

Sunday, 31 March 2019

## "Theology from Below: A Personal Journey"

*An address to the "Theology from Below Conference" at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University:*

- Fellow theologians (all of us here are theologians, no matter how far along the journey we are);
- Fellow students of the Gospel (because all of us, no matter how well qualified, remain students all our lives);
- Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Good evening. And for those from other parts of our country, our continent and the world, welcome to the beautiful Western Cape. It is exciting for me to be among all of you, postgraduate students and researchers from many different backgrounds and contexts, here in Stellenbosch tonight.

The conference organisers have asked me to tell my own story, including my journey as a young person entering the world of theology and the church, in the context of theologies that are speaking from the margins and challenging those "at the top", or theologies concerned with Africa and the Global South.

You may think it strange for an Anglican Archbishop to pontificate on theologies which are speaking from the margins. After all, I live and work in a large mansion, originally built by a Dutch settler, in Bishopscourt, the wealthiest suburb in Cape Town, on a big estate originally settled by the first Dutch colonist who arrived here in 1652.

I lead a church which has its origins in the arrival of British colonialism and is associated with an empire which not only oppressed the indigenous people of this country and continent, but in its greed for gold, waged a war during which both black South Africans and Afrikaner women and children were locked up in some of the world's first concentration camps, resulting in the death of tens of thousands.

And although the days of the Anglican Church being the church of the Anglo establishment in South Africa are long gone, I still have a pulpit at St George's Cathedral, across the street from Parliament, which attracts television news crews to report on my sermons at Christmas and Easter.

Not only that – I am speaking at a university which has sometimes been called "the cradle of Afrikaner nationalism", the ideology which – partly in response to British imperialism – spawned the policy of apartheid.

So I speak to you tonight from within the context of a church and a university which carry a lot of baggage from the past. Given that context, what can I say that will be of any value to you, starting out on your own theological journeys? Well, to be honest, I don't know. That will be up to you to decide once you have heard my story.

I was born in the far north of this country, into a clan we refer to as baTlou – the People of the Elephant – in a lush valley of forests and waterfalls called Makgoba's Kloof. It is a place of extraordinary beauty, a beauty celebrated in English literature read far beyond these shores. But for baTlou, it is also a place of extraordinary pain, for it is there that my great-grandfather, Kgoši, or King, Mamphoku Makgoba, was put under siege when he defied orders from the government of the South African Republic in the 1890s to get off our land and allow white farmers to take possession of it.

For years my great-grandfather managed to fight off or dodge the settlers – mostly Boers, or farmers, from the republic, but including others from Britain, Germany, Austria and Denmark. Once he escaped from a prison by digging his way out. But eventually, our clan's troops – who numbered about 200 soldiers – were defeated by a force estimated at somewhere between 4,000 and 7,000 men. The people who caught up with my great-grandfather were actually African auxiliary troops, and to prove that they had killed him, they cut off his head. A local photographer took a gruesome – his head looking like that of John the Baptist on a platter. Announcing Kgoši Makgoba's death to Pretoria, the Boer general responsible ended his telegram with the words: “The Lord reigns, and I am his servant.” The skull subsequently disappeared and we are still trying to find it, nearly 125 years later, so we can give my great-grandfather a proper burial. To summarise the history in current South African political language, our land was expropriated without compensation by force of arms.

Sixty-five years later, I was born in one of the areas to which our clan was banished after 1895. But my birth was actually registered in Johannesburg, where my parents were living and working at the time. This was a direct result of apartheid – if my birth had been registered where I was born, under the pass laws which restricted the movement of black South Africans, I would not have had the right to live or work in Johannesburg. My father had migrated to Alexandra Township, on the outskirts of Johannesburg, at the same time as Nelson Mandela did, in the early 1940s.

In Madiba's words, while Alexandra had “some beautiful buildings, it was a typical slum area – overcrowded and dirty, with undernourished children running about naked or in filthy rags” and teeming with “all kinds of religious sects, gangsters, and shebeens.” Life was precarious but also exhilarating: again in Madiba's words, “Its atmosphere was alive, its spirit adventurous, its people resourceful.” My father was a minister of the Zion Christian Church, now South Africa's biggest church, which allows polygamy, and my mother was his third wife. He wasn't paid a stipend – he made his living by buying goods at a wholesale store in Johannesburg and travelling to mining compounds where he sold them to black mineworkers on the gold mines.

