

## **Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**

### ***The Truth will Set us Free – Faith Communities and Social Justice***

#### **4th Grootboom Lecture in Series on ‘Masithete – Let’s Talk!’**

**25 October 2010**

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Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, it is a great privilege to deliver the Social Justice Coalition’s 4th Grootboom Lecture.

This year’s theme, ‘Masithete – Let’s Talk’, with its focus on improving consultation and communication between communities and government, is a topic close to my heart.

That said, as an Archbishop, I find myself rephrasing the concept, by drawing on the words of Jesus, ‘The Truth will Set us Free’. This is the title I have chosen for my address.

The life of an Archbishop is very varied – far more varied than I had realised, before I found myself in Bishops court.

In just the space of a few days, I can find myself moving from the corridors of power and the presence of Kings and Presidents; to being knee-deep in the stinking mud of a polluted vlei and hauling out broken bottles and bits of shopping trolley; or inspecting inadequate toilet and sewerage facilities and hearing the heartbreaking stories of human degradation that these bring.

And it seems to me, that, if one aspires to any sort of leadership – in the church, in politics, in civil society, in business, in our communities, in any walk of life – one has to be prepared for both the glamour and the grime: and, I might add, to give the grime rather more attention and effort than the glamour.

#### **The Essence of Leadership**

True leadership, and authentic good governance, lie here: in shouldering the responsibility to deliver the promises of our Constitution – and especially in guaranteeing its provisions for those who are least able to access them freely through their own efforts or resources, those like Irene Grootboom.

While the primary responsibility for all this rests with elected government, supported by the public service, my contention is that no part of society can stand apart from the picture of life which our Constitution paints. We must stand together – and we require good communication to do this effectively.

Private sector, academia, media, faith communities, civil society in all its forms – all of us are citizens of a nation with one of the best Constitutions in the world; and therefore to be a responsible citizen is to orient one’s life in alignment with the provisions of the Constitution.

This should provide us with the context of our specific tasks and roles.

In our choices, in our decision-making, in the way we conduct our daily business, we must ask what promotes the greater fulfilment of these principles, for which so many struggled for so long, even at the cost of their lives.

We must also be alert to, and reject, options that undermine or distort the delivery of Constitutional provisions – no matter how expedient, or how far they further our own narrowly defined and short term interests.

The full actualisation of the Constitution is a hard task, and requires long term commitment.

There is a great gap between the standards it describes and the actual living situation of far too many of our citizens.

But it will not do for those of us in positions of any power or influence – whether in the public sector or any other part of society – to respond that the task is ‘too difficult’, and can therefore be set a little to one side and dealt with on the margins, while we focus on matters closer to our own interests.

We must get our priorities right. This principle is at the core of the ruling which Irene Grootboom won.

Those whose needs are greatest, when it comes to provisions of basic services, basic rights, must be our highest concern, and our most urgent objective.

How can it possibly be otherwise?

This reasoning is grounded in the fundamental essence of what it means to be a human being.

Here I want to set theology alongside human rights as the dual foundation on which I am building – because I speak not only as an Archbishop, but also as current chair of the Western Cape Religious Leaders’ Forum. I want to make clear why we believe faith communities have a very particular role to play in promoting the good communication that helps build and shape society.

### **Theology and Human Rights**

I heard a church person recently comment upon a particular issue, and say ‘it’s not a question of theology, it is a question of human rights’ – as though the two could and should be separated, and with human rights having the upper hand.

Let me explain why I think this is wrong on all counts!

First, what is theology?

Theology relates to ‘the things of God’.

Theistic religions, generally speaking, understand God as creator and sustainer of all that is.

As the Hebrew Scriptures put it, in the famous words that open the book of Genesis:

'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth ...' (Gen 1:1).

And the Psalmist wrote 'In his hands are the depths of the earth – and the peaks of the mountains are his also' (Ps 95:4). You may have noted that this verse was written on the t-shirts which many of the Chilean miners were wearing as they were finally brought to the surface after 69 days underground.

If all existence owes its being to God, then everything is of concern to him.

It is a meaningless exercise to try to divide reality into areas where God has an interest, and where God doesn't.

This is particularly true when it comes to human activity.

