

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
20th Anniversary Service – The Peace March
St George’s Cathedral
13 September 2009

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

³For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

²a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

May I speak in the name of the one God, who is Lord of time, and Lord of all eternity.

‘For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven’ says the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes.

‘For everything there is a time’ – and September 1989 was a time for marching.

It was a time for standing up and being counted.

It was a time for saying ‘enough is enough’.

It was a time for saying ‘the killing must stop’.

It was a time for proclaiming ‘Peace in our city’.

Yes, it was a dark time, a very dark time – a time of huge numbers of arrests, of extreme police suppression; a time of far, far too many deaths.

But it was also a time when the light that cannot be overcome began to shine in a new and stronger way.

Those of you who were here, twenty years ago, will know far better than I how new glimmers of light began to shine together.

Forgive me, if I nonetheless speak of a history that was made by people who are here today – while I was in Grahamstown, studying to be a priest, involved in pickets and marches on a far smaller canvas.

You who were here will remember how Archbishop Desmond's call for a march for peace kindled fresh flames among the sparks.

A police lieutenant in Mitchell's Plain had voiced the growing concern of many that some elements of the security forces had gone too far, behaving like 'wild dogs'.

Now the Mayor came on board – a supportive presence reassuring many for whom it had been, for too long, a time to keep silent, that now was the time to speak out.

The government gave its permission for the march to go ahead.

And so it did – and with over 30.000 people from every part of our nation, our city, fully represented – marching in peace, in hope, together, as one.

And the police stood by – for once they were not the enemy, not on 'the other side', but human beings alongside other human beings.

It was an icon, a living icon, of what South Africa could become – a diverse nation, united in a desire for a new life, a life of freedom, for everyone.

How far we have come since then!

And yet, how far we still have to go!

How do we keep hold of the promise, the hope, the vision of that day – and ensure its legacy is not forgotten, or watered down, or corrupted, or lost in the easy complacency of democracy?

The fact that we are meeting today within this Cathedral, in an Inter-Faith Service, points us to a way ahead.

Twenty years ago, the Peace March came shortly after the Saturday of 'purple rain' when police used a cannon of dyed water.

It led to the slogan 'the purple shall govern'.

When I look at colour photographs of the Peace March, I see an awful lot of purple – bishops in their shirts and cassocks, ready to give a lead – and with them, leaders of other faiths, including Sheikh Nazeem Mohammed of the Muslim Judicial Council.

With so many political leaders in detention, there was no question that the faith leaders should come to the fore, in proclaiming the need for justice, for freedom, for overturning the morally bankrupt apartheid regime.

Today too, faith communities must shoulder our responsibility.

But let me swiftly say I am not calling for the purple to govern!

I am not calling for Cabinet and Parliament to be filled with bishops – though we pray for Bishop Mvume Dandala, in his new role!

But democracy calls for new forms of engagement by the faith communities, and new forms of leadership from bishops and other key figures.

These are often much harder to sustain.

Political engagement under democracy has been described as too often like wrestling with jelly, or knitting with fog.

We no longer have one big issue, one clear-cut right-or-wrong question, around which people across the whole spectrum of our country can unite.

We have countless little questions – all of them tangled up with each other.

Which of us knows how best to balance interest rates and the strength of the rand, or labour legislation with private sector financing, or taxation and public spending – so we can most effectively achieve the economic transformation and justice for which we yearn?

Are 30,000 people going to march for an Eskom price increase that is just enough for a reasonable catch-up on maintenance and investment, but which narrowly avoids being even a bit too much?

Of course, situations may arise that demand such a response from us – and we must not be slow to meet the challenge

But for the most part, most of us ought to devote most of our energies to other forms of making a difference.

As our Bible passage reminded us – there is a time to plant, a time to build up, a time to heal.

Always and everywhere, the faith communities – not only the leaders, but every last child of God – must commit ourselves to being planters, builders, healers – always being part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Our faiths are in remarkable agreement on what it is to be moral, to uphold the best, to work for the common good, to create an environment in which human beings, and human society, can flourish and grow.

We must teach our people to uphold all that contributes to planting, building, healing – to flourishing and growth – in whatever walks of life they find themselves.

We need to teach people how to live ethically in their work, their neighbourhood, their family – in all the little decisions and habits of life.

Life is no longer one big issue.

It is a million little things, and it is through the million little decisions, the million little choices which the people of this country make every single day, that our vision of peace, of freedom, of hope, will be realised, or not.

St Paul says this in his letter to the church in Philippi:

‘Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things’ (Phil 4:8).

We must help people to know how to apply these standards, of truthfulness, honesty, excellence, justice and so forth, in the little details of

life – instead of being sucked into a consumerist culture of self-enrichment at no matter whose expense, of self-serving power and status, where the rules are to be bent as far as they can go.

Of course, the faith communities do not have the monopoly on these virtues, and all people of good-will, I am sure, will share them.

Yet we, the faith communities, are the ones who are sufficiently organised, sufficiently broad in our reach across this country, to give the lead.

Finally, in our Bible reading, we heard that there is a time to speak – and here, faith community leaders have a particular responsibility – raising our voices wherever ethical standards slip, wherever moral principles are ignored, wherever the letter of the law is upheld while its spirit is blatantly brushed aside.

Democracy entails accountability – not only at the ballot box once every five years, but in the conduct of the daily business of our country, at national, provincial, municipal and local level.

We must do our bit in holding our leaders to account – and we must help our local communities to do the same, through all the processes and mechanisms afforded to us.

And we must keep on doing so, for this is what it means to play a constructive part in democratic life.

Dear friends – today we celebrate a most remarkable time in the life of our country.

Yet we remember that it came as a result of years of struggle, of hardship, and of dedication to a better life.

Let us not lose sight of that vision, and let us learn again what a life of dedication to all that is good can mean in the new circumstances of today.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven – and today is a time for celebrating, a time for thanksgiving, a time of looking to the past, and committing ourselves to the future.

Time is a gift. Let us use it well.

Amen.