

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Sabeel Conference – Sermon**  
**"God, Faithfulness, and Resistance"**  
**Church of All Nations / Church of Gethesmane**  
**25 February 2011**

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Note from Naim Ateek:

This will be a simple service of song, readings, and prayer that will last one hour including your sermon. As you know the theme of the conference is Challenging Empire: God, Faithfulness, and Resistance. The suggestion is to use the subtitle as the topic for the sermon, i.e. "God, Faithfulness, and Resistance." We believe that your experience in South Africa is very relevant to us as Palestinians. And it is your people's faith in God that guided their resistance in the struggle. Our people, as well as our international friends need a word of encouragement and hope and a challenge to make a difference in their own context. Our people feel great affinity with South Africa and I believe they (and our international participants) welcome your words, stories, and illustrations that sustained you along the journey for justice and freedom. The setting of the Garden of Gethsemane is very conducive because it reminds people of Jesus' agony and suffering at the hands of empire and its collaborators. With these thoughts you may use the topic we are suggesting or a topic that you may feel to be more appropriate. I would suggest that the time frame needs to be between 15 to 20 minutes.

Matthew 26:36-46

<sup>36</sup> Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' <sup>37</sup> He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. <sup>38</sup> Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' <sup>39</sup> And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, <sup>40</sup> Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?' <sup>41</sup> Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' <sup>42</sup> Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' <sup>43</sup> Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. <sup>44</sup> So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. <sup>45</sup> Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. <sup>46</sup> Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

[If an Old Testament reading is also desired, I suggest Isaiah 61:1-4]

May I speak in the name of the living God, who alone is King of kings and Lord of lords.

For my reflection today, I have taken as my title the sub-theme of our Conference – God, Faithfulness and Resistance. I felt it was inevitable that for our reading we should have a gospel account of Jesus, in this very garden.

What does this pivotal moment in the life – in the passion – of Jesus Christ, say to us about God, Faithfulness and Resistance?

We see God in Christ, at his most human, his most vulnerable. The prospect of great suffering and death lies before him.

He is 'grieved and agitated' as [one version of] the reading puts it, as he prays 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me...'

We know that he knows what it is to face suffering – that he is truly with us, in the darkest hours of our lives.

But we also see Jesus here at his most faithful – for he continues in prayer, '... yet not what I want but what you want.'

And so he allows himself to be betrayed, and events are set in motion which lead to the paradox of the cross.

As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it,

'We see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.'  
Heb 2:8-9

Suffering and glory – a strange combination indeed.

It is one that has perplexed Christians through the ages, especially in relation to our third theme, resistance.

For a superficial reading suggests that the model offered to us by the 'pioneer of our salvation', when faced with overwhelming injustice, is merely to accept it, with complete passivity.

Well, I doubt we would be here if we believed that was the whole story!

I certainly would not be – for the churches of Southern Africa would have played a very different role in the transition from apartheid to democracy, if we had listened to those voices among us which called for such a response.

But I stand here today because ours is a message of hope and encouragement, and a story of God's redemption at work, in the face of overwhelming odds.

It is the story of the victory of the cross, the ultimate defeat of sin, of evil, of all that demeans humanity, of all that stands in the way of abundant life for all.

For we are Easter people – we stand 'the other side of the cross', from Jesus in the garden.

And though, in many areas of life, it is helpful to ask ourselves 'What would Jesus do?', we must always remember that he alone is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the Son of God crucified and risen, 'tasting death for everyone', so that we might know the power of his resurrection at work within us.

We do not have to do for others, what God in Jesus Christ has already done for us all.

Our faithfulness to God lies in the proclamation – through words, through actions – of the whole story of the gospel: that Jesus has come, bringing good news for the poor, liberty to the captives, and justice with mercy.

It is for us to learn to 'watch and pray', so that our eyes may be opened to see how Christ's suffering and resurrection, and his redemptive power at work among us, are played out in our own circumstances – and to align ourselves to be part of these.

This is godly resistance.

Let me illustrate this through reflection on the Kairos Document.

You may remember that this was written by black South African theologians in 1985, not only to challenge the attempt by the apartheid government to use Scripture in its support, but also to challenge the insufficient response by many historic churches.

It identified three sorts of theology – state theology, church theology and prophetic theology.

State theology distorted the Bible to its own ends. This ran from using verses from Leviticus to justify racial discrimination and segregation through to quoting Romans 13, with Paul's instruction 'let every person be subject to the governing authorities' when its policies were opposed.

Church theology was the description given to the far too limited and cautious critique of the state made by mainstream churches, even though they knew apartheid to be wrong.

Rather than engaging in in-depth analysis of the 'signs of the times', there was too much reliance upon superficial and uncritical application of a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition.

In particular the Churches' right desire for peace and reconciliation was not adequately matched with demands for justice, repentance and change.

