

Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste... But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of heaven has come upon you.

- Luke 11:17b, 20.

Thursday 16 August shattered the psyche of South Africans out of their servile submission. We were reduced to shock and paralysis, in fear and in a state of numbness; We are bereaved. We are in a state of mourning. As a nation we exhibit all the signs of and we have been through the stages of bereavement. We have been rather uncritical of ourselves and our circumstances. For far too long we have been rather self-contented and even smug. We have been perhaps rightly, but without reflection about the true state of affairs, about what often putatively is termed “our achievements’ by that being meant the peaceful transition from apartheid to democratic and constitutional rule, and of being the pride of the world, or being a nation of Nobel Prize Laureates. In a brief moment of machine-gun fire all of that was shattered. It seemed that all was lost, and the past, present and future lay in ruins as 34 lifeless bodies lay unidentified, except merely as “protesters” and “mineworkers”. Well, the week before some 10 people, among them 2 police officers and 2 security guards were killed in the course of duty. Their passing went unheralded. And yet we know that somebody’s child, husband, brother died that day, killed or murdered in defence of, or to preserve something we know not what. Yes, on that day we lost our innocence.

In the aftermath of that episode, that momentary lapse of the best that we could be as a nation, lay in ruins the aspirations of being a democratic, constitutional and human rights nation that we pride ourselves of. We became a murderous nation no different from the military dictatorships, or the apartheid security forces of Sharpeville, Langa and Soweto. Policing in a democratic dispensation became a metaphor for the unilateral and murderous use of state power rather than rule by consent that democracy has promised.

What also lay in ruins was our sense of being, of our identity and character, of ourselves and our collective humanity. In destroying our fellow citizens and patriots we have thereby destroyed our own humanity. We can hardly claim to exist as such once a part of us has been shattered. We are, together, no more.

And so we lament. We lament in part as an expression of our righteous outrage and anger, but also out of our sense of pain, of helplessness, of despair. Lamentation is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow, a hymn or a cry of mourning. Yes, we might lament what could have been, and what is no more, what Shakespeare expresses in Mark Antony's words as "my heart is in the coffin there with Caesar..." Indeed, the merciless mowing down of protesters could not be anything but heartless.

Lamentation is a curious literary device in Biblical literature. At one level it is a psycho-social response to a catastrophic and apocalyptic tragedy; at another, at the spiritual or theological level, it is a recognition of divine retribution, the anger of God, or the absence of God. It is accordingly a prophetic moment. It is the means by which God is thought to intervene decisively in human affairs and to redirect human history. It is, in the prophetic language, a cry at the realization that God's judgment, put rather poignantly by Jeremiah,

When human rights are perverted in the presence of the Most High, when  
one's case is subverted – does the Lord not see it? (Lam 3:35)

Is upon us.

Prophets are no mere predictors of doom. They are not clairvoyants or soothsayers either. By their words, they guide contemporary moral and social conduct. They challenge nations to transformation, and they bring to consciousness notions of right and wrong, good and bad. Prophets also forth-tell, speak out about the condition of humanity in their contemporary world. The future that might be referred to is not necessarily a temporal future, a kind of gazing at the stars, it is not not a distant future, but a future that is already upon us if we continuously ignore

the signs of the times. The future sits in judgment on the present, and invites God's action and intervention. The future is in the present. Prophecy is moral outrage, is uncompromising and tells uncomfortable and unwelcome truths, about the condition of society, but especially to those in power.

That time for us in South Africa has now come. We are called to wake up from our sleep, and ignore unfolding events at our own peril. In his encounter with the sceptics, his despisers and adversaries, Jesus pronounces a challenge to the powers that be, and brings their hegemony of the social condition of the people to an end; they may no longer dominate and manipulate human action; no longer paralyse by fear; and no longer blind to subservience. He challenges their right to name and label those they disapprove of. By so doing they put under their control and they stigmatise. The situation of evil and sin is exposed because the prophetic action is divine judgment, and it is the work and purpose of God. "If I, by the finger of God, cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you..." and the strong man, the controller of human destiny, is exposed for what he truly is. A moment of true liberation is achieved, "to be captive to the way things are (and have always been), to resist criticism and change, to brutally suppress efforts at humanization – is", says Ched Myers, "to be bypassed by the grace of God"<sup>1</sup>.

