

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
To the People of God – To the Laos
May 2009

Dear People of God

South Africa's elections fell between Easter and Pentecost, so I have been considering what it means to live as those who are raised with Christ, indwelt with the Spirit, and called and sent to be the salt in this complex messy world of ours. I have been greatly helped by recent conversations with my predecessors – drinking from the well of many years of wisdom and experience in 'speaking truth to power'. I thank Archbishops Desmond and Njongo for all they have learnt and shared, and affirm my support for the public stance that each continues to take, particularly in South Africa, in calling on politicians to uphold all for which the Constitution stands.

After the leading role churches played in opposing apartheid and supporting the transition to democracy, I have found it extraordinary to encounter so many recent claims in the media that religion should have no place in political life. Of course, I share others' wariness of political parties claiming God as their supporter; but to believe that faith is irrelevant to the national life is a real failure to understand mature religion, and how much we can contribute to the flourishing of human society. Anglicans have long believed engagement in public debate is inevitable, for God is either God of everything or of nothing. Therefore there can be no area of human activity in which he has no interest, and into which he does not call us to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ! Any attempted distinctions between the secular and sacred, the personal and the political, are artificial and unsustainable.

Yet this does not mean that churches should try to micro-manage government policy. Instead, we must help people understand how the eternal truths of the gospel apply in whatever context they find themselves – from the voting booth, to community forums, to a seat in Cabinet! This approach was set out by William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in 1942-4, who said it is the church's responsibility to 'announce Christian principles and point out where the existing social order at any time is in conflict with them. It must then pass on to Christian citizens, acting in their civic capacity, the task of reshaping the existing order in closer conformity to the principles.' Because mature democracy offers the best context for debating Christian principles – and more general pursuit of mission and ministry – I see one role of the church as being to act as 'the friend of the Constitution'. This is why I took a lead role in election monitoring bodies, which encourage political tolerance, freedom of speech, healthy debate, and so forth.

South Africa's Constitution is a wonderful document, bought at great price – many lives lost, others permanently scarred. Its first commitment is to 'heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights'. As Christians, we also want to bring God's healing and wholeness to humanity. Many other principles that we want to promote are also reflected in the Constitution, such as upholding truth, honesty, accountability, transparency, justice, fairness, and all that exemplifies good governance. We also want to prioritise those in greatest need – the weakest, poorest, neediest, marginalised, and voiceless – and in this, to ensure that for them the Constitution's promises of equal rights and benefits are properly realised. In practice, this includes adequate prioritisation of HIV and AIDS, TB, malaria, safety (I am particularly concerned at present about safety of our young people in school), and many other urgent areas of social need – as well as ensuring that urgent and critical environmental considerations are properly reflected in all policy-making.

Now the voting is over, here at least, though other parts of our Province will face elections later this year. After the counting is done, the church must lend its voice to ensuring that those who are elected pursue the common good of everyone – not only of themselves and their families, friends and supporters. We should be a vital part of the conscience of our nations. As St Paul tells us, we will support our governments, our elected representatives, as long as they are 'God's servants for our good' (Rom 13:4). But where they fall short, we will be unafraid to tell them so – and it is to the best of our Constitutions that we will hold them accountable.

Jacob Zuma, just before the elections, spoke of Constitutional Court judges as being 'not Gods' and 'only human'. Quite so – but the same is true of politicians, and this is why we show loyalty to the Constitution and all its checks and balances, with none of judiciary, legislature or executive holding all the power.

It is for us also to acknowledge that Jacob Zuma is 'only human', and affirm that, whatever his flaws, he has now been elected to the highest office in the land through a fully free and fair process (and let me here give warm congratulations to Hlope Bam and her colleagues at the IEC for a difficult

and complex job well done). As our new President, he deserves our congratulations, and our prayers that he will discharge the responsibilities now entrusted to him to the very best of his abilities, and for the good of every citizen and resident of this country.

That said, I remain concerned at the many unanswered questions around not only Jacob Zuma and the NPA, but also the entire arms deal. Some politicians say we should draw a line, forgive and move on. But – regardless of whether or not judicial proceedings are involved – one lesson that we learnt through the TRC (and which is intrinsic to all forms of ‘restorative justice’) is that people cannot forgive, unless they know who they are forgiving, and for what. South Africans deserve to know the truth. Unless this is uncovered and acknowledged, it will inevitably remain a festering sore in our political life. I am convinced that the over-riding interests of our country would be best served by a full arms deal enquiry.

However painful revealing the truth may be for those involved, this is the only path to the healing and fresh start South Africa and its new President crave and need. As St John wrote, ‘If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1 Jn 1:8-9).

May I end by asking your prayers for another of my predecessors – Archbishop Phillip Russell, who did so much to hold our church together in divisive times, inviting us to receive in greater measure the Spirit’s love and empowerment. Remember him, in the increasing frailty of old age. Please also remember me and everyone participating in the Anglican Consultative Council meeting of 1 to 13 May.

Yours in the service of Christ,

+Thabo Cape Town