

ADDRESS TO THE ANGLICAN ABLAZE CONFERENCE

1ST MAY 2015

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN A TIME OF TURMOIL

I am deeply honoured by your invitation to address you this morning. It is truly a privilege to be part of the “Anglican Ablaze Conference” of the Western Cape, with your threefold aim of being anchored in the love of Christ, committed to God's mission and transformed by the Holy Spirit. In a time of confusion, and I believe we live amidst great confusion today, re-commitment to the mission that we have been giving by Jesus Christ is essential. It is this that gives us meaning and is at the very heart of the Church. St Paul writes to the Ephesians:

“...the saints together make a unity of the work of service, building up the Body of Christ. In this way we are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself. Then we shall not be children any longer, or tossed one way and another and carried along by every wind of doctrine, at the mercy of the tricks men play and their cleverness in practicing deceit. If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow in all ways into Christ, who is the head...” [Eph 4:12-15]

Committing ourselves to mission – the work of service – necessitates us to anchor ourselves in the love of Christ and to open our hearts to transformation by the Holy Spirit. In other words, to remain rooted in what has been entrusted to us, while at the same time having the openness to respond to that in new and meaningful ways which take into account a rapidly changing world. The task that we have is to bring the light of the Gospel among people in a way that is understandable and intelligible to them. So, what is it that makes the world different today than when a lot of us were young? What is the “turmoil” of our time, why and how has it happened that there is such turmoil?

I must now address the “turmoil” of our time. The great danger of doing so is that it can so easily sound like a list of negatives, a type of “woe is us” exercise. So, from the outset, I must say that the “turmoil” - while confusing and threatening – is not just about problems, difficulties and woes. It is not just about wringing our hands and throwing our eyes heavenwards. There is much much good in the world, many signs of hope, much that inspires and encourages us, and we should not lose sight of that and to give thanks to God for it. Neither should we forget that God's Holy Spirit is not just the Spirit of tranquility and peace, but also the Spirit who “churns up the waters”, the Spirit who shakes things up, the Spirit of turmoil. Sometimes the Spirit has to shake us up and get us out of our comfort zones. God's Spirit is speaking to us in the turmoil.

The Turmoil

External turmoil: The world is a pretty unstable place with conflicts endemic to certain regions.

The roots of a lot of those conflicts are often simply greed and power. When we think of the ongoing violence in the Congo, for example, we know that it is largely about control of raw material, minerals as various groups, including multi-national companies and foreign nations, scramble to gain the upper hand. Such conflicts have been with us since time immemorial. What is a fairly novel feature for us – although there are historical precedents – is conflict that appears to be *purely* religious-based. Some “religious wars”, such as that in Northern Ireland, may have had religious aspects to them, but they also had other important elements which indicated that they were not purely religious – there were economic, political and social factors. Today's Boko Haram in West Africa appears to be purely religious – it's sole purpose seems to be the promotion of Islam and the destruction of all those who will not adopt it. Similarly, Al Shabaab in East Africa has become known for separating Muslim from Christian in hostage or kidnap situations, and allowing Muslim to go free while murdering the Christian – there may be some aspects of the political in this regard, as it appears punishment for Kenya's involvement in Somalia. Nonetheless, it is clear that there is a clear religious motivation. By far the most dangerous is ISIS, which is clearly well-organised, well-resourced and which has a well-orchestrated and sophisticated publicity/propaganda machinery. The public beheadings and stoning of people are designed to cause terror, to intimidate and to proselytize through fear.

The persecution of Christians is recognized by world leaders, including Prince Charles and the US Congress which established a sub-committee to hear evidence on the matter. It is a vicious, violent and ruthless onslaught. I have continued to use the words “appears” or “seems” to be purely Religious in nature, but I also wonder if such extremism and fundamentalism is not also the result of the political and military involvement of Western countries associated with Christianity or which are considered “Christian countries” as they try to manipulate world affairs for their own advantage – as well as being a reaction to a perceived moral decay in those countries. But I leave this merely as a question.

But such clear and violent persecution is but one aspect of the “turmoil”, albeit a dramatic aspect. I don't think it is necessarily the most serious one. In the mid 1960's the Catholic bishops who had participated in the Second Vatican Council, wrote a document called *Gaudium et Spes*” which dealt with the Church in the modern world. In it, they said:

“Today the human race is involved in a new stage of history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the world” [GS4]

Since then the changes have increased and continue to increase and have become even more rapid, not only in terms of scientific and technological changes, but also in terms of the massive

migration of peoples, the meeting of cultures, globalization and revised social understanding. What was taken for granted before is now questioned, doubted and often seen as irrelevant. In terms of religion, it is often not so much that people doubt the existence of God, but rather he has become completely irrelevant to their lives. Our present times are described as “a particular significant, historic moment of tension and a loss of equilibrium and points of reference. These times are increasingly forcing us to live immersed in the present and in passing things which make it increasingly difficult for us to listen, to transmit an appreciation for the past and to share values on which to build the future”. The Church and Christians are perceived with great reservation and repeated criticism.

