

Why defending democracy must start with a fight against corruption.

“The time for the Church to heal our land from corruption is now” is the title of a column by Bishop Jacob Freemantle which was published in the EP Herald on 4 March 2019.

Corruption is a cancer which is eating at all aspects of society, and there are real risks to business and the local economy if it is not brought under control. Most of us would react rapidly if ever diagnosed with a disease as deadly as corruption.

Identifying incidents of fraud and corruption are seemingly the easiest of tasks. What we have learned from the various commissions of enquiry currently under way is that the perpetrators generally make little effort to conceal their activities. Rather, it is in the investigation, and thereafter the conviction of fraudsters and their ilk, that is the most difficult.

We see it our own metro. The Pikoli report, an investigation conducted in 2013, has not been dealt with up to now. This report followed on from an earlier forensic investigation known as Kabuso, which to all intents and purposes seems to have disappeared. The fact that neither report has been acted on is a blight on the landscape of good governance.

In the Herald Column “In my view” on 21 March 2011, Professor Velile Notshulwane, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Arts, writes in an article headed “All must join war on graft” that he - like most South Africans – is a law-abiding citizen who decries corruption, bribery, fraud, extortion, embezzlement and all forms of kick-backs on public and private contracts and tenders.

The majority, he says, recognise that these activities are wrong, and that they prejudice efforts to uplift the disadvantaged and to advance our democratic ideals.

Is this then not the time for “most South Africans to declare what they stand for?” His challenge is not lessened by the subsequent discovery that he was guilty of plagiarism. No, rather it emphasises the depth of the disease.

An article in the Fortune magazine dated 16 May 2011, titled “The biggest problem for developing economies is corruption,” emphasizes the global implications of a massive moral decline. Wen Jiabao, the then Premier of the People’s Republic of China, is used as an example. He declared that corruption was the biggest threat to China. This is not because of its effect on foreign investors, but because of the threat it creates to social stability.

The Bible indicates that corruption flourishes when it is not punished by the ruling authority, is practised with the connivance of the religious community, and no one is prepared to stand openly against it as Daniel and Nehemiah did. Moreover, it would seem that it proliferates whenever there is a lack of transparency and openness in government and business.

In my opinion, the ongoing instability in the poorer areas of our city is a response to the leadership who are not accountable to the people. The bottom line is greed, fraud, corruption and nepotism.

Many people shrug at corruption because they figure it’s eternal and incurable. Not so. England was deeply corrupt in the 17th century, Sweden in the 19th, notes professor Michael Johnstone of Golgate University, a corruption expert. Singapore and Hong Kong virtually eradicated corruption in a generation.

So, what can we do here right now in this city of ours? There is much we can learn from the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Sir Jonathan Sacks.

His article, “How to reverse the West’s decline” published in the magazine Standpoint recommends the following: “There is, to my mind, only one sane alternative. That is to do what England and the United States of America did in the 1820s.

“Those two societies, deeply secularized after the rationalist 18th century, scarred and fractured by the problems of industrialization, calmly set about remoralising themselves, thereby renewing themselves.

“The three decades, 1820-1850, saw an unprecedented proliferation of groups dedicated to social, political and educational reform-building schools, YMCAs, orphanages, starting temperance groups, charities, friendly societies, campaigning for the abolition of slavery, corporal punishment and inhumane working conditions, and working for the extension of voting rights.

“Alexis de Tocqueville was astonished by what he saw in America, while the same process was happening at the same time in Britain. People did not leave it to government or the market. They did it themselves in communities, congregations, groups of every shape and size.

“They understood the connection between morality and morale. They knew that only a society held together by a strong moral bond has any chance of succeeding in the long run. That collective effort of remoralization eventually made Britain the greatest world power in the 19th century and America in the 20th,” said Rabbi Sacks.

Right now, the Faith community can do what they do best and that is to pray as encouraged in 1 Timothy 2:1-4.

Other practical avenues can be explored in future articles.

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