

# Anglican Archbishop reflects on Restitution, Freedom of Information and Hate Speech

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Archbishop Thabo Makgoba participated in the unveiling of the Memorial Tombstone to Revd Tiyo Soga on 9 September 2011, at Thuthura, Eastern Cape, using the following prayer.

Below, the Archbishop offers a longer reflection on the lessons that we can learn for today, from this great South African intellectual and man of faith. Dr Makgoba comments on freedom of speech and the protection of information legislation, on hate speech and racial and sexist language, and on Archbishop Desmond Tutu's recent remarks about restitution.

Let us pray:

God our Creator, whose Son is the Way, the Truth and the Life, we ask you today to bless all who speak here, and all who listen – praying that, as St James writes in his epistle, we may be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. Make us your apostles of true freedom and democracy, so that we, following in the footsteps of our brother and forefather, Tiyo Soga, may bring true emancipation to those who are held captive by economic slavery.

God of Righteousness and Truth, fulfil in us your promises, by making us people of justice and integrity, who, like Tiyo Soga, not only sing a song of gospel liberation to the poor and downtrodden, but work to share our wealth.

We pray especially for the rural poor, that they may know the fulfilment of your promise never to leave or forsake your children. When times are hard, pour your Holy Spirit on us, speak your words of comfort and encouragement through us; move our hearts and strengthen our wills to act, so that we may bring the fulfilment of your promises of real hope and new life for all. We ask this for your tender mercies' sake. Amen.

Reflections on the life of Revd Tiyo Soga, and his legacy to us today

Participating in the unveiling of the Memorial Tombstone for Tiyo Soga has prompted me to reflect further on this remarkable African intellectual, and his legacy for our own times. What would this devout man, who aimed to take the best of international scholarship and give it expression in his own culture, say to South Africa today? What would the composer of the famous hymn, sung to open the first meeting of the South African Native National Congress in 1912, 'Lizalis' idinga lakho', 'Fulfil the Promise', say about democratisation's unfinished business of reconciliation and restitution? What lessons should we learn from his commitment to the 'Lord, God of Truth' (the words with which that hymn continues) for current debates around freedom of information, hate speech, and racist or sexist language? Tiyo Soga has a lot to teach us.

There is no doubt that Revd Tiyo Soga was an extraordinary individual. He was outstanding in his own generation, and remains outstanding as we reflect on his astonishing life, 140 years after his sadly young death. Others have recalled his achievements in greater detail than I, both in Thuthura at the unveiling of his Memorial Tombstone, and elsewhere. My father-in-law, Professor Cecil Manona, who researched and wrote on Tiyo Soga, gave me extensive material on this remarkable man, and his influence has remained with me.

Last week's moving ceremony, attended by Tiyo Soga's family members, together with former President Mbeki, the Provincial Premier, amaXhosa King Mpendulo Zwelonke Sigcawu, other politicians, traditional and religious leaders and figures from the business and wider community, has prompted me to consider what lessons should we learn for our own context, from this man who travelled (what must have seemed to a schoolboy from Chumie) incomparable distances into the unknown, in order to learn from the best the world had to offer, and then to translate it into his own language and culture? What does it mean for us as individuals, and for our nation, to draw on the best of today's international experience and scholarship and root it in African soil, so that Africa's children may grow and flourish?

Reflecting on these questions, I found my thoughts focussing on the central question of what it means for us today to 'Fulfil our Promise, God, Lord of Truth'.

Fulfilling Promise poses us, I shall suggest, four challenges. First is a challenge to our nation, and our leadership, in this era of democracy. What is the promise for which so many struggled and even died, for which the seed was planted in 1912, and which blossomed in 1994? Where is the promised fruit of democracy and freedom?