Much of this is actually foreshadowed in the Book of Lamentations, generally associated with the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah takes account of the state of Jerusalem after the catastrophe of the destruction of the Temple in 587BCE, and the removal of the brightest and best and noble and honorable of her citizens into the Babylonian captivity, as well as the total substitution of all that Israel honoured and valued – her soul, into a lifeless shell under the control of a foreign power. The tragedy was total and it was deeply felt. The appropriate and human response was lamentation, but the faith response was to seek to understand God's purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> BINDING THE STRONG MAN: A Political reading of Mark's Story of Jesus; 1988:Orbis Books; 167

What the prophet acknowledges first is the sinfulness that has brought about the ruin of the nation; and second is the fact that things could never be the same again, and that the only possibility was to seek and to find God, and to abide by the historic covenant relationship. Finally, it was to affirm the restorative faith in the God of love and mercy who is capable of the reversal of human fortunes. Lamentations provides no ready made answers but it invites us to an honest exploration of the extent to which matters had hit rock-bottom; to ask of ourselves (both the people of Jerusalem, and ourselves today in South Africa) some uncomfortable and troubling questions; and, says Iain Provain in his Commentary on the Book of Lamentations, “the only answers which can be given to the questions raised by the ‘voices’ of the book, must be given... by the voice of God himself (1991:25)”.

Chillingly, Lamentations reads like headlines in our newspapers today: we work without proper remuneration, we pay for our own water, women are raped, no respect shown to elders, young men are forced into hard labour and “The joy of our hearts has ceased;/our dancing (read toyi-toyi!) has been turned to mourning...” Justice is being perverted, power is being abused, and the rich and powerful are indifferent to the plight of the poor. The poor are up in revolt because their backs are against the wall. To do nothing is to die.

For us in South Africa Marikana will always serve as a defining moment, a wake-up call. It is to wake up to the absolute tragedy we have reduced ourselves to as a nation. The beginning point is undoubtedly the fact that the people of this country no longer have trust in the politics of this nation, and not in the people they have elected, granted indirectly, as their representatives. The workers no longer trust their union bosses to stand on their side, given that the union bosses are themselves partisans. Democracy by its nature functions on the basis of trust. Where trust is dissipated then people find their own means of survival. They are on their own. Leaders must surely earn trust and be deserving of being trusted. Trust and integrity is the mark of a moral leadership.

Those of my generation who have spent practically a lifetime in the struggle for a new South Africa, a constitutional democracy founded on the rule of law, where everyone enjoys human dignity and a secure future these are very troubling times, are having to live with a troubled conscience. Our consciences are restless, and we are reduced to doubt. What do we doubt? It is not so much that the struggle was not morally justifiable, or the efforts and the suffering that we went through were not liberatory, fulfilling or redemptive. It is that we had not taken sufficient account of the tendency of the human condition to cruelty, avarice and intolerance. I do not take kindly to the tendency to psychologise the prevailing tendency towards evil in our society. Those who do wrong do so with eyes wide open.

Otherwise how does one explain that it was not possible over some 2 weeks for South Africans to negotiate a compromise, even a solution to the stand-off; and for the law to act as a restraint, and that the checks and balances of our Constitution restrain the intuitive revenge mentality of the police, who clearly were armed with lethal weapons ready to kill; and for the miners with legitimate grievances to have confidence in the rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights, and that the labour relations environment was there to protect their interests. Instead they resort to intimidation, and armed with various assortments of weapons? And yet we must be wary of blaming the victim, and absolving any of the players in the tragedy of any responsibility. To do so would be to subordinate truth to power.

