

Finding the right way forward in times of crisis

The deep disruption caused by Covid-19 challenges us to respond appropriately to the crisis. What are we to do amid so much loss, destruction, and suffering?

Paul's prayer for the Christians of Philippi comes to mind. "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best"

The original Greek word translated here with "to determine what is best" is "phronesis". It means seeking to find the right way forward, to be wise, to think and plan together until the right choices emerge.

Paul links the Christian ability to discern with three things: our capacity to love, to obtain trustworthy knowledge and to gain insight in what is appropriate and timely.

This is a fruitful agenda for appropriate action at a time like this.

Imagine a society where we love another across boundaries and seek to build a society together where human life will flourish.

Discernment about the right way forward depends firstly, according to Paul's prayer, on truth. We need real honesty.

Covid-19 exposed the truth about our society. It leaves no room to hide the nasty facts. We are one of the most unequal countries in the world.

During lockdown churches in Nelson Mandela Bay launched a huge "Against Hunger" project. We organised food and distributed it through a metro-wide church networks to the needy. It ranks as one of the most impressive examples of what can be achieved through church cooperation. The project painfully highlighted our inequality. Many of us witnessed first-hand the extreme poverty we so often choose to ignore.

This forces us to ask: Why are people so poor? Why are so many so vulnerable? What went wrong in our society?

This question cannot be answered with the mere scapegoating and blaming that politicians are so fond of.

Yes, poverty and inequality arose out of colonialism and apartheid.

Unless we own painful truths, we will not be able to discern a meaningful future.

Ongoing poverty is the product – sadly – of the way our country is governed.

Governor of the Reserve Bank, Lesetja Kganyago, said two weeks ago that the last decade was the worst in economic growth in SA's history.

Since 2013 South Africans became poorer. A few decades ago, South Africans earned 128% of what the average Brazilian took home. Today it is 65%.

It is not that government does not have the money.

Taxation in South African is 50% higher than that in Japan, Ireland, Mauritius, Chilli and Turkey, according to economist Mike Schüssler.

As a percentage of GNP our taxation is twice that of Singapore, the Philippines, Egypt, Mexico, and Malaysia.

Clearly, our ability to create opportunities for the poor to flourish is wasted by mismanagement of the economy.

Corruption and theft are part of the toxic mix. Former Prasa chair Popo Molefe testified last week before the Zondo commission how political leadership failed to act against widespread corruption when he warned them ("ANC top six ignored Prasa corruption", The Herald, 30 June).

Another example of poor management is the catastrophic collapse of state hospitals in Nelson Mandela Bay, which testifies to horrendous neglect of medical services by government.

Politicians often send up smoke and mirrors to distort reality to their own benefit.

We should hold them accountable and not let them get away with it.

Secondly, according to Paul's prayer discernment requires love.

We seek truth not to condemn, but because we love. This love is a gift of God. God loves us and pours his love into us through his Holy Spirit. We need to succumb to God's love and live it out.

God enables us to love our neighbour, whoever he or she is.

This love creates a solidarity amongst people, a willingness to embrace one another and to work together for the common good.

For the purposes of collective discernment about our future society, neighbourly love becomes a political reality.

We are compelled by the Holy Spirit to do something about poverty and inequality.

As churches we have come together to alleviate the destruction of Covid-19.

We now need to stay together, to tell and speak the truth, to grow in love and solidarity, to walk humbly with one another, across all kinds of boundaries, and to discern a preferred future for our country.

Churches need to host an indaba, a lekgotla, a bosberaad – whatever you want to call it – where we discern practical action, born out of truth and love and infused with Godly wisdom to discern a way forward.

We need to build the South Africa we pray for and use our influence and collective wisdom to make it a reality. We need to partner with civic society and lobby together for our collectively discerned preferred future.

Then we will courageously speak truth to political power. Remember, the local government elections are drawing nearer.

It is time for a new dawn. We have the capacity to do this.

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