

# ARCHBISHOP THABO MAKGOBA

## Graduates' achievements are built on the sacrifices of the 70s generation

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*A graduation address at the University of Cape Town:*

Good morning, greetings to you all, and thank you so much for the honour and privilege of allowing me to address you. Thank you to the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, and your executive for inviting me. Congratulations to the parents, relatives, sponsors of those graduating, and to you, the graduates. on your achievement. We are immensely proud of you.

I'm going to embarrass my son, Nyakallo, who with his friends is among those graduating today.

[Sorry, Nyaki] When I asked him for tips for my speech, he said two things: One – do not talk about yourself, politics or religion; Two – please, Dad, get to the point! I nearly rang the Registrar to say I have lost my voice and can't speak.

Well, given this caution, I decided to talk about other students who went to university before me and whose stories inspired me and still have the capacity to inspire all of you to work for the public good.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of South Africa's democracy. It is also the 107th anniversary of the founding of the ANC, the 60th anniversary of the PAC and the 50th anniversary of the founding of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) was formed. SASO's first president was Steve Biko, and its second president was the former UNISA vice-chancellor, and one of my clerics, Canon Prof Barney Pityana.

From Dr Pityana's and SASO's perspective, the year 2019 marks 50 years of consciousness, the consciousness that black people first to read and examine their own circumstances – a process that resulted in the awareness that the subordination of black people to white supremacy was not divinely sanctioned. Nothing in the universal order of things made black oppression traceable to the will of God.

On the contrary, the pursuit of freedom was consistent with God's will, and the lives of the students of that era demonstrate that the consciousness they developed placed them at the forefront of affirming God's will by questioning, confronting and fighting oppressive authority.

Forty seven years ago, in a setting like this, Abraham Onkgopotse Tiro, a student at University of the North, Turfloop, now known as the University of Limpopo, addressed that year's graduation ceremony. This was the university where I first registered as student, 38 years ago, because apartheid's minister of education had refused me the ministerial permission I needed as a black student to study at a white university. Delivering his speech on April 29, 1972, Tiro began by quoting what apartheid-era Prime Minister BJ Vorster had told the Afrikaanse Studentebond Congress the previous year. "No black man," said Vorster, "has landed into trouble for fighting for what is legally his."

Tiro went on to quote an American lay preacher, R.D. Briensmead who said: "He who withholds the truth or debars men from motives of its expediency, is either a coward, a criminal or both." For fighting for the kind of education that he thought was legally his, Tiro was expelled from Turfloop for

what he said in that speech. Student protests failed to get his expulsion rescinded. He went on to teach at Morris Isaacson High School, in Soweto where he became mentor to the June 16, 1976 student leader Tsietsi Mashinini. Later, relentless police harassment forced Tiro into exile in Botswana, where he was sent a parcel bomb that ended his life. The bomb left him in such a state that even his mother was advised not to insist on seeing him remains.

Within eight months of Tiro making his speech, Mthuli kaShezi, a playwright, cultural activist and vice-president of the Black People's Convention, became the movement's first martyr when he was assassinated on the eve of the SASO elective conference. He was pushed under the train at Germiston Station, in Gauteng for standing up for African women being drenched by a railway official with a hosepipe. In August 1976, SASO permanent secretary Mapetla Mohapi was found hanging from the bars of his cell after being detained without trial by security police.

Steve Biko suspended his studies to mobilise adults, leading to the establishment of the Black People's Convention. High school students formed the South African Students Movement, journalists the Union of Black Journalists and adults including Lutheran bishop Manas Buthelezi and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela responded to the Soweto Uprising by forming the Black Parents' Association to support their children.

Outside our borders, the collapse of Portuguese rule in Angola and Mozambique inspired the mobilization of students across South Africa. I recall my older sister, Mathaps Makgoba, taking a school trip to Lourenço Marques, now Maputo, and returning home singing freedom songs. A pro-Frelimo rally staged at Currie's Fountain in Durban led to the arrest and trial of nine SASO/BPC leaders. The case became known as a trial of ideas, and Biko's skilled sparring with the judge when he gave evidence for the defence is one of the classic interchanges of South African political trials. Peaceful mobilization against apartheid was deemed to be terrorism and the leaders were charged and convicted under what was called the Terrorism Act of 1967. Steve Biko, after being repeatedly arrested for violating his banning orders, was arrested for the last time in August 1977. A few weeks later he was dead, the result of a brain haemorrhage, inflicted on him by security police during interrogation.

I share these reflections to remind us that the students graduating today follow in a proud tradition, the only difference between then and now being that your forebears learned under extremely trying conditions in which as well as studying they also carried the burden of fighting for freedom.

Tiro was 25 when he made his speech and 27 when he was blown to pieces. Shezi was 25 when pushed under the train. Mohapi was 29, and Biko 31, when they were killed in police custody. The deaths gave the lie to Vorster's words, and the fortitude with which they continued to perform the task at hand was nothing less than amazing.

Look at yourself and the learning times of your life. You could be any one of those students 47 years ago. Nyakallo Masilo Makgoba, graduating Honours in politics, philosophy and economics aged 24, should appreciate the difference that the years of struggle that the generation that came before has made so that he can be where he is.

The American novelist, Alice Walker, said we are a people for whom others have died. This generation should cherish moments such as this graduation and resolve to act in such a way that future generations will look up to you, just as you look up those from the 1970s.

I say this fully aware that South Africa has not yet fully healed. We remain wounded. We are still a hurting nation. The scars we carry still cut deep. The flashes of joy that come with graduation

ceremonies in one campus are tempered by flare of unpleasant emotions in another. The incident at the University of Johannesburg on April 2, in which a student was removed from a podium, is such an unpleasant episode. But we also celebrate the burst of exhilarating dance that punctuated this year's graduation ceremonies of the University of the Western Cape, the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Mangosuthu University Technology.

I must not prescribe to you the way in which you at UCT should characterise your graduation celebrations. But the upholding of common standards of public decency is my wish. To this end, I want to extend to each one of you my congratulations and best wishes for the future.

God loves you and do I. God bless Africa.

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**

**18th April 2019**