

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
‘A Pastoral Letter to All South Africans’
Issued 7 April 2010

My fellow South Africans,

The message of Easter – a message of hope and new life after darkness and death – could barely be more relevant to the political life of South Africa than it is today. At a time of continuing debate about ‘hate speech’, it is a compass for us all, whatever our beliefs or backgrounds, in considering how best to relate our past to our future, and especially so following the murder of Eugene Terre’Blanche,

South Africa is an amazing country of wonderful possibilities. To realise them requires answering the question: what future do we choose for ourselves? Will we persevere in pursuing fulfilment of the justice, the equality, the opportunity, the reconciliation, for which so many struggled for so long?

Much remains to be done, as we all know. We must confront the past’s many enduring legacies, especially of socio-economic inequality and poverty. We cannot deny former oppression and injustice, or the sacrifices that were made to bring about democracy – nor should we want to. We cannot afford to forget.

But now we have freedom, including freedom of choice about how we remember the past, and how we deal with its lingering negative consequences. We can do so constructively, appropriately honouring our history and using its lessons as building blocks towards a better future. Or we can do so destructively, chaining ourselves to the damaging and divisive attitudes that kept people apart, mired in fear and mistrust, in hatred and revenge. We can choose the forward path of Easter life, or we can remain with our feet in the grave.

The Easter path to life was the one our nation chose seventeen years ago, when, on Holy Saturday, Chris Hani was assassinated at his own home. It was a deliberately divisive political act, after which the nation teetered on the brink of disaster. We looked into the abyss opening before our feet – and turned away, choosing instead to walk together towards a future where we could celebrate our diversity, united in our commitment to shared equality and opportunity for all. This year, Holy Saturday has seen another violent murder of a man in his home. But this was a very different man, of very different calibre. The motives remain unclear, and we should neither jump to conclusions, nor create links if none existed. Nor should we let this crime be exploited by extremists, of whatever persuasion, for narrow self-interest and to the detriment of our country as a whole. The key parallel with seventeen years ago is that once again we can and must choose life, and keep striving for the good of all.

In the years since freedom came, there have been many other ways in which we have shown the moral and political maturity to let our past be ‘baptized’ into new life. Take 16 December, formerly the Day of the Vow, now the Day of Reconciliation. As a boy growing up in Alexandra township, on ‘Dingane Day’, as it was also known, we used to hide, scared that if we met white people from Lombardy East we would be indiscriminately attacked. We should now be proud that we have been able to take a day that reinforced the violent victory of one

community over another and transform it – determined that hatred and revenge should be subverted and overcome by the greater power of new relationships, forged through a shared journey of reconciliation.

We need a similar programme of redemptive and transformative ‘subversion’ of other elements of our past: acknowledging them in their context but declaring that, untransformed, they are no longer relevant within the life of constitutional democracy. Songs such as ‘kill the boer’ or ‘De La Rey’ fall into this category. They have nothing constructive to offer to today’s political imperatives. They cannot promote the nation building and social cohesion that are vital to the future success of our country, especially when perhaps 3000 or more farmers have been killed within our beloved land since 1994. They do not address the old, deep-flowing, currents of anger and fear that run through divided communities, or their historic sources. Nor do they do anything to further the rights of farm workers, or to strengthen the capacity of new black farmers, to name but two further urgent priorities within the agricultural sector.

I therefore call on our political leaders – especially those in the ANC, to whom, though our vote, we have entrusted the well-being of the nation and every one of its citizens – to lift their discourse to a higher level. They must return to the central question: what kind of nation do we want to be? This is the point around which debate should focus. This must be the goal towards which all our rhetoric, and also our action, is deliberately directed – with the explicit condemnation and repudiation of all that does not serve our striving for the common good. Today’s appropriation of the past must be done in ways that intentionally further, not undermine, the objective of the struggle: a reconciled country of justice, equality, opportunity and economic development. Politicians must give a strong lead, in word and deed. And the rest of us must both hold them to this task, and support them in it.

For all South Africans, Easter Monday is marked as Family Day. It is a day not only for spending time with our nearest and dearest, but also a time for reflecting on what builds up the rainbow family of our nation. Whatever your beliefs, I invite you to join me in working – and praying too, if that is your tradition – for a shared life-giving and hope-filled future for everyone, not only one day a year, but every day. And may God bless us all.

Issued by the Office of the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, the Most Revd Dr Thabo Cecil Makgoba.

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