The Book of Genesis also says 'God created humankind, in his image' (Gen 1:27).

Christians believe that God further dignified what it means to be human, through becoming a human person in Jesus Christ.

Thus, faith communities, each in our own way, all conclude that every human individual, without exception, is intrinsically valuable and deserving of dignity and respect – in some sense, of honour akin to that due to God himself.

The very next verse of Genesis says 'God blessed them [that is, humanity], and God said to them "Be fruitful ..."' (Gen 1:28a).

God's intention is that we should all live lives of flourishing and fruitfulness.

While we also read God's word that humanity should 'subdue' the earth and have dominion over it, we do so recognising that the whole of creation – the planet and all life on it – must also be treated with the reverence and care that is due to the handiwork of God.

This is the belief that prompts me to join in the cleaning of polluted vleis; and to lobby in the corridors of power for governments to take decisive action at COP-17, the 17th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change – which meets in South Africa next year.

### **Human Flourishing, Life in Abundance**

However, today my focus is on God's desire for humanity's flourishing.

This takes me back to the question of clean water, toilets, and sanitation, and the basic essentials of human well-being.

Flourishing does not mean we are all entitled to an opulent lifestyle. Not at all!

Indeed, we know our planet cannot sustain over 6 billion people pursuing the consumerist lifestyle which the advertising world implies is our right!

Human flourishing is far more fundamental – and must be open to everyone, which is why we also use the term 'the common good'.

Flourishing reflects humanity's essence, and what we need to support it – our basic human rights.

These begin with a necessary standard of material well-being – adequate food and clean water, housing, clothing, health-care and so forth; with particular provision for the very young, the very old, the sick and disabled, and other vulnerable individuals unable to look after themselves.

You'll find such provisions in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, signed over 60 years ago.

Other necessities for human flourishing are also reflected there, such as access to decent education, opportunities for employment, and the dignity of having some choice in our own destinies.

Also fundamental is a stable, safe, just, society, as a fertile context for the flourishing of both individuals and communities.

Now contemporary human rights theories are often grounded in what aspires to be an objective, non-religious, universalism; with a concept of what it is to be human that is greatly at odds with the understandings of the major religions.

For this reason, many faith communities tend to be wary about, or even negative towards, human rights language.

But we can agree on these end goals of human well-being, even if our reasoning differs.

For example, when Jesus promises 'life in abundance' we can be confident that such abundance spans our emotional, spiritual, mental or intellectual, physical and material needs, as well as our thriving both as individuals and as members of society.

These are at the heart of the human vocation which he distils into the two great commandments: loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbours as ourselves – which includes treating others as we would like to be treated ourselves.

Every aspect of human rights is in there.

This is why faith communities give such vocal support to our Constitution. Like us, it presumes that intrinsic human worth, lived out with dignity and respect, and enjoyed by individuals and in community, should be readily accessible to everyone.

### **The Challenge of Ensuring Human Rights**

In practical terms, however, we know the situation is difficult; that our history has left us battling on many fronts; and that resources are limited.

Yet at the same time the circumstances are so different from a generation ago, because now – as we must recognise – we are ultimately all on the same side: all wanting to see problems solved, poverty overcome and everyone receiving their just rights.

Good communication, openness, and honesty are key to helping us feel that we are all in this together – and can help us together find the imaginative solutions we need for the future.

And we do need new ways of thinking and acting. For, as Albert Einstein said, 'We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.'

Furthermore, truthfulness on the challenges of service delivery can only help in the long run. Politicians who try to hide the extent of problems, or who make unrealistic promises at election time, just make matters worse.

Therefore I commend Tokyo Sexwale who admitted last week to a housing backlog of 2.2 million units; and also the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry for acknowledging that at least 10.5 million South Africans are without basic sanitation. That is more than 1 in 5.

Within the greater Cape Town area, the number without basic sanitation is somewhere close to half a million. In Alexandra, where I grew up, it seems that the provisions have worsened in relation to the still-growing population, rather than improved.

This is bad enough in what it means for the conditions in which people must live day by day – but the consequences do not merely disgust our sensibilities. The consequences are life-threatening.