So given my background, how did it happen that I, from a clan which fought against white oppression, the son of a polygamist, and coming from an area of the country which was the headquarters of Southern Africa's most powerful syncretist church, come to be a mainline Christian, moreover one who was at first an adherent, then a priest, then a bishop and eventually an archbishop of the established church of the empire whose dominion over my country, my people rejected?

There are a number of answers. The first one is tied to education and the fluidity of denominational affiliation.

While my mother was loyal to my father's church, she was ambivalent about the ZCC

when it came to her children. Also, although her parents were in the ZCC when she met my father, her mother had originally been Lutheran and her father Dutch Reformed. So when the time came to send her children to school, she had no hesitation in encouraging us to join the churches associated with schools that were thought to provide the best education. In that way, my older sister became a Catholic and I was baptized in the Anglican Church in Alexandra. I went on to play an active role there, and later, when our family was forcibly removed by the apartheid government to Soweto, at the local Anglican Church in the Pimville area of Soweto.

But if you ask me what influenced my spiritual development most powerfully, the first incident I can put my finger on was when, aged 15 and just after the Soweto Uprising, an armed personnel vehicle filled with soldiers chased me on my way to school, accusing me of being a terrorist. A local mechanic gave me shelter, letting me hide under one of the cars he was repairing, while he courageously went out and, at the risk of his life, argued with them until they went away. That frightening experience marked a conversion in my life, a time when I realised that it was only by the grace of God that I had survived not only that experience but the years of growing up in a gangster-infested township in which we sometimes walked past the corpses of crime victims in the gutters on the way to church on a Sunday morning.

Later, when I lived in Soweto but still went to school in Alexandra, I was deeply moved by the worship every Monday to Friday on the commuter train from Soweto to town, where the same group of passengers sung beautiful African choruses on their way to work each day, listening to itinerant preachers, whose sermons and prayers spoke to their congregants' sense of desperation, pain and fear but also to their hopes.

Aged 18, I offered myself for ordination to the Bishop of Johannesburg, but he sent me away, saying I should first go to university and study anything other than theology. While I was a student I continued to be involved in local parishes, teaching Sunday School, becoming a lay minister and then exploring my vocation with others who felt called to the priesthood in what in the Anglican Church we call a Fellowship of Vocation.

During university holidays, I worked in the photocopy room at the South African Council of Churches, which had given me financial aid for my studies, and there I was attracted to the rhythm of daily morning prayers and regular communion which Desmond Tutu insisted upon. I was also deeply involved in the Anglican Students' Federation.

But in spite of all this, I was confused over whether I was called to the priesthood. The others in the fellowship all felt they had met the Lord in some way, while I wasn't so sure that was my calling. Besides that, at university the subjects I was most interested in were science and chemistry, and my teachers were urging me in that direction.

Working against that impulse, however, was the revolutionary tumult that we went through in the 1980s. The struggle against apartheid was approaching its final stages, and I became involved in the agitation of the time. During the Soweto Uprising, my main contribution to the struggle had been "liberating" a bag of mielie meal from a Chinese-owned shop in the first few days of the rebellion. (I denied this vigorously when the police caught us, but since I and the other boy who had stolen the bag were covered in white mielie-meal, our denials weren't believed. Fortunately the police

were too overwhelmed to keep us in custody.) But when I got to university, first the University of the North and then Wits in Johannesburg, I became involved in the agitation that was characteristic of the time, and I became active in the Release Mandela Campaign. I even considered leaving the country for military training at one stage, but Desmond Tutu told a group of us we could be just as useful organising young people at home and teaching our communities about our struggle.

In the end what inspired me most was seeing people like him, together with the Anglican activist Helen Joseph, the other former SACC general secretary Frank Chikane and the Afrikaner dissident Beyers Naude in action, passionately addressing large crowds of chanting young people in stadiums, preaching the eternal ideals of our faith, the values of the Bible and its demands for justice and peace. So I allowed my name to go forward to the selection conference at which the Diocese of Johannesburg chose who to send to theological college. Somewhat to my surprise, I received a letter from the then Bishop Tutu, who had recently been elected Bishop of Johannesburg, telling me I was being sent to theological college.

