

SA can learn from unity shown by Ukraine's people.

Afrika Mhlophe

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the unfolding humanitarian disaster brings to the fore the words attributed to US abolitionist Wendell Philipps that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

This conflict has shown us that hard-won civil liberties can easily be lost, especially when they are entrusted to the hands of a few.

Sad as things are for the people of Ukraine, I believe for us in South Africa there are lessons we can take from this, chief of which is the patriotism and resistance shown by Ukraine's people.

At this point, I just can't imagine South Africans fighting side by side in defence of their country.

Perhaps being one of the most ethnically diverse countries on earth is not such a positive thing after all.

Right now, Alexandra is engulfed in xenophobic tensions between local residents and foreign nationals who eke out a living in that township.

So bent they are on driving the foreigners out, the locals have established an anti-foreigner movement called "Operation Dudula".

My prayer is that this sentiment does not spread to other South African townships.

South Africa's situation reminds me of what Samora Michel once said. "For a nation to live, the tribe must die."

Mozambique's former president did not mean that tribes must be literally killed.

He meant is that you can't build a successful and cohesive nation on the foundation of ethnic rivalry – the very thing that divides.

Stronger Together was the rallying cry of the Springbok team that won us the 2019 Rugby World Cup.

But, as you know, some politicians quickly shot this down by refocusing on the cracks that still mark us as a nation. To me, this is a chicken and an egg situation.

While we keep our eyes on the things that divide us, we will never succeed in building a cohesive nation that can withstand all challenges thrown at it.

In other words, if we were to face war, we might turn on each other rather than the enemy.

However, projecting false unity is also self-defeating.

What then, you may ask?

Well, some people suggest that the church, as a leader of society, should provide a third way, which is an alternative to what I have just mentioned.

Let us take war as an example. Gerald Barney Smith answers the question of how the church should respond to war in a journal paper he wrote following America's participation in the First World War.

In the paper, Smith opposes war on the basis that "human life is too sacred to be ruthlessly sacrificed to sordid schemes of national rivalry."

In other words, a follower of Christ should speak out against the flagrant disregard for human life.

No matter which life or where it is located.

Furthermore, we should unapologetically back efforts to end all hostilities between people and nations.

For this is what Christ expects of us when He said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Take note, the call is to be "peacemakers", not "peacekeepers".

In other words, God blesses those who actively diffuse conflict and release an atmosphere of peace.

The Message illustrates this succinctly: "You're blessed when you can show people how to co-operate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family."

Paul made the same point in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19. He told the people of Corinth that God has entrusted to Christians with two things: the ministry of reconciliation and the message of reconciliation.

This means God expects His children to act and speak in a reconciliatory way.

Back to Smith. He quotes US President Thomas Wilson who said that the world must be made safe for democracy. This is to say that "human interests must be made supreme as contrasted with the interests of any one class or group or nation at the expense of another."

Smith then turns to the church and says, "if the world is to made safe for democracy, there must be a religious interpretation of democracy. No mere force of arms can establish a new kind of brotherhood."

Think of the famous sculpture standing in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York. It is that of a powerfully built man beating a sword into a ploughshare.

On the base are words taken from Isaiah 2:4 which read, "and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

Curiously enough, the sculpture was made by the Russian artist Ergenly Vuchetich.

This goes to show that leaders can be at odds with their people. This is why citizens should always remain vigilant.

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