

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Moral State of the Nation Address
3 February 2010

[*Opening Greetings:* Ladies and gentlemen, I'm glad to be with you this evening.]

Introductory Comments

I have just returned from the World Economic Forum in Davos.

There, religious leaders contributed articles on 'Values for the Post-Crisis Economy' and helped lead discussions, as part of our interdisciplinary consideration of economic, political, social and technological developments.

This underscored how religious leaders are expected to express views on the moral questions that set the context for our lives.

So I am grateful to the Chief Rabbi for proposing that we should address the moral state of the nation, from the perspective of our particular faith communities.

My hope is that we may sow the seed of something larger for the future: that in years ahead, contributions will come from a fuller breadth of the faith communities – and that we will prompt a debate, in which all South Africans should share, on the broad questions shaping national life.

Nonetheless, I am aware that it might seem presumptuous to deliver a 'Moral State of the Nation Address'.

Therefore, let me offer it as just one lens through which we might view our country.

But I hope we will nonetheless bring a helpful focus on areas where we feel compelled to speak and act, and where we cannot allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by moral relativism.

This is our reality. This is Holy ground.

The Nature of Morals

My purpose this evening is *not* to 'moralise', in the sense of passing judgement in a spirit of negativity.

It is always easier to criticise and condemn. It is far harder to be creative and constructive.

Yet let us dare to take the harder route, as a new decade unfolds before our feet.

This week, we are especially conscious of the journey of the past twenty years, and the momentous steps that set us on a new path, and opened up new hopes and dreams.

Twenty years ago, liberation movements were unbanned, Nelson Mandela walked free, and suddenly, anything seemed possible.

So my fundamental question tonight is to look at those hopes and dreams, at the vision for which we had struggled, and then dared to believe could become reality – and to ask ourselves: Who are we now?

We aspired to be masters of our own destiny. What destiny are we now creating for ourselves?

Do our actions and their consequences reflect our deepest, most heartfelt, aspirations?

Or have we lost sight of that great and glorious vision – and, if so, how shall we rekindle it in our hearts and minds, our souls and spirits?

These are moral questions, if we appreciate that the Latin roots of the word 'moral' address the essence of what it is to be human: to be flourishing individuals within flourishing communities.

The totality of human existence, lived well, is the core business of the faith communities.

It is also the context for conducting our political and economic life.

Therefore, our best chance of making a success of our country, lies in making the comprehensive well-being of the whole of life, our over-riding priority.

In its proper sense, therefore, morality is not an optional extra, for those with tender consciences, or who can afford to have scruples.

This is the picture given in the play, *My Fair Lady*: Colonel Pickering, shocked at the attitudes of working class Alfred Doolittle, asks 'Have you no morals, man?' – and gets the response, 'Can't afford them, governor.'

It's witty, but it's wrong.

Morality, then, directs us to the common good – the pursuit of all that makes us truly, fully, human.

To echo the words of Jesus Christ, it is life in all its abundance, for all South Africans. This was what we dared to dream, twenty years ago.

Constitution and Covenant

Abundant life for all is enshrined in our Constitution, which commits us, among other things:

- to establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
- to improve the quality of life of all citizens; and

- to free the potential of each person.

It is helpful to look at these commitments, and the Constitution itself, not as a contract, but as a Covenant, between South Africans.

To understand what Covenant means, I want to turn to the Hebrew Bible – Holy Scripture which the Chief Rabbi and I share.

Here we read how God regrets he ever created degenerate humankind – with the exception of faithful Noah.

God tells Noah to make an ark, a great boat, in which Noah's family and two of every kind of animal take refuge. A flood then destroys all other living things.

After the flood subsides, God makes a new beginning in his relationship with humankind, in the form of a Covenant.

It is as though God says to humanity, 'We belong together – we cannot get away from each other – and therefore, the only sensible thing to do is to commit ourselves to make the very best of this relationship, and keep on investing together in our shared future. Really, there is no alternative.'

In South Africa, we too belong together – we cannot get away from each other – and therefore for us also, the only sensible thing to do is to commit ourselves to make the very best of the relationship that lies between all South Africans, and keep on investing together for our shared future.

Really, there is no alternative for us, either.

Covenant is entirely ubuntu-shaped – we find our humanity through the humanity of others – we flourish through promoting the flourishing of others.

SePedi has a proverb for this: Mphiri o tee ga o lle – one bangle makes no sound. But working in harmony can create a beautiful symphony!

