

Saturday, 25 May 2019

A New Dawn - Reflections on South Africa's Democracy



(Photo: Jiayi Liu/Amherst College)

An address delivered at Amherst College in Massachusetts, ahead of a graduation ceremony in which Archbishop Thabo received the degree of Doctor of Divinity (honoris causa):

Today being Africa Day, and also the feast day of the Venerable Bede and the 18th anniversary of my consecration as a Bishop, I am honoured to be with you.

And in the year in which we are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the liberation of my country, I have great pleasure and joy in bringing greetings to you, the citizens of one of the world's older democracies, from your sisters and brothers in South Africa, one of the world's younger democracies. In my mother tongue, Sepedi, on an occasion like this we say: "Rea lotjha. Ke tagwa ke le thabo." (Greetings. Today I am intoxicated by joy.) Your reply is: "Agee" or "Thobela." (Meaning: We agree and we can see your joy.)

I thank the President and the other leaders of this great institution warmly for inviting me here this weekend. I hardly feel worthy of the honour that is to be bestowed on me, especially if you consider the credentials of our "greatest generation" – the leaders of our country, such as Nelson Mandela, whom my generation has replaced. In the Church, I have been fortunate to follow in the footsteps of a series of church leaders renowned for their advocacy of justice and peace, notably my predecessor-but-one, the 1984 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. Archbishop Tutu lives within 30 minutes of me in Cape Town, I see him regularly, and he is well – although ageing – and asks me to send you his greetings, and also his special thanks to those of you who campaigned so tirelessly in the 1970s and 1980s for an end to apartheid in South Africa.

Our democracy may be a lot younger than yours, but our nations share a great deal in common. We were vividly reminded of this half a century ago when a member of a prominent family with deep roots in Massachusetts came to South Africa at the

height of apartheid. In the words of one of our newspapers at the time, the visit of Robert F. Kennedy was like a gust of fresh air sweeping into a stuffy room. In the highlight of his tour, he gave a stirring speech at one of my alma maters, the University of Cape Town. I learn that in the United States, it is best known as his “ripples of hope” speech, because of his stirring declaration that every time someone “stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice,” that person sends forth “a tiny ripple of hope,” and that coming from a million different places, those ripples “build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

In South Africa, however, it was the opening words of Robert Kennedy's speech which first resonated with us. Allow me to quote from them. He began:

“I come here because of my deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which was once the importer of slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage.”

Of course, we thought he was talking about us. But we were taken completely by surprise when he continued with these words: “I refer, of course, to the United States of America.” Such are the many parallels you can find in our different countries' histories.

I had cause to reflect on the similarities of our respective heritages last year, when I spent a few days staying in lower Manhattan, the guest of our friends in the Episcopal Church. There I first visited the New York branch of the National Museum of the American Indian, where I found the ceremonial rituals and dance of the earliest inhabitants of the Americas interestingly similar to those of my rural forebears back at home. Also similar was the way in which European missionaries had conflated Western culture with the Gospel, outlawing the traditional cultural practices of indigenous peoples after branding them as “dancing with the devil”. But what affected me the most was reading about how, just as settlers from another continent fought and dispossessed the original inhabitants of Southern Africa – including my ancestors – during the 18th and 19th centuries, so had they done the same in the United States.

On another day, a visit to the African Burial Ground National Monument on Broadway reminded me of the later similarities between the South African and the American experiences of colonialism and slavery. Thirty years after the Dutch West India Company colonized Manhattan, the Dutch East India Company colonized what is now Cape Town. The main source of enslaved Africans shipped into New York by the Dutch was Angola in southern Africa and when the British took over the colony, they spread the slaving net to incorporate West Africa and – at one stage – Madagascar. Under Dutch rule, Cape Town initially received shipments of enslaved

people from Angola and West Africa; later they came from Madagascar, the East African coast, India and the Indonesian archipelago.

Of course much has changed since Robert Kennedy's visit to South Africa in 1966. Helped by pressure from people overseas such as yourselves, and especially by young people on college campuses, we overthrew apartheid in a peaceful revolution. And then we addressed the evils of the past by establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which Desmond Tutu headed after his retirement as archbishop.

The commission sat for three years, took more than 20,000 statements from the survivors of human rights violations under apartheid, and held 140 televised hearings across the country, in which the survivors could tell the country their stories. Those stories were often horrifying and the acts they described almost beyond comprehension.

We also did something unique in the world; unlike in Germany after the Second World War, we did not hold the equivalent of Nuremberg trials – we did not have the resources. But nor did we let the perpetrators off scot-free, as happened in Chile and other countries. Doing that would have further victimised the survivors, by silencing their past and so denying the awfulness, and the lasting legacy, of their experiences. Instead we developed something unique in the world, which has set a new example for other countries – we chose a middle path by offering amnesty to perpetrators of human rights violations, but only if they made a full confession of their crimes. In that way, we learned the truth, and the truth opened the way for a degree of reconciliation. I learn that there are those in this country who advocate a similar process to address the legacy of slavery.

But in another respect, since the end of apartheid, we have become more like you in the United States, in that we abolished the old, minority government, which denied the right to vote to black South Africans, and adopted a new Constitution, with a Bill of Rights, giving everyone the right to vote. In our case, we have what we like to describe as one of the most progressive constitutional orders in the world: we have abolished the death penalty, and the constitution recognises LGBTQ rights, including the right to marry under civil law. (Although, as an aside I have to acknowledge that in that respect the State is more progressive than the religious community; church law in most denominations still adheres to the position that the sacrament of marriage is only for a man and a woman.)

In government, like you we have three branches: the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, and we have a vigorous fourth estate: the press and the media, whose rights are also protected by the Constitution. The strength of this system has been demonstrated vividly in recent years. As many of you might have read, for nearly a decade, until early last year, our executive was badly corrupted by the actions of the president at the time, who allowed his friends and allies to seize control of major state institutions, awarding government contracts to corrupt payers of bribes, and undermining the justice system to prevent them from being prosecuted. Unfortunately, some of the world's biggest names in accounting and management

consultancy, including a leading American consultancy, were complicit in these activities.

But a combination of the media, vibrant non-governmental organisations in civil society, and outstanding work by the judiciary, has held the executive to account, bringing so much pressure to bear on the governing party that it was forced to act on its own to fire the president before the end of his term.

I have recently been critical of the failure of our Parliament to hold the executive accountable, and a battle for control by opposing factions of the governing party is still being waged, but just a few weeks ago we elected a new administration and today our new president, Cyril Ramaphosa is being inaugurated. There are still some bad apples in the barrel but President Ramaphosa has vowed to bring us a “new dawn”. He has initiated a series of public inquiries into the corruption, which are exposing the rot in live television broadcasts, and he is acting to restore the integrity of the police and prosecution agencies.

So as a result of the strength of the institutions of our young democracy, I am not only hopeful but optimistic about our future. Indeed, I am on record at home as saying that these recent elections have the potential to be the genesis and catalyst of our nation's renewal, thus writing the beginning of not only a new chapter in our history, but an entire new book that will define our children's and our grandchildren's lifetimes.

May it be so in South Africa, and I make bold to say, may it also be so in the United States. At a time when the threat of war is on the horizon, I pray that you will be able to avoid unnecessary conflict and that in the years to come you too will realise the enormous potential which your nation, with its enormous inner strengths, has for renewal and rebirth in the years to come.

God bless you, God bless South Africa, and God bless America. God loves us all, Americans, South Africans and the whole of humanity, as well as God's whole creation. May we fulfil God's desire that we preserve and protect all God's children, and all God's creation, for our children and grandchildren to come.