine how mighty, powerful, and all-seeing He is.

Looking at the Temple the concerned Israelite would remember Solomon's prayer when he consecrated the Temple and begin to remember God's wonderful compassionate promises to Solomon about those who pray in desperation towards the Temple. They would remember Israel's history when God in His majesty intervened to deliver them in His all-consuming, fiery omnipotence. As they do this then disbelief, fear and powerlessness will be replaced by the faith, courage and power necessary for effective action.

As Christians we worship someone who is greater than the Temple. When the temple of his body was destroyed on the cross it was remade again within three days at his resurrection. This new temple is not on earth but in heaven where He reigns in glory far above every evil power, spiritual or human. So let us by faith become so linked to Him, our living Temple, that we begin to actually believe that the God who knows everything that is going on in the shadows and hates it and is ready to act. The righteous will find refuge in him (v1), not as shivering paralyzed cowards, but because He will empower them to act to overcome this evil.

Then how should he begin? The answer is found in Psalm 82.

Psalm 82 is an example of confronting corruption with 'prayer' and 'people power'

The 'gods' spoken about here are most commonly interpreted either as the gods the Canaanites worshipped or human leaders and kings. Whether it is one or the other the psalm is mostly about human actions since the god's rulers worship will determine how they rule. In a modern context, we might say that the 'gods' are our desires we put first in our lives. If we desire something inordinately then we can be said to worship that thing and thus we make it a god in our lives. Thus, we can make a 'god' of self, or sex, or greed, or money, or possessions, power, popularity, position or prestige, and whichever desire dominates in our lives will determine our actions. This is especially so for rulers since they often have the opportunity and power to give free reign to their desires and get away with it.

Some interpreters go further and even suggest that the gods mentioned in this psalm represent the spiritual powers who rule over each nation and who are thus responsible for the types of rulers and officials who rule them, because of the connection the Bible reveals between the heavenly and earthly realities. Thus, judgment upon these gods is also judgment upon their human agents.

Whatever views are correct, and maybe all are, Psalm 82 may thus be legitimately interpreted as God castigating kings and rulers (aptly called gods) for their partiality (unfair bias) to the wicked. These so-called, 'little' gods are reprimanded for being devoid of a true understanding of moral issues. This is seen as resulting in the oppression of the most vulnerable in society, which God hates. The psalmist (vv. 1-4) testifies that God expects power to be exercised in solidarity with the weak and needy. Those with power, such as political and governmental leaders, are in a unique position

to enforce justice, punish corruption and set the moral tone for those they rule. In today's world this would translate into unselfish attitudes, just actions and incorruptibility.

What recourse, then, do those who are concerned about this situation have? The answer of Psalm 82, as exemplified in verse 8 ('Rise up, O God ...'), is to pray. This prayer is more than just an eschatological call for some future justice; it is foremost a prayer for the implementation of judgment and justice now.

Prayer is more than just pious wishing. For many in South Africa, especially of African descent, as it was among God's people in the bible, it is emotional, heartfelt, compassionate, angry and persevered in until it is seen that God has answered. There is a dynamic among those who meet to pray together, as they love to do, so that this heartfelt desire is imparted to all and those who were formerly apathetic become concerned and motivated to act. It is seen by many as an assault upon the spiritual powers (god's) that are behind injustice and wrong. It is a claiming of the power of the cross as spelt out in Col 2:15, *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.* Thus, it mobilizes people power with the expectation that the evil forces behind the wrongs were defeated by Christ and can be defeated by His praying people in the reality of their daily lives and in their country. Thus, although many might 'poo-poo' prayer it is a vital first step for Christians in combatting a corruption which is effected by the evil 'powers of the air' through human agents that they are unconsciously influencing. It is neglected at our peril! No matter what cultural group we belong to this is the praying that is needed and overcomes.

Yet the psalmist believes that something else happens if we pray together. Not everything is to be passively left to miraculous intervention by God. It is also a prayer that justice would be done by God through his people. As such, it is suggested that the psalmist himself sets the example by praying or singing this 'prayer psalm ... aloud in the Temple during Temple worship, probably in the hearing of the unjust "gods" /rulers, whom he portrays as being judged by God. This is another step in the utilisation of 'people power' (or rather 'people of God' power) to influence, firstly, corrupt leaders and then mobilise the worshipping community into action, since many who practice corruption are also regularly joining in worship on Sundays and even also at midweek prayer meetings, and will hopefully get the anti-corruption message and be motivated to change.

But this, however foundational, is just the start of the battle and the beginning of the options available to the righteous. There are in fact many answers offered in the Bible:

When the foundations collapse you can flit (like Elijah), seek to rebuild them (like the Deuteronomist), preach (like Amos), tell stories to build faith (like Genesis), promise a better future (like Isaiah), or feel overwhelmed (like the author of Ecclesiastes). Or you can just stand tall and look for God to act, like the author of Psalm 11, knowing that Yahweh's acts do not lie in some distant future, but now¹.

¹ Goldingay, J., 2008, *Psalms*, 3 vols., Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, p.194.

In the next article we will be reflecting on putting some of these actions into practice in today's world. I close with just a quote that I hope will focus our thoughts about the church's concerning this issue.

Grace without repentance

"Although the church in Africa is experiencing tremendous numerical growth it has failed to halt Africa's moral degeneration... the church has offered the grace of Christ to people without demanding thorough repentance. This has resulted in a lack of moral transformation" (Goffried Osei-Mensah in Christianity Today, 1998 issue). He is referring to the massive corruption experienced in Nigeria. Could the same also be said about South Africa?

Tucker/Khotseng article link:

[http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/download/1933/3758,](http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/download/1933/3758)

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