We can point to global financial difficulties, and make other excuses, but there is no getting away from the truth that economic emancipation has not yet reached us all. Indeed, the divide between rich and poor has grown. And though it is now the case that among the richest 10%, 20%, 30% of South Africans, the majority are black – it remains true that the great, great majority of our population, our black population, remain exceedingly impoverished. We know there have been great improvements, for example in provisions of water and electricity, but it has been no-where near enough to overcome the poverty trap in which so many are imprisoned, with little hope of escape. NGOs, charities and faith communities do what we can – but we are only scratching at the surface. Government must lead the way forward.

We often talk about the private sector coming to the party – but it is the government who must ensure there is a party, and a good party, to which others can be invited, and can turn up with confidence that all arrangements have been properly made! I am sure there is far greater willingness to come to the party than government realises – if only the rest of us knew for sure that there really is a party, and where it is being held, and how to get there!

Recently Archbishop Tutu got himself into hot water once again for speaking about reconciliation and restitution, and the unfinished business (indeed, the unfulfilled promise) of the TRC. And, as usual, the sorts of reports that followed focussed as much on the outrage as on the heart of the matter. But there is an important issue at stake – and it will not do to leave such unfinished business hanging in the air while continuing to complain at it. This is a recipe for a dangerous festering sore, not a solution.

Here is another party which the Government must organise. Mamphela Ramphele, in a public presentation for the Restitution Organisation earlier this year, said 'The pain caused by Apartheid has been left to individuals to solve privately without any effective assistance from society.'<sup>[1][1]</sup> She is right that individuals, acting out of private motivation, cannot be expected to bear the burden of making amends. Nor can companies, one by one, however good their social responsibility programmes. And while we should be more than wary of punitive measures (indeed, the Arch said it could be something 'quite piffling'<sup>[2][2]</sup>) and the imposition of inappropriate one-size-does-not-fit-all policies, it nonetheless surely must be the responsibility of Government to provide mechanisms for making amends.

No one else can provide the necessary guaranteed channels for ensuring tangible, sustainable, upliftment to those who continue to be most harmed by the legacies of our unjust past. If only government would provide such sure ways of making a true difference, how many more would be ready, even keen, to take such steps? But is it any wonder there is resistance, when the likelihood is that attempts at reparation will be lost without trace within a budget we are incapable of spending well on our country's neediest people? And what of South Africa's wealthy, of all backgrounds, who should also be given encouraging ways to contribute to a more just economy – as some of Europe and North America's richest have recently been asking to do through higher taxation?

As Trevor Manuel put it so eloquently at the Parliamentary seminar on the Millennium Development Goals last week, service delivery – and our failures in service delivery – are not a question merely of money, but of how Government spends it. It seems that we have enough, more than enough, but we do not use it wisely or well.

To put it another way, the budget is not fulfilling its promise – the promise that is well within its grasp, if only we work to make it so. When I look at the promise of the struggle, and at our difficulties today, I wonder if one of our major problems lies in the following: that in the past we taught people to struggle against; but we have not taught people that now we must struggle for, if we are to achieve that promise. Therefore we must learn new ways of struggling, and struggling together:

- struggling through hard work, dedication, commitment, and going the full distance
- struggling through refusing to settle for second best, for corruption, for corner-cutting, for laziness
- struggling through holding one another to the highest standards,
- struggling through being prepared to work for the good of everyone, not just me and my cronies,
- struggling through believing our country truly can be all it promises to be.

Only through such struggling together, can we ensure a re-engineering of past discriminatory attitudes and practices and their persisting legacies.

All this brings me to the second challenge to fulfil our promise. It is the challenge of the youth of today.

For once I am not speaking about offering a challenge to the youth – but rather, about the challenge that the youth are giving to us, today's leaders. This challenge demands that we recognise that too often we have been selling empty promises to the generation now in their twenties, even thirties – empty, unfulfilled, promises of instant improvements in education and employment, as if all these would come with the single wave of a democratic wand. We promised, but we did not deliver. Perhaps we were too exhausted when democracy came. Perhaps we just assumed that another generation would pick up the baton where we left off, and carry it forward themselves. Perhaps, we reached crucial compromises far too quickly. Perhaps we did not realise that the youth too needed to be 'conscientised' into the promise, and the struggle needed to achieve it – in their own time and context, as we were in ours.