With the World Cup only 127 days away, football also offers some good illustrations.

I watched the final of the African Cup of Nations at Zurich airport, waiting to fly home – and I saw the elegant goal that brought the Egyptians victory.

It demonstrated team spirit; co-operation; mutual trust; generosity in sharing the ball, in sharing opportunities – for the good of the whole team.

Furthermore, every player must play by the rules – no matter how great a star.

It's no different if we want South Africa to be winners in the game of life – we must play as a team, work hard together, and all keep the rules.

This is why upholding the Constitution – both its letter and its spirit – is a moral non-negotiable.

While I'm on the subject, let me pay tribute to 'Team South Africa' at Davos. The representatives of government, business and civil society, were wonderful ambassadors not only for the World Cup, but also for our country as a place to do business and invest.

Of course, we are not perfect – no country is – but I saw that the flames which ignited our hopes and dreams, twenty years ago, had not fully been extinguished.

But how shall we fan them more fully back to life?

The story of Noah offers three signposts to the way ahead.

God warns Noah and his sons not to shed human life – for humanity bears the image of God – and God adds, '... never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth ... and this is the sign of my covenant: the rainbow.'

So then, the three signposts to abundant life:

- first is the sanctity of life – which must be honoured as holy;
- second is the stewardship of creation – the preservation of the earth;
- third is the dignity of difference, symbolised in the rainbow.

Let us consider these in turn, addressing some of the specifics of life in South Africa today.

The Sanctity of Life

First – the sanctity of life.

The culture of violence pervading society concerns me greatly.

Daily accounts of murder and brutality are just the tip of the iceberg.

Of course, we are heirs to a violent political past.

But still we continue to fuel violence.

From TV cartoon characters to computer games, violence infects so much of so-called entertainment – and it scars the children who grow up with it.

We also use the language of violence in politics, business, and across society.

We should know by now it is unacceptable to speak of 'killing' for your political objectives, or telling your opponents to 'go and die'.

But it is also appalling that we say things like 'I'd kill for those shoes, this car, that job'; or describe someone smart as 'dressed to kill'. Or how about 'I could murder a cold beer ...'

Language is used in other ways to demean and diminish human beings.

This is the opposite of human flourishing: the opposite of honouring elders; or seeing the divine spark in one another; or upholding ubuntu.

In footballing terms, it is the equivalent of playing the man, not the ball – and we should all cry ‘Foul!’ loud and clear!

This applies as much to overheated political rhetoric as it does, say, to the sexual objectification of women – which brings me to wider questions of sex.

I’m sure you’ve been wondering when I would get round to this subject!

Of course, it would be easy just to preach ‘no sex outside marriage’: which is what Christians, and others, uphold – and for good reason – as what best makes for strong families and healthy societies.

But if my words are completely out of touch with how people actually live, then I risk being irrelevant.

Let me rather put it this way: promiscuity, unfaithfulness, adultery, unprotected sex that risks spreading HIV or resulting in unwanted pregnancies and the appallingly high numbers of abortions that occur in our country – all of these are offences against the sanctity, the sacredness, of life.

They are acts of emotional violence and physical peril, and demeaning to the human dignity of all involved.

Why do we pursue such damaging behaviour? – damaging to ourselves, to those we claim to love, to the stability of society, to future generations?

Of course, sex is wonderful – it is one of God’s best gifts to humanity. But the greatest gifts are open to the worst abuses.

Let us use the gift of sexuality wisely and well.

Yes, life is sacred, and every individual should live with dignity and be treated with complete respect by everyone else, with no-one marginalised, excluded, or voiceless within society.

This must be the bedrock for all government policy-making and service delivery.

I should also like greater urgency in tackling poverty, housing, health, education, and the other fundamentals of life.

For though we knew that we could not turn round our economy overnight, we have seen a disturbing complacency among those who have found success in economics and politics.

Yet what matters is not getting the job – but getting the job done!

I am heartened that some senior politicians have finally begun to address this.

I hope this will affirm the thousands of dedicated civil servants, teachers, doctors and nurses, police and other public sector workers, who want to do a good job.

I hope this will give them courage to speak out against the lazy and corrupt few.

I similarly hope business acknowledges that profit must be balanced against human and environmental realities; and that true growth is not about economic activity but delivering tangible benefits.

Let's ensure morality and ethics inform every walk of life – for example:

- in staff development from the factory floor to the highest management;
- in schools and at all our universities and colleges;
- and in our faith communities, including madressas, bar mitzvah preparations, and confirmation classes.