For the Water Affairs Department have also acknowledged that within South Africa, over 100 children may die daily from diarrhoeal disease, largely as a result of poor water and sewage provision.

Clean water, decent toilets, proper sewage disposal – they are truly vital matters.

It is not surprising that they can become the flash-point for emotions to boil over – which is what led to me being in Makhaza in June this year, and then to return to Khayelitsha in August, with other members of the Western Cape Religious Leaders' Forum, for a wider fact-finding visit, arranged by the Social Justice Coalition.

And the facts are, that this is a huge problem and not easily solved; but at the same time, it must be handled with sensitivity to human suffering and needs.

It is not just what we do – but also how we do it, that carries the strongest message.

And it is not just what we say – but also how we say it, that communicates most strongly.

Honesty, transparency, good communication, and effective dialogue have to be our foundation stones if we are to work together and bridge the gap between where we are and where we ought to be, where we want to be.

And when I say 'we', I mean all of us who have any sort of influence or power, in whatever walk of life.

We have no option but to work collaboratively – to support government and the public sector; but also to stand in solidarity with the communities who are most affected – in the delivery of basic services, human rights, Constitutional provisions, to the whole nation.

None of us can stand apart from this. It is our Constitutional duty. It is also a necessity. The task is too big for the public sector, or any one else, to handle alone.

This is not just about sanitation.

This is true in the health sector, as Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, the Minister of Health, and I, discussed as we co-hosted a National Conference on Religion and Public Health in Stellenbosch earlier this month.

It is true in relation to adequate housing. We know the problems – whether reflected in the violence in Hangberg, or the demonstrations along the N2 – each place with its own specific factors at play.

The backlogs are vast – over 410,00 units in the Western Cape. And the number will rise if migration, and population increases, continue at current rates.

Money to tackle this is inadequate; necessary skills and other capacity are limited; land is limited – and yet the Grootboom ruling says that housing must be supplied.

We know that Province and City are caught between a rock and a hard place.

But so are the most vulnerable – for though Irene Grootboom won the court case, she did not receive her home before she died.

And there are hundreds of thousands of others – millions across the country – who have a right to a house, but no guarantee of where or when they might find this right realised.

Even if there were limitless resources and overwhelming political will, these issues would still take years to solve.

Good communication can provide the cement to hold together all sectors of society as we negotiate our way between ideal and actuality, between aspiration and implementation.

And I use the word ‘negotiate’ deliberately – because there is no alternative to good communication and genuine consultation.

They may not of themselves solve our problems. But without them even the smallest molehill has the potential to become an erupting volcano.

To return to the words of Jesus, only the Truth will Set us Free.

Therefore we call for openness, transparency, honesty, and the highest ethical standards, from every sector of society: as the basis of the good governance which we cannot short cut, if we are to make the difficult journey towards human rights, human flourishing, for everyone.

### **Good Communication – the Truth that Sets us Free**

Good communication requires more than just openness, transparency and honesty.

Good communication also entails care in speaking, and a commitment to listen.

God gave us one mouth and two ears – we therefore all need to learn to do twice as much listening as talking!

And we cannot be satisfied with merely transmitting our side of the story – even when we have hard facts, or legal opinion, on our side.

Communication requires a message to be received – and that means it must be sent in a form that its recipients can grasp.

This means more than just working between English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa.

I have a PhD, written in English – but even I sometimes struggle with understanding the legal language used, for example, in notices about rezoning or evictions.

To City and Province, I say – please be intentional about ensuring that alongside necessary formal communications, channels are open to make certain that their contents are explained, clearly and carefully, in ways that communities can understand.

Respectful, transparent, speaking and listening are the best ways of building trust – and trust is one of those things that once you get the first brick in place, it is always easier to place the subsequent bricks. It has its own potential positive momentum.

We know that the City has an effective programme of keeping storm-water drains clear and open – so that when the winter rains come, flooding can be kept to a minimum.

In similar ways, communications with communities must be kept open at all times, so that when crises arise, the channels already exist and are in good working order.

In many areas, of course, this is already the case – but sometimes blockages happen. Yet, as with so much else, prevention is better than cure.