For Julius Malema is not wrong when he cries out for the youth of today – when he cries out for justice in education, in employment, in opportunity, in economic emancipation and empowerment. But he is wrong in how he thinks these can be achieved, and in leading others to believe in these unworkable solutions. We need to share the hope, promise and detail of the new struggle with the new generation – for so far, we have failed to do so adequately.

It is far easier to struggle against, than to struggle for. As the demonstrations outside Luthuli House last week showed vividly, it is far easier to break down and destroy than it is to create and build.

But democracy also requires a struggle – making democracy work requires effort and commitment. Democracy was not a destination – rather, it is a new way of life, which comes with the promise of true fruit for all, provided we are prepared to tend the plant so it can grow and flourish. In the same way, Tiyo Soga's legacy, the promise in which he believed, and which he worked to deliver, is one of creating a new society, and building a new nation – laying the foundations from the best that we can see around us.

It is not enough to criticise what is wrong. True, we need to get our analysis right. But that is drawing the map. It is not even taking the first step into the future that, if only we had eyes to see, still remains so full of promise, so ready to bear lasting, tangible fruit.

Yet we certainly must be free to criticise what is wrong. Tiyo Soga's hymn continues: Fulfil your Promise, God, Lord of Truth. Though the phrase 'speaking truth to power' is more recent, Tiyo Soga certainly lived by it – both criticising the colonial powers, and refusing to be co-opted by Maqoma, telling the Xhosa chief that he served only God – 'There is another King ...'

Surely to honour his legacy means, at the very least, that we must have a public interest defence clause in the Protection of Information legislation. I fully support the efforts spearheaded by the Right to Know Campaign, with their march on Parliament on 17 September, to call for its inclusion, even at this late hour of the legislative process. I am also appalled that Cosatu members should be arrested and deported from Swaziland to prevent them speaking up for democracy and human rights – though I am glad they are not being charged within Swaziland for promoting regime change.

Freedom of speech is entrenched in our Constitution – and rightly so, because it is a part of the necessary bed-rock of democratic life. But this does not mean we can and should say anything, anywhere, merely on the grounds that we claim it is 'truth'. Nor should restraint merely consist in establishing the maximum we can get away with when arguing before the courts. No, freedom of speech touches on the very essence of what it is to be human, and to be committed to the wellbeing of other human beings. This is at the core of religious belief – though it is not exclusively the perspective of the religious, as illustrated by the ancient concept of the Greek philosophers of 'the common good'. Our best speaking is what builds up our communities, our society, our nation.

Hate speech is not merely a legal category. It is, as I have said often before (when people have been called 'snakes' and 'dogs' and worse), any utterance that diminishes and degrades other human beings, other children of God. More than this, it diminishes and degrades not only its target, but also the speaker – for it demonstrates a general failure to understand and respect people at large. The same is true of those who resort to racial epithets, or demeaning sexual slurs, as are also in the news. Pretending to humour is no excuse. Whether such words break the law may be open to debate. What is beyond question is that it all undermines our capacity to 'fulfil the promise' of democracy, through building the sort of individual character and mature society which will help create the opportunity for every citizen to flourish. Hate speech, racist talk, sexist language only oppresses and imprisons. We must denounce it all, and instead speak the 'truth' of Tiyo Soga – the truth that underpins true democracy, that emancipates and liberates; the truth of the one King whom Tiyo Soga followed, Jesus, who told the world 'the truth shall set you free'.

So now comes my third challenge of what it means to fulfil our promise. It is a challenge to Tiyo Soga's direct heirs – South Africa's religious leaders. One definition of a preacher in the pulpit is someone who stands 'six feet above contradiction'! It is easy enough for us to declaim our sermons! But that is not enough. In his new Testament Letter, St James says we should 'be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves' (Jas 1:22). In the same way, we who preach should be doers of the word and not merely speakers, deceiving ourselves and others.