Changing social conditions and values have pushed God to the side – faith is at best considered irrelevant, at worst a danger to society because it is perceived as archaic and anti-progressive. With the growth of the various “isms” - secularism, materialism – the voice of the Church has been largely sidelined - ignored if not antagonistically received. One of the challenges of our times is to ensure that the message of Christ is once again brought to the public square.

But even more than this is the “**enemy within**” - the conflicts that have arisen among us as Church – not so much inter-denominational conflicts which have plagued us historically, but *intra*-denominational conflicts, conflicts within our own denominations. These can arise through different world views, philosophies of life or theologies, with different “camps” that label each other, most commonly “liberal” (or “progressive”) and “conservative”, right-wing and left-wing, so to speak. Very often such labels have little meaning, and what was considered a “conservative” issue in the past is no longer so. But in some cases these ideological standpoints have become serious battlegrounds that go beyond what we like to so euphemistically call “robust debate” in South Africa – it is hard not to recognize even a hatred at work. We only have to read some “Christian” blogs to become aware of this.

But even beyond the more dramatic divisions such as these, there is something that has happened to our human relationships – there has been a breakdown and disintegration. It is not an exaggeration to say that in South Africa we are an angry society. There may be many causes for this, and I do not wish to enter into a detailed analysis, nor do I wish to pretend that the issues I will mention are exhaustive. Some of the causes of this anger and the consequent strained relationships are as follows:

a) The inequity in South African culture is a major cause of dissatisfaction and anger. Super-wealthy and bitterly poor live side by side. The glamour and glitter of a materialistic society hides from sight the reality of the majority of our country who live in abject poverty who cannot meet

basic needs. Furthermore, millions live in degrading situations with little hope of change. Coupled with this are the political promises raising expectations that have not been realised. In addition, the real and “perceived” racial overtones of the the inequity exacerbate and heighten the sense of marginalisation and deprivation;

b) We have never dealt with racism in South Africa. In the euphoria of independence and the reconciliatory leadership of Nelson Mandela, we saw ourselves as the “rainbow nation”. There seemed to be little realisation that the consequences of apartheid would have to be dealt with that went beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and BEE. Relationships needed and need healing. We cannot deny that we are all affected by racialism of our history This does not mean that we are all racist. Having been born in such an abnormal society the effects are there – they may be unwelcome, they are not to be confused with racism, but most of the time issues are seen through the lenses of our upbringing and history. This is to be expected, but we have to admit it if we are to begin to deal with it. Furthermore, racism itself is alive and well in South Africa – this is manifested not only by violent racist attacks we have recently endured, but also shocking racial statements and attitudes that abound and seem to be expressed more and more.

c) The breakdown in family life is a serious reality that has effects far beyond the family itself. The family is not only the domestic church, but it is also the cell of society. Broken families means a broken society. I do not wish to enter into an analysis as to why family life is in such crisis. That there is no “typical” family in South Africa has, I think, been shown by SAIRR research of, I think, 2011. certainly, our history has played a major role in the destruction of families, particularly the migrant labour system, influx control, and so on. “Modern” attitudes towards marriage have also played a significant role and the evident de-valuing of marriage – for whatever reason – has led to a weakening of family. I do not mean in any way to be judgemental – family life is difficult and there are many challenges. Nonetheless, it is a significant concern for the church and for society. Ideally, the family is a place of safety, harmony, a “school” where children learn how to relate to others, to resolve conflicts, to tolerate, to forgive, to care for others, to protect the young and the aged – in short, to love. Family is also the first Church where we learn about God and learn to love God and live a Christian life.

d) People live stressful lives for a number of reasons. I believe we are a nation under enormous stress. There are family problems, economic problems, political uncertainty, crime, corruption at the workplace and in society, racial tensions, a leadership vacuum. For whatever reason, such stressors influence how we view the world and how we relate to others.

e) Migration is a reality in the world that is rapidly changing the face of the earth, changing

nations and cultures as we know them. It is an unstoppable reality – everywhere, people are on the move seeking a better life. It is a threatening phenomenon as we encounter different cultures and cultural practices, as we see what is familiar being eroded, where we endure lack of integration. We have seen the devastating effects in our own country with the recent xenophobic violence in Durban and Gauteng. This can never, never be condoned. People may say “they are taking our jobs”, that there are criminal elements among them, that they are illegal, but none of this can justify what happened. We have committed a great sin against God, a sin against hospitality and against God's creation. Once we start seeing people as “ants”, “cockroaches” or “flies”, it becomes easy to justify casting them out, killing them, crushing them. Nonetheless, migration is a cause of strained relationships and an element of the “turmoil” that has to be taken into account in terms of the mission of the Church.

