

FEDOSA OPEN DAY

January 27, 2007.

TALK ONE

SIGNS OF HOPE

I take it that I have been asked to speak about the signs of hope in South Africa Today because many people can see very few, if any, signs of hope. I also take it that I am supposed to say something about this from the point of view of Christian faith.

I am reminded of the famous verse from I Peter: "Be prepared to give an account of the hope that is in you". So that is what I shall try to do.

A) The basis of our hope as Christians and followers of Jesus is not signs – any kind of signs or any number of signs. The basis of our hope is God and God alone. Even if we were living in a time and place where there were no signs of hope at all, we would still be filled with hope because we have put all our hope and trust in God – or at least we try to do so.

In the words of Paul: "We hope against hope". We hope even when there appears to be no hope at all, no signs of hope. Christian hope is not dependent upon the signs we can see or not see.

In fact it works the other way around. It is when we look at the world with trust and hope in God that we can begin to see more and more signs of hope. When we look at South Africa with the eyes of faith we can begin to see the finger of God at work in the most surprising places. When we try to look at South Africa and the world as God must see them, we gain a quite different perspective on what is hopeful and what is not.

B) While we may know all that, by and large we don't look at our country through the eyes of faith in God but through the eyes of the **media**.

Few people realise just how much their thinking is shaped by the media. The media (newspapers, radio and TV) decide for us what will be counted as news and what is to be regarded as not newsworthy. The media dictate

what we must see as a problem and as a sign of doom and disaster, a sign of despair. It is the journalists and to some extent the politicians that decide what would have to happen in order for something to qualify as a sign of hope.

And even when we disagree with what we are told in the media we have still been forced to regard their topic as the one about which we need to have an opinion.

The media are not always wrong. They have a valuable role to play and they can be a useful source of information, but we must approach the media critically – with questions and doubts and with the proverbial pinch of salt. Otherwise we will be duped. We will often enough be blinded to the truth and unable to see the world as God sees it.

Why?

Because the bottom line for the media is not truth but **profit**. Today, more than ever before, newspapers, magazines, radio and TV are dependent upon revenue from those who advertise in them. They must increase their readership or listeners if they want to remain in business.

They must give people what they want to hear not what they might need to hear. They cannot be dictated to by the truth because the truth does not always sell.

I am not suggesting that the media always lie. Sometimes they just avoid speaking the truth because it is not what people want to hear. If the truth happens to be bad news and sensational then we might find it in the media because in that case it will sell.

In some countries the media are controlled by the government. That makes the news propaganda. We all make a great fuss about the freedom of the press and rightly so, but too often we forget that freedom of the press can simply mean that the media is left free to exploit us and to make a profit in whatever way it wants to.

What we need to be aware of is that if we are looking at South Africa through the lens of the media that is not the same as looking at it through the lens of faith and hope.

C) The other lens through which we tend to look at our world is **blame**. We live in what I call a culture of blame. Whenever anything goes wrong we tend to look around for someone to blame. We point fingers and impute guilt. We feel restless and dissatisfied until we can find someone to accuse. Finding someone to blame gives us a kind of feeling of satisfaction.

Almost everybody indulges in this culture of blame or at least is tempted to do it: politicians, journalists, editors, commentators, academics and saddest of all the church.

Jesus didn't do it. He didn't go around pointing fingers at people. He didn't go around hammering sinners. He saw them as people in need of healing, forgiveness and love. He saw them as hurt, wounded or lost.

When we look around for someone to blame we are unable to obtain an unbiased view of the world.

D) So if we do begin to look at South Africa with the eyes of faith, of hope and of love, as Jesus would have done, what do we see?

1. We see a country that has been miraculously saved from a **bloodbath**. We were, in the days of apartheid, a very violent country. It seemed that the only way to solve any of our political differences was through violence. We had the terrible violence of apartheid with its detention without trial, solitary confinement, merciless torture, the killing of children, political assassinations, massacres and of course the horror of necklacing.

Today we have **no political violence at all**. (We will talk about criminal violence later). Despite big political differences and political rivalries of all kinds from Zuma to Zille, nobody any longer resorts to violence to solve political problems.

We have become famous worldwide as a country that avoided a bloodbath by many long hours and months of **negotiations** rather than violence. We now export that method of solving problems to other parts of the world. For that we should never cease to thank God.

Can anyone doubt that here we are witnessing the finger of God. That would be my first sign of hope for the future.

2. My second sign of hope would be that whatever criticisms we may have of our politicians, we are now governed **by the rule of law**. The constitution is the highest authority in the land and it is said to be one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. One of the great achievements of the present parliament is the detailed legislation that has been put in place in many areas of government.

