

Jesus offers hope in a dysfunctional world

Thabo Makgoba

This is an edited version of the message shared by archbishop Thabo Makgoba at the Easter Vigil in St George's Cathedral, Cape Town, on April 20th, 2025

Over the days of what we now call Passiontide (last two weeks of Lent), it seemed the dreams of where the Jesus story would lead the disciples had crashed

The power of the political, religious and military establishments had borne down upon them, scaring the disciples into fear and vulnerability. A time during which the darkness of the Roman occupation of Palestine threatened to crush them,

English poet and priest John Donne wrote in one of his Divine Meditations, *"death, be not proud, though some have called thee. Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so..."*

Luke's record of Christ's resurrection (Luke 24:1-12) reinforced by Donne's poem, reminds us as Christians that Easter is a vindication of new, resurgent life.

If ever there was an hour when we needed Luke's words; when we needed the assurance which the Easter message of resurrection and new life offer us, it is now, when our politics around the world and in our own nation are so dysfunctional, when conflict wreaks death, dehumanisation and destruction in at least 40 places across the globe, when domestic abuse and gender-based violence strip their survivors of their dignity, and when we destroy our environment, putting profit above people and make excuses for genocide.

For we live in a time when Russia, continues its merciless bombing of civilian targets in neighbouring Ukraine.

We live in a time when the civil war in Sudan continues without pause; when South Sudan teeters on the brink of a new civil war; and when we look on in despair as Israel expands its occupation of Gaza, where not even those identifying themselves as medical personnel are safe from attack, and where the Israeli government gives every indication of pursuing ethnic cleansing with the collusion of the United States.

In South Africa, the credibility and commitment to good governance of our political parties is seriously open to question.

Last week leaders of the South African Council of Churches met President Ramaphosa and members of his cabinet, where we registered our protest at the way in which members of the Government of National Unity are engaging in grandstanding and political one-upmanship at the expense of resolving the urgent challenges our nation faces.

I am concerned that, unless our politicians stop playing these dangerous games and develop a proper respect for the legitimacy of their partners in the administration, the very concept of democratic governance in South Africa is headed for a crisis of confidence.

A section of the leadership of the African National Congress clearly finds it difficult to accept that they no longer enjoy the support of the majority of the electorate, and behave as if they alone enjoy legitimacy.

The Democratic Party sometimes behaves as if its electoral support entitles it just to override the views of those who represented a far bigger proportion of the electorate in the last election.

And at municipal level, we see minority parties exercising far more power than their legitimacy entitles them to. Thirty years into democracy, no party should assume a legitimacy greater than their strength at the ballot box gives them.

Respect for the legitimacy of others needs to be extended to other institutions in society.

This has important implications for the National Dialogue planned by the Presidency.

The churches support the dialogue, having called in 2017 for a national conversation aimed at confronting societal fragmentation, moral deterioration and the loss of trust in public institutions.

But, as we told president Ramaphosa, it is critical for the credibility of the dialogue for it to be free from manipulation by political and economic elites, and how representative its deliberations are of the full spectrum of South African society.

Easter offers us new hope, which is not a nebulous, pie-in-the-sky concept.

It is the driving force which motivates our determination to name our problems, to identify solutions, and to mobilise people to overcome them.

But it is not just about good deeds or good works — it is about promoting justice.

As that great African saint, Augustine of Hippo said, “Charity is no substitute for justice withheld.”

American philosopher and political activist Cornel West makes a similar point when he says justice is “what love looks like in public.”

We will establish true justice in South Africa only if we fulfil the promises of our constitution by working together for the common good.

New life and resurrection means turning history round, opening spaces for healing, restoring trust in our public utterances and building a just world.

A final point relates to the role of women that first Easter.

The women are told by the angel to tell the disciples to go to Galilee and meet Jesus there. But, we read that they were still in Jerusalem a week afterwards.

Luke records that the disciples did not believe the women. At the time women were marginalised and their voices and contributions therefore did not count, robbing the community of gifts that went unexplored.

When we exclude others, we narrow our world, limit our empathy, shrink our hearts, impoverish our imaginations and deprive ourselves of creative challenges, rendering each of us less than a fully human person.

But when we open our hearts and our minds and include others, we become more fully human.

In our fractured and conflict-ridden world, we have to be willing to put our trust in God even though we might not know the answers or be certain about our futures. If we do this, we can fill the world with light and love, so that all of us will find ways of becoming midwives of a restored humanity.

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