At college and beyond, what inspired many of us was the way in which church leaders leading the struggle against apartheid, and for democracy, justice and the true peace – the shalom – which comes with justice, was their focus on people on the margins of society. Desmond Tutu is well known for telling the story of how when missionaries came to South Africa, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, “Let us pray,” and we closed our eyes. When they finished praying, and we opened our eyes, we found they had the land, and we had the Bible. But what is not so well known is that Bishop Tutu went on to say that in getting the Bible, we got the better deal. Because, to paraphrase him, he used to say that in a situation of injustice and oppression, there is nothing, just nothing that is more revolutionary than the Bible.

For the Bible says that each of us is made in the image of God, that each of us is a God-carrier, and that to treat any child of God as less than this, no matter how marginalised they may be by society, is therefore not simply unjust, not simply painful for the one so treated, but it is blasphemous – like spitting in the face of God.

The power of such condemnations of injustice still have resonance with us today. When I was ordained to the ministry, I was ordained a deacon before I was ordained a priest. When I was made a deacon, I was charged with a special ministry by my bishop. He told me that, and I quote: “In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, and to seek out particularly the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely.” My subsequent ordination as a priest, my consecration as a bishop and my installation as an archbishop have not changed that mandate.

In my book, *Faith & Courage: Praying with Mandela*, I explained it like this, and I quote: “I remain a deacon, as all priests do, so my task remains to seek out the poor and needy, to seek out those who need God’s healing love and touch, and to be especially worried about those who are suffering.” For biblical scholars, Jeremiah would say “Is there a balm in Gilead?” Are there people out there who can really understand these things?

That commitment should form the basis for my public theology and my ministry to society as an archbishop, whether it is responding to police shootings, to mistreatment of the weakest in society and to corruption and bad governance in both the public and

private sectors. To continue quoting from my book:

*“This is why I visited Ficksburg after the death of Andries Tatane [at the hands of police], Marikana after the massacre there [also at the hands of police], and Cape Town townships with inadequate sanitation. This is why after eruptions of xenophobic violence I led a walk of witness in Alexandra and visited migrants chased out of their homes in the Western Cape....*

*“My vocation as a deacon also underpins my passion for restoring the church’s role in promoting good, affordable education across Southern Africa. It also fuelled my anger at the appalling conditions in the mud-brick schools of the Eastern Cape, which I visited in the company of a delegation of prominent South Africans to find disgusting toilets, no hand basins, broken windows, holes in classroom floors and too few teachers. This vocation is why, as chancellor of the University of the Western Cape, I reached out to negotiate with students during their #FeesMustFall protests, and why I identified with our son, Nyakallo, when he was arrested during them.*

*“It is why I have hosted a series of what we call 'Courageous Conversations'... which pull together people from mining communities in South Africa, executives, unions, NGOs, faith leaders and the legal professionals involved in Marikana, which seek to reposition the sector as one that can be a partner for long-term sustainable development.”*

And a deacon’s concern for the poor and the needy is why national religious leaders and the SACC spoke out so strongly against the corruption and misappropriation which resulted in the public's money being stolen from the poor and going to line the pockets of the powerful during the administration of our previous president.

Our country is now beginning to get to grips with the consequences of corruption and misrule and to begin to set things straight. But ending corruption and establishing good governance won't on its own bring the marginalised into the mainstream. Again, let me quote from Faith & Courage:

*“Despite the changes, despite the talk, despite the policies we advocate, levels of inequality in our society remain shocking. There are huge differences between the development of the wealthy parts of our cities and that of nearly everywhere else. We have failed to eliminate the desperate conditions in which many of our people live, creating potential for an explosion of anger. Many of us operate in separate spheres, held apart from one another in the silos in which we lived and worked before 1994. We live with massive disparities of income, largely based on race but increasingly based on whether you have made it into the middle class. Black economic empowerment in many instances is contributing to inequality rather than closing the gap between rich and poor, with the children of the rich likely to enjoy a good education, and thus good lives, and the children of the poor often condemned to failing schools and a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty....*

*“But the greatest inequality in South African society today is the inequality of opportunity. Access to opportunities is an important predictor of future outcomes. Access to basic services such as education – including early childhood development – health care, running water, sanitation and electricity provides an individual, irrespective of background, the opportunity to advance and reach her or his unique*

*human potential. Yet there is no equality of access to opportunity...*”

The challenge of inequality may be particularly acute in South Africa, where by some measures we have the worst gap between rich and poor in the world. But it is of course a challenge to you all as well, whether you are from a more impoverished part of Africa than South Africa or from the materially wealthy societies of the Global North. For that reason anyone concerned with theology from below has to address theologies of the economy.