Finally, in talking of the “turmoil” - and I mention this last not because it is least important – and that is stewardship of creation. Over the centuries, but most particularly in recent years, humankind has gravely damaged the environment and has put life itself in jeopardy. We are not sure that we are even going to have a world in which to evangelize in the future or, if we do, what the nature of the world will be and what hardship it will bring on human beings. The care of the environment will be a major influence on the church fulfilling her mission in the world.

I wish to re-iterate that in speaking of the “turmoil” we should not lose sight of the blessings, the graces, the many signs of hope that are present in the world. This exercise was not meant to be a hand-wringing “all is lost” and “all is doom” type of process. It is simply a recognition of the state of the world and the context in which we are called to fulfill as Church, in order that we can do so as effectively and as faithfully as possible. As I shall note below, we must not become overwhelmed by the problems nor the enormity of the task. Rather, we are called to stand firm and be faithful.

What is the Mission of the Church?

In an age of turmoil and confusion, it is pertinent and necessary to remind ourselves of what the mission of the Church is exactly. Over the past few years, as theologies and philosophies have become more divergent in terms of emphases, ecclesiology has been questioned as people ask the valid questions such as “what is the Church”, “what is the church's role in society and the world” and so forth.

The mission of the Church is summed up in Matthew 28:18-20”

Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given

to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations: baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yes to the end of time”.

1. This mission is given to all the disciples of Jesus. By virtue of our baptism, we participate in the mission of the Church and we each have a role to play. That role may differ according to our status in life, but we all share in it and it is a necessary element of the life of discipleship.

2. We should also be clear that we proclaim Jesus Christ to the world – Christ crucified and Christ risen. We proclaim Christ as the Word, through whom all things were made, we proclaim him as Saviour through whom the world is redeemed. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the source of all that is good, the living water and the bread of life. It is only through him that we come to the Father. We do not proclaim that “non-Christians” cannot be saved, but we do proclaim that all salvation is through him.

3. In the past, mission – at least in the Catholic Church – was understood as evangelizing the unevangelized in foreign continents and countries. Thus, thousands upon thousands of “missionaries” - priests, religious sisters and brothers and, to some extent, lay people – left their native land to go to the missions, largely with the intention of baptizing as many as possible. Mission can no longer be understood in that restrictive sense. While the traditional sense remains valid, a major part of mission is to evangelize those who have already heard of Christ and who, for some reason or another, no longer see him as relevant, have drifted from faith, have privatized their religion, or who have categorically rejected him. Mission is also for the continued pastoral care of those who do believe, that their belief may be strengthened and nourished and their conversion deepened.

4. Having recognized that a major part of mission is to proclaim Christ to those who have already heard of him, we have to ask ourselves *why* faith has become irrelevant to such people. Of course, there is a myriad of answers. One of them is that we – as Church – have simply become too comfortable in what we do, too established, too complacent with a sense of weariness, too concerned about maintaining the status quo rather than evangelizing. If we are going to proclaim Christ in the modern world there are three very basic things that are necessary:

- New zeal in proclaiming God's word
- New methods of conveying the message, e.g. internet, social media?
- New expression, in an understandable language: avoiding archaic expression

In addition to these three essential elements, we need a new boldness in proclaiming Christ. We

should not be reticent, we are not those who hold back. Isaiah 58:1 makes clear we should not hold back:

Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins.

And in Hebrews 10:39

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Boldness doesn't mean "in your face" or imposing on people. It does mean not being ashamed of our faith and the message we preach and not being intimidated into silence.

The evangelization is aimed not so much at individuals but the whole culture. It is evangelization of economics and economic systems, of civil life and politics, of social systems. It is to bring Christ into the market place, keep him on the agenda.

So what are we to do?

1. St Theresa of Avila once said that the man who neglects prayer needs no devil to drive him into hell. When we neglect prayer, or it simply becomes routine, then our faith becomes routine, lacking in depth and insipid – saltless. Prayer is our communion with God, our most intimate experience of his presence in our lives and in the world. It is through prayer that we are united with the very source of life, the source of goodness, with the source of our strength, the source of grace. If we wish to shake off the "fatigue" or the "weariness" that seems to have gripped "institutional" religion, the "mainline" churches, then we have to look deeply within in ourselves and question the state of our relationship with God and the state of our prayer life. This is the beginning of all that follows and essential to what follows. Prayer, in all its different forms – praise and worship, repentance, thanksgiving, intercessory, petition, communal, individual, meditative and expressive – keeps our relationship with the living God alive.