Indeed, how could we as a nation have remained insensitive for so long to the suffering of the poor, to the widening gap between the rich and the poor? How could we remain indifferent to the crisis in schools and the educational disasters dished out to us daily in a democratic country? How could the poor in our land go to bed hungry at night, without homes, without land and unable to access basic health care? The time for change is now. This situation must be fixed. It is crying out for urgent change. It is shocking that there is no sense of urgency in the corridors of power in our land.

Make no mistake. It happens because we allow it. It happens because our democracy is not strongly held enough to bring matters to an end. It happens because too many of our politicians are unaccountable. They are unaccountable because we actually do not elect them. Make no mistake. It is not a political party that governs, but people. Any democracy that directs you only to elect a party, and allow the party to determine who will be President and Head of state etc, is flawed. The recognition of the sin of our times and the social systems that do not produce justice is a lesson to be lamented over. The call must reverberate through the length and breadth of our land that the economic and social policies pursued in our name have not worked. They must be fixed now, and we cannot wait for 2030 as the NPC promises.

But Jeremiah ends on a reassuring note. He surely portends a reversal of human fortunes. "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored;/renew our days as of old..." save of course, that the "old" he refers to will never be again. The "old" is no more. His theology is such that he sees in the end-times, the seeds of a future dispensation under God. Walter Bruggeman observes that Jeremiah is capable of speaking newness out of nullity, and that "the ideology of our age does not believe in real newness. It does not believe in the possibility of a new Jerusalem, so it must hold desperately to the old one. It does not believe in the resurrection, so it must hold on to a messiah who never dies. It does not believe in a God who can work real newness at the zero point so it must defend, guard, and protect at all costs the old, which is thought to be the only source of life" (PROPHECY AND IMAGINATION). The poet in Lamentations exudes confidence in the future under God when he sings in words made famous by John Keble in his hymn "New every morning..."

...but this I call to mind, and therefore hope: The steadfastness of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lamentations 3:21).

Is that not the real problem here that for 18 years we should have recognized that the well-worn out logic of the market economy does little to benefit the poor; and

that the distribution of resources and the wealth of our land does no more than perpetuate poverty and contributes to the impoverishment of our people. Why don't we realize that the wealth of the few does not produce life and wealth for the many. Instead it creates social instability, human indignity and a state mired in corruption. It should not surprised us that instead of all that the Constitution promises we have managed to construct nothing more than a kleptomaniac state. What Marikana says to me is that we are at crossroads, at a turning point. The consequences for not heeding the voices of the prophecy of Marikana can only be a looming apocalypse.

For now, yes, let us lament the miserable state in which we find ourselves as a nation. Let us accept in the words of William Shakespeare

Men at some time are masters of their fates:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,

But in ourselves, that we are underlings...

(Julius Caesar, Act 1, scene II)

to linger but never to dwell in it; to take notice and learn lessons, but never to be conditioned by it. Yes, let us weep for the lost lives, and the futility of conflictual relations, and a future that is uncertain. Let us remember the families of the deceased, and pray for a legitimate and genuine protection under law. Let us collectively make a determination to chart a new course for this nation, and honour in righteous observance the promise of our Constitution, to re-connect with the values that held so much promise a mere 18 years ago, but which promise has now been frittered away and wasted; and recover the soul of this nation that we once held sacred. Lest we have forgotten, the Preamble to the Constitution makes this undertaking

- Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people, and every citizen is equally protected by law;
- Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and
- Build a united and democratic South Africa...

The text of this sermon is: Luke 11:17b, 20

“Every kingdom divided against itself, is laid to waste... But if it is by the finger of  
God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

Amen.

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Marikana Memorial Service

Cathedral of St George and St Michael & All Angels

Grahamstown, 30 August 2012.