Sometimes there have been proposed bills that were not good, for example regarding the judiciary or the media. There was an outcry about them and they were withdrawn.

But the most important aspect of the rule of law is that despite lots of politicking the government has never refused to accept the decisions of the judiciary. That cannot be said of many other countries in the world. In South Africa it is a sign of hope for the future.

3. South Africa will go down in history, with Nazi Germany, as a country that elevated **racism** to the heights of a virtue. Unlike Germany we managed to dethrone racism without anything as destructive as the Second World War. From the perspective of faith we must surely see this as the work of the Holy Spirit.

However, despite the dismantling of apartheid, racism is still with us. Those who might have expected it to just disappear from the hearts and minds of people overnight were unrealistic. It will take time.

And those who might have expected that the people who had been the victims of racism for such a long time would not engage in some reverse discrimination were equally unrealistic.

Racism is the belief that my racial group is superior to another. Whites in South Africa still believe that they are superior and that is not the work of the Spirit. Black people have not come to believe that they are superior to whites, but they do now discriminate against whites in some situations. That is prejudice and often unjust. It can only be deplored. But it is not racism as such.

Race still dominates the politics, economics and social life of South Africa, and that is decidedly not a sign of hope.

What I would see as signs of hope however are South Africa's extraordinary stories of **personal forgiveness and reconciliation**. I am

thinking of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's forgiveness of Eugene de Kock, Amy Biel's parents forgiving her killer and then adopting him, the APLA soldiers who killed people in the St James Church and the Heidelberg Bar asking for forgiveness, Adrian Vlok washing the feet of Frank Chikane and so forth.

These and other similar stories are to my mind signs of God's grace at work in our society.

4) On the other hand we are a country where **corruption, bribery and fraud** flourish. While we are by no means the worst in the world, this is decidedly a bad sign that points to something deeper and more widespread: the worship of Mammon. We have in South Africa as in most parts of the world is a **culture of money**. For very many people money is the god they worship. In such a society we should not be surprised to find people using their positions to line their pockets.

But even in this, one can detect the finger of God. The sign of hope here is that in South Africa corruption is being exposed every day. There are plenty of countries in the world where corruption is never exposed. In South Africa in the past there was plenty of corruption but it was carefully hidden. When corruption is exposed continuously there is some hope that it will be at least minimised.

The Peer Review Group Report will help with this exposure of corruption.

5) And that brings us to what many would regard as South Africa's biggest problem: **crime**. Crime covers not only burglaries, muggings, hijackings and heists but also rape, child abuse and drug dealing. What makes crime in South Africa such a major problem, however, is the violence that accompanies it. We seem to have moved from political violence to criminal violence.

We are also famous for our domestic violence which is of course just another form of criminal violence.

When we look at this with the eyes of faith, hope and love, what do we see?

In the first place we should not imagine that it is everyone. These criminals are a relatively small number of people. The majority of our people black and white, male and female are the victims of violent crime and not the

perpetrators. Black people have been the victims of violent crime for a very long time. It is only recently that whites have also been targeted. Women have been the victims of violence for a long time too. It is only now that this is being exposed.

But there is a deeper problem today. It is the breakdown of almost all social and cultural norms. All cultures, African, Western and Asian, are no longer able to hold society together. Family life is breaking down and religions are losing their authority and influence. Selfishness has gone wild.

This is not a specifically South African problem. It is a worldwide phenomenon. It manifests itself more dramatically in South Africa, perhaps because of our chaotic and violent past. But it is the direction in which most of the world is moving.

That of course is not in itself a sign of hope. But it does challenge us and the sign of hope is the number of people who are taking up the challenge as activists campaigning against rape, child abuse, domestic violence, police inefficiency, the proliferation of weapons and crime in general.

6) Last but not least I want to look at our **economy**. Many of South Africa's severest critics see our economic growth as the one great sign of hope for the future. Trevor Manuel has done a great job, they say.

That is what I would call a half truth. It is true that our economy could have collapsed as it has done in Zimbabwe. We could have been queuing for bread and petrol, we could be experiencing 1000% inflation. We can thank God that has not happened and we can thank the government for that.

But the wealth that has been created is not being evenly distributed. The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. When we look at that with the eyes of faith we have to pronounce our economy, like that of most other countries in the world, as **unjust**. We have a flourishing economy but it remains an unjust economy.

Some effort has been made to build houses, provide electricity, water, education, pensions and social grants, And that is a good sign, an enormous improvement over the past. But it is not enough – not nearly enough. There are still far too many poor people. Nor is this a challenge only for the government. We should all be involved.

TALK TWO

THE CHALLENGES

I will try to spell out how I see the challenges that face us in South Africa today as Christians and especially as religious. I hope you will help me by adding others and qualifying what I say.

