

Archbishop Dr Thabo Makgoba
Funeral of Mama Albertina Sisulu
Orlando Stadium, Soweto
11 June 2011

1 Pet 1:3-9; Matthew 5:3-10

May I speak in the name of God, who comforts those who mourn. Amen.

In his name, and in the precious name of Jesus Christ – who died and rose again, to be for us the resurrection and the life – I greet you all once again, as we ask for God’s comfort and strength upon all who grieve at the death of Ma Albertina Sisulu; even as we gather to celebrate the life of this remarkable woman.

[Further greetings – acknowledging VIPs as necessary – but more importantly the Sisulu family, children, grand children and great grand children.]

It is rather fitting that we are here today – on the day the Church observes as the feast of St Barnabas – whose name means ‘The Son of Encouragement’ – the one who encourages. And it is also the day before Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, whose name in the Greek of the New Testament is often translated ‘The Comforter’.

Encouragement and Comfort are my themes today, as we celebrate Ma Albertina Sisulu’s life, and as we mourn her passing – commending her into the eternal arms of the God of love, the God whom she loved.

Encouragement and Comfort are God’s words to us – as we heard in the two readings from the Bible; they are the words we have for each other; and, it is fair to say, they are the words that Ma Sisulu speaks to us through her remarkable life.

Let me begin with speaking of encouragement.

Many profound tributes have been paid to this outstanding woman, who dedicated her life to the cause of justice, to the vision of a non-racial South Africa, and lived to vote in four free and democratic general elections.

I knew her when I was a student, residing at Glyn Thomas, and we consulted her on various issues before travelling by bus from Johannesburg to Cape Town for the launch of the UDF.

We also consulted her around the Release Mandela Campaign and whether it would be at all sensible to drive Aubrey Mokoena's Toyota Skyline – without a driver's license – to drop some clothing for Mrs Mandela to take to prison for Madiba!

She gave us forthright criticism: but it was criticism we needed, in order to build us up and point us in a better direction.

Today, too often, criticism is labelled anti-revolutionary, and we are discouraged from speaking out – or threatened with all sorts of “laws.”

But we should follow Ma Sisulu's lead, and say what needs to be said – for the good of our leaders and our country.

She knew the power of Jesus' words, that ‘the truth will set us free’ (Jn 8:32).

My experience of Ma Sisulu, confirmed also in the tributes, told me that here was a woman of enormous principle, of enormous moral strength.

I must say, I am still in awe of her.

Albertina Sisulu was a struggle icon from a struggle icon family. She was a fighter for family and women's right and indeed the rights of all disenfranchised.

The Psalmist wrote ‘Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against the evildoers?’ (Ps 94:16).

Ma Sisulu certainly answered that call.

But this was not without costs to her and her family.

For example, I was very moved to hear the story of how Zwelakhe and Sheila took to shouting Lindiwe's name outside the prisons in Pretoria and Johannesburg, trying to find where she had been taken following her arrest – with their mother unable to look for her, because she was banned; and of how Zwelakhe was arrested for calling his sister's name outside the Pretoria Women's Prison.

These illustrate the cost to family life and to Albertina, but also the great love they shared.

Another example is her deep concern for Lindiwe a year after her release.

Still traumatised by her experiences she would sometimes wake in the night, fearing that the police were surrounding the house and back to arrest her.

Albertina used to speak of how Lindiwe had been tortured, pulled by her hair and bashed against the wall.

And, typical of a mother, she would add 'She had long hair, Lindi.'

Ma Sisulu's example of dedication to her family and nation is one we should take as an encouragement.

We should also be encouraged to follow her wider example of service, not only as a nurse, but in politics too.

This she shared with her husband Walter – both are to us wonderful examples of selfless service in pursuit of all that is good and right and true and just.

They pursued it and for its own sake, not because of what we might be able to get out of it.

Not for them, the pursuit of power for personal gain!

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled’ said Jesus.