Therefore, though I appreciate the need to protect city employees, I still believe that, in some relatively full form, the city's report on the Makhaza toilets needs to be made public.

Transparency is fundamental to building trust – withholding information is guaranteed to undermine it.

I will say that the City has such a good record, in comparison with many, and in comparison with the old ways of the past, in being open. Don't let yourselves down on this one!

### **Faith Communities and Civil Society**

Faith communities, along with other civil society bodies, must also be conscious of how our role has changed since the struggle years.

With everyone now on the same side, we must beware of falling into the old binary polarising dynamics, labelling parties, even unconsciously, as entirely 'goodies' and 'baddies'.

Matters can be far, far, more complex.

Part of our role, in bringing ‘truthfulness’ to bear on a situation, is to ensure that all relevant factors are brought out into the open. We can help provide proper education, understanding, about the whole context.

It is also the case that these days, there tend to be many competing interests at play. It is certainly not just local or national government on one side and disadvantaged communities on the other.

By no means! And, frankly, some individuals and groups have destructive objectives, including personal or political power for its own sake, economic exploitation, and even competing criminal interests.

Our role should also be to help unmask these factors too.

### **An ‘Aside’ on the Media**

By the way, may I at this point also challenge the media to maintain a similar commitment to this sort of ‘truthfulness’, and to use your tremendous influence constructively.

Keep on being part of the solution, in your educative reporting; and avoid imposing easy binary narratives that echo the past.

They may make for a good story, but actually distort the true picture, exacerbate polarising differences, and keep us trapped in out of date mindsets. We need you to keep reminding us that this is not how life is today.

And where malign influences are at work behind the scenes, please keep on uncovering them and reporting!

Let me declare loud and clear my support for the true freedom of the media!

If the so-called ‘Protection of Information Bill’ must go forward, then it must surely contain presuppositions towards transparency rather than secrecy; and a public interest clause of some sort is essential.

We have far too many examples of brave reporting uncovering criminality and maladministration, not to realise how vital this is as one of the checks and balances that ensure the healthy exercise of democracy.

Of course media freedom must be used wisely and well – but it is a precious gift that enhances the life of our nation, and we will all be diminished, if that freedom is diminished.

### **A Bias Towards Constitutional Rights**

That said, no one can be entirely neutral, in any situation.

So therefore, whether we are in the media, or in faith communities and civil society, or indeed, in any other walk of life, be very conscious of directing our ‘bias’ deliberately towards the full delivery of Constitutional rights and human flourishing, compassionately pursued.

Part of the task of religious organisations and civil society groups is to remind those who deal in hard facts and figures that ultimately these are questions of human well-being, of individuals who suffer when their rights are not met.

Yet we must avoid being well-meaning amateurs, wearing our hearts on our sleeves, who dive into waters that are far deeper, with far more currents at play, than is evident on the surface.

And contrary to what was the case so often in the past – when so many community leaders were imprisoned, banned or exiled – there isn't always an automatic need for faith communities to take a lead role. We need humility too.

Even so, we must be prepared to be present, wherever there is need – and to go on wearing that heart on our sleeve, not least as a reminder to those who deal in the hard business of facts and law and limited resources, that ultimately these are questions of human well-being, of individuals who suffer when their rights are not met.

We must also be channels of compassion to those who stand in need – and perhaps some of us need to be challenged to ensure we are more deeply rooted in our most needy communities, rather than standing on the sidelines with our proffered assistance.

And of course, where we can help, we must. We did so in relation to the xenophobic attacks last year. One of our strengths is to be able to mobilise swiftly in times of urgent need, using our city-wide networks.

I also repeat my earlier offer to mediate in moving towards a just lasting solution in Makhaza – if I can assist, I am ready to do so.

More broadly speaking, I suspect that the civil society sector as a whole is still undergoing change, following 1994 – when so many of the previous NGOs found their activities taken over by the ANC as it took power.

As has been powerfully described by Dr Mamphela Ramphele, we are still finding new ways of existing and working independently of, and in dialogue with, government, after years of working alongside political leaders of the struggle.

I think we are learning these lessons – some NGOs doing so impressively – walking in support of communities, listening and working, often behind the scenes, over many months.