1. As I see it the first and greatest of all the challenges would be that we ourselves become, or remain, **people of hope**. As Christians we base our hope upon God's love for us. We hope against hope. We remain hopeful in all circumstances.

When we act hopefully and when we speak with hope and confidence, we encourage others not to give up hope. Our hope can become itself a sign of hope that strengthens others. It witnesses to the value of putting all one's trust in God.

When called upon to do so, we should be prepared to give an account of our hope. We have hope because we believe that God is at work in South Africa. All the good things that have happened in our country have been God's work – the finger of God.

God is at work in the whole of human history, in the magnificent evolution of life on this planet and in the grandeur of an unfolding universe. It is all God's work. Changing the world, changing South Africa, saving the planet is not my work or your work. It is God's work.

We have the unbelievable privilege of being allowed to participate in God's work of saving the world.

When we see it like this we can always act with hope and boundless confidence.

2. This leads us to a whole range of everyday challenges.

We are challenged to speak out against pessimism, cynicism and the culture of blame – pointing fingers at other people. We can do this wherever we are: in conversation with other religious, in the parish, in the catechism class.

We can also speak out against racism and sexism, against all forms of discrimination whether it be against women or homosexuals or whites or Indians or Muslims. That alone would make an enormous contribution to the future of South Africa. It would be part of God's great work.

3. In view of what I said earlier about the media, we are challenged to listen to the news with a critical mind, to refuse to allow the ads to draw us into consumerism and to recognise the false values especially in TV programmes.

We could make a huge contribution to the future of South Africa by teaching others to be critical, asking questions about what is served up to us in the media. It is a very difficult task, but one that we should never give up on.

4. And then there is the challenge to contribute to **a new culture of compassion and love**. Many of you are already involved in the work of caring for those who are affected in one way or another by the AIDS pandemic. That continues to be a work of great love and compassion – God's work.

But there is much else to do done in the area of learning and teaching compassion.

Violence is the very opposite of compassion. Our criminals who kill and maim, like those who tortured youth in prisons in the days of apartheid, have lost all sensitivity for the feelings and the pain of others. They have no compassion left at all.

In some ways this marks a failure of the churches and other religious institutions. We have not led our people, or not all of them, to feel for others. Perhaps we have not shown enough compassion in the way we have spoken about other people.

This applies particularly to the way we speak about **the poor** or the way we ignore them. Many of you do great work amongst the poor and have an exemplary love and compassion for them. But the rest of us tend to forget the poor. In South Africa just about the worse thing that could happen to us

is that we should forget the poor. They so easily drop out of all our concerns and arguments.

One of the challenges we face as Christians and especially as religious would be to remember the poor, to keep reminding the government and the business world about the plight of the poor and to keep spreading feelings of love and compassion for them and for all who have become marginalized.

5. This brings us to the many challenges to **activism** that still exist in South Africa for all those who have not become too old to participate in campaigns and marches. South Africa has a rich history of activism that could be counted as in itself a sign of hope. The challenge to us is to join in where we can because it is clear that God has and still does work through such efforts.

There are NGO's and advocacy groups for almost every form of injustice in the country. One that comes to mind immediately is the whole movement against rape, child abuse and domestic violence. It would be a good place to start because it would help to secure a different future for us all.

But there is now a campaign that is more urgent than any of the others, and that is the campaign **to save the planet**, our environment.

6. So far I have not made mention of the greatest of all our problems in South Africa and elsewhere: the destruction of the earth and most immediately the reality of climate change with all its horrifying consequences.

As a result of global warming much of South Africa will become a desert. On the other hand the warming of the oceans will result in the melting of the icecaps which will lead to rising sea levels that will make all the sea level cities of the world uninhabitable.

As we all know, global warming is caused by the greenhouse effect resulting from emissions of carbon dioxide that come from the burning of fossil fuels (oil, coal, gas).

Here we have a crisis that outweighs all the problems we may have with corruption, crime, inefficiency and poverty. Without ignoring all these problems we are challenged at the same time to save the earth.

While most of what needs to be done, and done immediately, would be the responsibility of politicians, scientists and religious leaders, rather than you and me, we can all participate in the campaign in small but significant ways.

We can save energy. We can use less petrol and less electricity. We can replace regular light bulbs with energy saving ones. We can switch off heaters, hot water cylinders and air conditioning whenever possible. We can also plant trees. They absorb carbon dioxide.

Where possible we can even change to non-fossil energy, like solar or wind energy. And we can tell as many other people as possible about the dangers of global warming and what causes it. Our government is gradually beginning to do something. Much more is needed.

The snowballing of this campaign would be a magnificent sign of hope. Saving the earth would be a very important part of God's great work.

We are challenged on every side. There is much to be done.

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