Whenever when we feel uneasy about a matter, we should not let ourselves be paralysed with fear. We should speak up, for the good of our society – and make ourselves part of the solution.

Together we can overcome the scourge of criminality and corruption.

The media can play their part too. I challenge the writers of our soapies, to make the good guys, the nice people, into the true heroes, the ones we'd like to be.

Don't present the violent, criminal and corrupt as exciting and glamorous; nor depict abusive relationships as normal and to be expected.

The Stewardship of Creation

Just as we honour the sacred spark in every human being, so we must also honour our planet.

Stewardship of creation is our second signpost.

I am glad President Zuma decided to go to Copenhagen. I hope this has whetted his appetite to continue working for a legally binding agreement in Mexico in November, though it will take considerable work!

In Switzerland last week, I was struck by the high level of environmental awareness – from conserving energy, water, and other resources, to recycling everything imaginable.

We have a lot to learn – yes, it costs money; but it will cost more if we destroy our environment through short-sightedness.

The Archbishop of Canterbury reminded us at Davos that living responsibly means living within ecological limits to ensure the security of work and food.

This vital theme was echoed this week by the new African Union President, the President of Malawi, who put the needs of the neediest at the top of his agenda, prioritising hunger – and with it, agriculture and food security.

The Dignity of Difference

Unjust inequality should not be confused with legitimate diversity – so let me turn to my final signpost, the dignity of difference.

Jesus famously said ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’

He did not tell us to like each other, or to agree. But, no matter how different, we must live together, and engage with one another, constructively and respectfully.

Let me say that I have received considerable criticism for agreeing to appear on a joint platform with the Chief Rabbi.

I do so, conscious that we come from different faith perspectives, and have differing views on various issues – not least on Israel and Palestine, and particularly the Goldstone Report.

Yet he, and the Jewish Community, are an important part of South African life. And it is South Africa on which we are focussed this evening.

So we are going to keep talking, and work at trusting each other enough to say hard words where we disagree – but also stand together where we have common concern. Today that concern is the morality, the well-being, of our nation.

South Africans need to work at loving one another – by which, I mean getting to know and understand one another sufficiently well to ‘walk in one another’s shoes’.

It is said that God made us with two ears and one mouth, so that we should listen twice as much as we speak!

We need to be able freely to air our differences, whether within or between religious communities, or political parties, or any other walk of life.

This is the way to help one another grow into our best selves, contributing richly to our common life.

I was struck by this at Davos. Global leaders from different faiths held each other in considerable regard, and collaborated in drawing secular leaders into deeper engagement around the current crisis of values and ethics.

Respecting difference extends beyond power, riches and status. In the eyes of God, no individual is more valuable, more important, than any other.

Government must therefore respect its citizens – for example, engaging communities in meaningful dialogue about decisions that affect them.

Many so-called ‘service delivery’ protests are more about the frustration of not being properly consulted.

Honouring difference also means being prepared to shoulder our responsibilities as well as demand our rights.

To put this in footballing terms: different positions require different skills, where each must play to the best of their abilities, for the good of the whole team – and not worry about who scores the goal or gets the glamour!

Players also have the right to expect, even demand, that other team members fulfil their own roles fully.

This is the spirit of the sePedi saying: Go botšiša kgoši ga se go e roga – To question a king is not to scold him.

In a democracy, ordinary people have a right to ask questions and make suggestions to our leaders – and in response to expect not only words but action.

I hope this is what we have been doing this evening.

Conclusion

I began by asking how far we are achieving our dreams of 20 years ago.

Let me end with another anniversary – the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, on 30 January 1948 – which was marked by the scattering of the last of his ashes in the sea off Durban.

I should like to leave with you Gandhi's own Seven Deadly Social Sins:

1. Politics without Principle
2. Wealth without Work
3. Commerce without Morality
4. Pleasure without Conscience
5. Education without Character
6. Science without Humanity, and finally
7. Worship without Sacrifice

In other words, there can be no faith – even faith in a new South Africa – without self-sacrifice. We cannot do nothing, and expect to get whatever we want.

Are we prepared to give what it takes, to pursue our dreams, and to create a truly moral society – a society where everyone can be fully human, and everyone can flourish?

Let's rise to the challenge. As the American satirist Felicia Lamport put it

Vice
Is nice
But a little virtue
Won't hurt you.

Thank you.