Some years ago I took part in the first Ecumenical School on Governance, Economics and Management, in Hong Kong, where we asked how we could establish an alternative to the current global governance of money and financial systems, replacing it with a system that would be less exploitative and would distribute resources and income more equitably. As I said at the time, this sounds impractical, but as stewards of God's creation we know that nothing is impossible with God.

There is a sense that every doctrine in theology is part of the doctrine of God. Thus, systematic theology is not only about creation, providence, salvation and consummation but also about God creating, God providentially governing, God saving and God consummating creation to be the temple of his Triune glory. God's theology and God's wisdom about God's nature and all things in relation to God are simple and eternal. Our theology, our wisdom regarding God and all things in relation to God is social and historical.

For this reason, theology from below should reflect an interest in history – in theology as taught and transmitted through time. It is our collective responsibility through faith to seek to understand the mysteries that God has revealed in God's Word. We learn from the early parents of the church and the creeds which are the fruit of their ecclesiastical labours. Having said that theology from below should reflect historical interest, it should be concerned with teaching what the church must believe and do – not simply what the church has believed and done.

That said, the church cannot know what it must confess in our day and age unless it knows what the church has confessed in other days and ages on the basis of scripture. History teaches us that inequality and injustice need to be addressed for the common good, and real change and true justice can only come from below, from the people. As disciples of Jesus we must promote truth and justice, equality and life at all costs, even if it creates conflict, disunity and dissension along the way. To be truly biblical as church leaders and theologians, we must adopt a theology that millions of Christians have already adopted – a theology of direct confrontation with the forces of evil rather than a theology of reconciliation with sin and the devil. It is from this understanding that in recent years, the church in South Africa has confronted the powerful, standing up against corruption, inequality and the like.

The various commissions of inquiry into corruption and misgovernance which have been sitting in recent months have confirmed that we are emerging from an era in which those who benefited from the status quo were determined to maintain it at any cost, even at the cost of other people's lives. They benefited from the system because it favoured them and enabled them to accumulate a great deal of wealth and maintain a high standard of living. This happened at the expense of much larger numbers of people who did not benefit in any way from the system – those treated as mere labour

units, paid well below a living wage, some separated from their families as migrant workers. This demanded, and continues to demand, confrontation with the forces of greed and self-accumulation which have characterised parts of both the public and private sectors.

Let me end by returning to the anomaly I referred to in my opening words – the anomaly of someone like myself with my family history playing the role I do in our church today. For the forthcoming British and American editions of Faith & Courage, I am adding an extra chapter on reconciliation in church and society. In preparing that chapter, I was asked: Given the history of my people; given the suffering inflicted by interlopers who proclaimed themselves Christian, why do I choose to be a Christian? I conclude this address with the answer I gave:

*“I am a Christian and I remain a Christian because I remember that our faith begins with a young Palestinian on a donkey. I draw this phrase, and some of my reflections on it, from the memoir written by Denise Ackermann entitled Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey. The image conjured up by Denise’s title tells me that since Roman times we have perverted the Word and the mission of Jesus Christ, and its message about what God is up to in our world. Over the centuries we’ve allowed ourselves to be pointed to imperial agendas. Christ’s message has been attached to national flags, to military might and to the AK-47.*

*“But that is not the Gospel. Christianity is not imperialism. Christianity is not colonialism. Christianity is how do I love my neighbour as myself and as others. The man who links us to God is he who enters Jerusalem a nonentity, riding a borrowed donkey. He is humble and he is marginalised but his message of love and simplicity is powerful; powerful enough to challenge the perversion of common humanity that engenders.”*

Thank you for listening to me, and God bless you.