God’s reward is greater than anything money can buy.

This is his encouragement also, to all of us, if we are tempted to do less than our best.

But God’s greater encouragement is this, that, though he fills our hearts, our souls, with a deep abiding sense of satisfaction, when we follow the path to which Christ calls us in our life on earth – the rewards of heaven are far, far, greater.

Jesus himself, through his resurrection – as our first reading says – has given us ‘a living hope’, a sure and certain hope, of this ‘inheritance that is imperishable’ which we know is there for our dear mother Albertina.

She, we can be certain, is one of those for whom St Peter was writing when he said ‘you have had to suffer various trials.’

But the genuineness of her faith, the genuineness of her commitment to do what was right in God’s eyes, was found indeed to be more precious than gold – and so we know that she will receive all the blessings that he has in store for her.

Remembering Ma Sisulu and her husband, reminds me that, though I was in awe of her, I was also caught up in the wonder of how they somehow became for us the great love story of the struggle years.

Theirs was a love that nothing could defeat – not separation, not incarceration.

Such love, true love, draws strength from the love of God, which, the Bible tells us, nothing can overcome – not hardship, not distress, not persecution.

As those famous verses from St Paul's letter to the Romans go on to say, nothing can separate us from God's love for us shown in Jesus Christ – nothing in this life, and not even death itself.

This is the source of God's encouragement, and of God's comfort, to us all.

Albertina's death cannot separate her from God's love – and her death cannot separate us from God's love either.

This is the love of the God who desires to take each one of us in his arms, and comfort us, like a mother comforts her child.

For God knows that death is still almost too much for us to bear.

Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus, even though he would be returned to life.

And we mourn Ma Sisulu's passing, even though we know she had a long, long life, and achieved so much, of such deep and lasting value.

Even though we know that, in Christ, she now knows the new life of heaven – we should not be afraid to grieve.

Jesus tells us this, when he says 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.'

This is my word to you, to the family [Max, ..., Zwelakhe, Lindiwe,*names?*], today.

Do not be afraid to grieve.

Grieve what you have lost, in the death of your mother, your mother-in-law, your grandmother, your sister, your aunt, this child of God whom you loved.

And grieve the losses of your life with her – the times you lost a mother to imprisonment; the times you lost her, even to the high calling of the struggle.

All the rest of us who are here today, know that we owe you a great debt of gratitude – far greater than we probably can begin to imagine – that you shared your parents with us, and that you in your turn have also given us so much.

Thank you, thank you, more than we can say.

No doubt there were times when you might have preferred a normal family life, a mother and father at home for their children; a life free from persecution because of all they stood for and fought for.

God's words of comfort are for you – for those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

The promises of heaven are for you, and for all of us.

God invites us to come to him, with all our grief, our sorrows, our anger, our disappointments – to mourn what is gone, to mourn what might have been.

In the book of the Revelation to St John, the Bible tells us God will one day wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

But before then, we should not be afraid to weep at all the sadnesses of human life and the losses of death – to bring them to God and to let him surround us with his love, and his comfort.

We must also weep, that the ideals of the Freedom Charter have not yet been realised.

We weep too that so many have used political power to enrich themselves and their relatives and friends, sometimes through blatant corruption – and so betray the legacy for which this family has striven.

But the God who comforts is also the God who encourages. He is the one who strengthens us, to say no to such temptations. He is the one who helps us to make a fresh start where we need it and to hold fast to all that is good, and right and true.

For what better way to celebrate Ma Sisulu's life than to follow the example that she gave us – to go forward, in the paths of justice, of honesty, of righteousness – the life of dedication, commitment – a life of serving God through serving others.

And now, in our sadness, we nonetheless rejoice to know that she will hear those words of God promised to all who follow the example and call of Jesus Christ:

'Well done, true and faithful servant – enter now into your Lord's joy' (Matt 25:21).

May she rest in peace – and rise in glory.

Amen.