That said, it is not our role to do government's job for them; nor to be social workers; nor environmental activists; nor political commentators; nor economic gurus. These are all areas with which we must engage – but we must do so, bearing the promised fruit of our own unique place within society. We have a special responsibility to provide the moral compass, a clear vision of justice, of freedom, of honesty, of truth. We must demonstrate what it means to be truly human – created, as many of us say, in the image of God, and so bearing intrinsic dignity, and worthy of respect, from the smallest child and the roughest old bergie, to Archbishops and Presidents. None is more valuable in the eyes of God.

We must walk the walk and talk the talk – modelling servant leadership exercised for the well-being of those entrusted to us; taking special care of the suffering and needy; standing in solidarity with the marginalised and excluded; helping the voiceless find their voice; being a full part of democracies processes of debate and mutual accountability. We must show what true stewardship is about – another essential aspect of contemporary leadership in a world of finite resources, where we increasingly risk destroying our home, the only home there is for ourselves, our children and our children's children, for the sake of short term gains enjoyed by the few. We must provide moral, ethical, resources; and help others understand how to apply them in every walk of life.

And finally, we must point to the fourth challenge that arises from Tiyo Soga's hymn title 'Fulfil your promise'. For these words are a prayer – that God himself will fulfil his promises to us. They are a prayer to which we can all say 'Amen' with confidence. For the vision that the Bible offers – the very Bible that says more about poverty and economics than it does about prayer – is that though God condemns those who exploit, or even merely ignore, the poor; far more than that, he delights to bring blessing wherever people pursue justice and mercy. The prophet Amos says 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' He says 'Seek the Lord, and live; seek good and not evil, and the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you' (Amos 5:24; 6, 14). This is the promise that is sure and certain – that when we do what God calls us to do; when we seek justice and mercy, when we seek righteousness and truth, when we seek the economic emancipation of the poor, affordable health-care for all the sick, decent education for every South African child, efficient service delivery, effective rural development, tangible mechanisms for appropriate reparations ... – when we seek the true flourishing of every individual, every community, all of society – then we can be assured that God will indeed be with us.

When our hearts, our minds, our commitments, are in the right place, God will help us know what is the right thing to do. God will help us have the insight to know how to take it forward. God will help us have the will-power to see it through. When we seek to do what is right, what is good – then God will indeed help us fulfil our promise. This is his promise, and he guarantees to fulfil it.

Therefore, let me end with words of prayer, from the final verse of Tiyo Soga's hymn, 'Fulfil your promise':

'O Lord, bless the teachings of our land;  
Please revive us, that we may restore goodness.'  
May it indeed be so. Amen.

ENDS

Note for Editors: Tiyo Soga was the first ordained African minister in South Africa, an African intellectual who translated parts of the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress and other works, into Xhosa, and wrote a great number of hymns, many of which are still sung today.

Born in 1829, at Mgwali, near King William's Town, he attended the Lovedale Missionary Institute, and when the principal returned to Scotland during the War of the Axe in 1846, Soga went with him, and continued his studies. He returned to South Africa after being baptised, but later went back to Scotland to study theology further. In 1856 Soga became the first black South African to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church. He married a Scottish woman, Janet Burnside, with whom he subsequently had seven children, several of whom had significant careers in South Africa and Scotland. In 1857 they returned to South Africa, where Soga worked as a catechist, evangelist, hymn-writer and interpreter. He died at Thuthura in 1871, of a persistent throat infection, exacerbated by overwork.

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An edited version of this reflection, "Singing from the Same Hymn Sheet" appeared in the Cape Times, 16th September 2011 on page 9.

<http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2011/09/anglican-archbishop-reflects-on-restitution,-freedom-of-information-and-hate-speech.aspx>