There was too much emphasis on individual morality and piety – including 'turning the other cheek' and other misappropriate interpretations of Jesus apparent passivity before his oppressors.

And there was not enough stress on just social, economic and political systems and practices.

Instead, the Kairos Document called for prophetic theology – learning to 'read the signs of the times' (as Jesus calls us to do, Matt 16:3).

And we must do this especially from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised, the outcast, the powerless, the voiceless – for all of whom God has a particular option: as Jesus affirmed when he read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, and in doing so set out what we might call the 'manifesto' of his ministry.

Prophetic theology meant learning to take the great trajectories of salvation history, the unfolding promises of rescue and redemption, and of the transfiguring of pain and suffering through the power of the cross – and to preach them with confidence.

We learnt to name what we saw, from God's perspective – from within his judgement, surely – from within his demands for justice, surely also – but, beyond that, most of all from within his purposes that love and mercy should triumph, and that his children should find healing and wholeness, as he wipes every tear from our eyes.

Today, twenty-five years on, we have to critique our new circumstances against these same three touch-stones.

For example, we have to remind politicians that being democratically elected does not mean they should have our unquestioning support – indeed, churches have had to take our President to task for claiming that the African National Congress will rule until Jesus comes again, and that to vote against them is to support Satan!

And churches, who struggled for freedom alongside the ANC, must now not be the sort of 'critical friends' of government who are too friendly and not critical enough!

We must hold them to delivering 'abundant life' for all, taking special account of the poor rather than furthering their own growing prosperity. We must demand honesty and transparency, and oppose corruption.

And most of all, we must strive to live lives of faithful obedience to God, so that we may have our eyes opened to be his channels of a 'prophetic theology' in ways that are likely to take a very different form to what has gone before.

Now let me stress that we must not be naïve in speaking about South Africa, while standing in Jerusalem.

There are many parallels between the situation here and apartheid, but there are also many differences. It is futile to argue which dominate.

Let me rather share more lessons that we have learnt, as people of faith, grappling to find God's prophetic way forward into the democratic era, overcoming the divisions of the past.

Perhaps the most important lesson is vulnerability – and here I want to affirm the model that Jesus gives us, in his anguished wrestling in Gethsemane.

As Anglicans, we found it hard to hold together through the apartheid years.

Tensions between church and prophetic theology were very real, very painful.

There was an even harder debate around the armed struggle – deeply complicated by the fact that Anglican chaplains served with the government's armed forces, which were brutalising our own parishioners, in South Africa and in the front-line states.

Only through daring to meet each other in the shadow of the cross – discussing not only with our intellects, but laying bare our broken hearts and battered souls – were we able to hold together.

Only this has allowed the Anglican Church – under the remarkable leadership of Desmond Tutu in particular – to play such a role since then in helping South Africa walk the long slow road to reconciliation: a journey that still has a long way to go.

Dealing constructively with painful and divisive issues can only happen if we are prepared to share in profound honesty, and acknowledge our differences.

This requires a degree of mutual vulnerability that is very challenging – it would certainly be the case amongst those who live here, when we recall what blood has been spilled around the question of Jerusalem.

Yet, paradoxically, the difficulty of the task should give us courage.

For engaging in mutual vulnerability can help overcome our tendency to objectify others, by putting us in touch with what we share as human beings.

Only through embracing complete vulnerability was Jesus able to be wholly one of us, and so win our redemption.

This is the key to genuine dialogue – where everyone is granted the dignity to tell their stories, in their own terms, and be heard respectfully, and begin to trust one another.

Only dialogue can build trust. And without trust, none of us can find reconciliation, and none of us can go forward on the journey to the lasting justice and peace for which every society cries out.

We feel it particularly in this place – but it is true of all the nations of the world, to some degree, when we look at the statistics for poverty and hunger.

Jesus Christ in his humanity has more to teach us.

To be fully human is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength – and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

This requires us to engage our emotions, our spirits, our intellects and our physically embodied selves.

It means to seek God's year of good favour for every dimension of the human person – and for us not only as individuals, but as communities: good neighbours with one another.

In ways such as this, our faith gives us a vocabulary to enrich secular political language – the language of empire.

So, for example, human rights talk is transformed when we regard every person as of eternal significance and value, since each one bears the image of our divine creator.

Holy justice promises the possibility of win-win solutions, and frees us from zero-sum thinking.

Faith helps us also resist the assumptions of empire.

For we subvert all its norms, when we dare to live as Jesus lived and taught, in other ways: when we dare to be those who believe that blessings come when we love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and practice radical forgiveness – even as we raise our voices for justice.

There is far more that I could say about God, faithfulness and resistance.

But let me end with this thought – God is faithful, and therefore, when it comes to resistance, we need only remember the words of St Paul to the church in Rome:

‘What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Rom 8:31-39)

So be it – Amen and Amen.