### **Communications and Being Rightly 'Caught in the Middle'**

This is why, when it comes to the business of communication, faith communities and NGOs potentially have a particularly distinctive role to play.

We are generally not ourselves part of the issue at stake – but we can be part of its solution.

In such a role it is as though we are not a cog in the machine, but we can be the oil that contributes to it working smoothly.

We should, so to speak, rightly find ourselves 'caught in the middle' whenever communications break down.

In different ways we are engaged with the communities affected by service delivery, or its lack.

But while we can help give them voice, it is not our job to speak for them.

Educated elites – which, frankly, church leaders and NGO activists tend to be – nowadays come from every background.

And let me say how wonderful it is to see such cohesion within organisations such as the Social Justice Coalition. Your diversity transcends old divisions, and you, in many ways, are the cadres standing together as foot soldiers fighting – through Constitutional means – for a better future.

Yet those of us whose roots are in disadvantaged communities must take particular care that we do not fall into the easy trap of patronising others by presuming to know what they in those communities still face.

Nonetheless, we can play effective roles as 'translators', in both word and action, between authorities and communities.

Faith communities in particular enjoy extremely high levels of trust – over 80% according to the Human Sciences Research Council, the highest of any institutions in the country. We must use this well.

We are ideally placed to act as 'honest brokers'.

We in turn ask for openness and honesty from all parties, wherever we are brought in to help – and for gestures of good faith.

### **Some Practical Situations**

Let me offer speak now about some other practical situations that we face.

Consider the recent demolitions of places of worship.

The situation is hugely complicated by historic anomalies and the unregulated growth of townships, where very few buildings have been through proper planning processes.

All sides recognise both the city's need to uphold national legislation – and that there is a particular responsibility to do so to ensure safety: whether of users of buildings, or where these are inappropriately built, for example, over drains.

All sides also recognise the desire of faith communities to stand within the law.

But breakdowns in communication still arise.

One example relates to the need to clarify terms.

We have in place a mutually agreed moratorium on both demolitions and new building.

But what does 'new building' mean?

Is an extension to an old structure 'new' building work? Perhaps, perhaps not.

What if it is entirely replaced, and with a far more permanent structure? Is either letter or spirit of the moratorium then being upheld?

All sides must be scrupulously honest, without narrow-minded pedantry!

Let me give another example.

When, regrettably, the city concludes removal is the only option, there is no reason not to inform faith communities, both those directly concerned on the ground and through our broader networks. We have structures for religious leaders to ease communications with those on the ground – we should use them properly.

In particular, we should allow for the dismantling and reuse of materials, rather than having them violently destroyed without warning. Our poorest communities have given sacrificially to build sacred places – this deserves respect.

Better communication, true consultation, is the answer – and, as I said, this must extend to deeds as well as words.

The way that demolitions have been carried out, the way that the City acted in Hangberg, all too easily gives the impression that, when disagreements happen with local communities, they are to be handled just as in the bad old days.

No wonder overwhelming emotions are stirred up, highly charged language is used, and actions get out of control.

And I say this, not only of situations in the Western Cape, but elsewhere in the country, where there have been clashes around housing and service delivery. The situation in Durban's Kennedy Road informal settlement is another case in point.

A heavy-handed approach from government and police will not do in these democratic times.

This is why I, and the Anglican Church of Southern Africa at our Provincial Synod at the beginning of this month, deplored the violence at Hangberg; and called for a Judicial Commission of Enquiry to investigate both the circumstances of alleged police brutality in the area; and the circumstances surrounding the Premier's visit and her failure to accommodate the request for ongoing dialogue in matters of land restitution and the development of communities

But looking ahead, what we need is not blame, but solutions.

And good communication must be the answer for Hangberg – as the court rightly pointed out last Monday.

It must be the way for other housing problems, for places of worship, for toilets – for service delivery everywhere.

**Conclusion**

So let me end by summing up.

Our problems are great, but we must make the needs of the neediest the highest priority of the whole nation, and every part of society.

The solutions are neither quick nor easy.

Effective consultation and communication, openness, honesty, transparency and trust, are necessary to ease our difficult journey forwards.

In other words, only the truth, the whole truth, can set us free.

May it be so.