2. We must stand firm in our faith, in what we believe. We must re-affirm the tenets of the Creed – our belief in one God, Father of all, of the Trinity, of the death and Resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. There can be a temptation to water down what we believe, to try and be "modern" in the incorrect sense, that is of trying to pander to the whims of the time, when we become ashamed of what we believe because we are told that it is archaic, irrelevant and superstitious. We cannot be ashamed of the Cross of Christ just because people battle to get their heads around it. Pope Francis said *When we journey without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord, we are worldly: we may be bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but not disciples of the Lord.* We bear the Cross of

Christ within us, we cannot escape the Cross and we cannot promise discipleship without the Cross.

In the face of all the “turmoil” in the world, we may be tempted to think that it is only we who face such turmoil. But in every age there has been turmoil and seemingly insurmountable problems. The Israelites themselves experienced this and it is important to note God's Word to them: stand firm, and God will save you. For example 2 Chron 20:17:

You will not need to fight here. Take up your position, stand firm, and see what salvation God has in store for you. Judah and Jerusalem be fearless, be dauntless; march out against them tomorrow and God will be with you.

In Exodus 14:13-14

Have no fear. Stand firm, and see what God will do to save you today; the Egyptians you see today you will never see again. God will do the fighting for you, you have only to keep still.

In 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Be awake to all the dangers; stay firm in the faith; be brave and be strong. Let everything you do be done in love.

3. We must be prepared to speak out. There are those who would have faith as a privatized endeavour, saying that people are free to believe what they will but it is only their own private affair. Christianity can never accept that. We are called to justice, to peace, to end conflicts and wars, to end all that degrades people. We cannot do so from any high moral pedestal, we know that we too are sinners, we fall short of the glory of God. For example, if we talk out against corruption we know there is corruption in the Church. Must we then be silent about corruption? Of course not. We acknowledge our own failure, we undertake to correct it and we bring to light the evil consequences of corruption in society. The message we preach may not be popular, but it must be spoken. Martin Luther King put it very well when he said that we are responsible not only for what we say, but we are also responsible for what we do not say. In the face of injustice and evil, we must speak out. There have been too many instances in history where we have been silent.

4. Having said that, and noting the need for boldness, there is also the need to do so with humility. We need to work for a humble church. Self-righteousness and adopting the moral high ground even in the glaring light of our own failure, is counter evangelical. Humility enables us to be express the compassion of Christ for all people, his forgiveness and his inclusivity.

5. We need to work very hard at strengthening family life and imparting this great gift God has given to us to future generations. In many ways, the very success of the Mission of the Church

depends on strong families. Some ways may include preparing your people more adequately for marriage, establishing ministry to men programmes that adult men may share their experience with younger men and be role models/mentors for them. In many cultures the processes for introducing young men into adulthood have been eroded and it is a void that we need to fill.

The Church is a community, and as disciples we have been called into community, the People of God. Our faith, while a relationship with a personal God, is not and cannot be an individualistic faith - just God and me. Its very nature is about neighbour and breaking down barriers with neighbour. And so, by the same token, community-building and strengthening belong to the heart of the Church – this includes the acceptance that our future lies in multiculturalism and that the migration we witness is an unstoppable event that must be managed and embraced. Thus, perceptions need to change from a negative view to a positive understanding of the challenge – a serious challenge – that lies ahead of us.

Part of the communitarian aspect of the Church is to maintain and enliven ecumenical and inter-faith relationships. We may be different Christian denominations but we have much in common, and the “turmoil” of the world which we encounter is far too large for any one denomination to think they can do it on their own. We need to work together for a common purpose – building God's Kingdom, rather than sectarian success or dominance. We must concentrate on what unites - the mission given by Christ and our willingness to proclaim Christ to the world. This extends further to all people of faith, even if not Christian. We need to recognize in people of faith their belief in God, in creation, in accountability for our lives to the Supreme Being. In an increasingly secular western world, where belief in God is rejected or deemed irrelevant, all people of faith need to unite for common purpose.

Recently Pope Francis, addressing people of Consecrated life, asked them to “wake-up the world”. Perhaps we have to begin by waking up the Church, by getting ourselves out of lethargy, apathy and weariness. God's Spirit is with us and God's Spirit is working in and through the turmoil of the modern world. In our openness to the Spirit we will be able to meet the challenges that lie ahead and to live the joy of the Gospel, bringing that joy and the life which Christ promises to all those we meet, to a world that is hungry for truth and thirsting for good news. It is a world that is ripe to receive and to encounter Jesus Christ.

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