

Stellenbosch University Theology Winter School
Justice, Reconciliation and Unity: Rediscovering the Power of the Gospel
5 June 2018

Good morning colleagues. I very rarely turn down an invitation to come to Stellenbosch. Having lived here for nearly seven years, having completed my undergrad and postgrad here, this town has a very special place in my heart. I work for the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation – an NGO based in Gardens, Cape Town – where we attempt to find ways of making sense of points of division within society, with a focus on South Africa, and how to bridge these divisions or fault lines. It is such a wonderful privilege to speak on a topic that is so important to our country and the current context we find ourselves in and something that I so deeply care about.

The history of South Africa is a fractured one. Traumatic aspects of our history that has contributed to this brokenness include the genocide of the indigenous peoples of this country, slavery and deprivation of local and indentured labour, the atrocities of the Anglo-Boer War, the brutality of the theft of land by colonists and the repeated dislocation and resettlement and related, gut-wrenching crimes of the apartheid regime. These traumatic legacies of the past have left deep, unhealed wounds that have had terrible psychological, spiritual, economic, and physical consequences. These wounds still fester. They necrotise. The trauma becomes intergenerational and it's a poisoned chalice we pass on to our children.

We live in a country where community, beleaguered with interpersonal and interracial conflict, is a broken basis of identity and belonging. This multiple-woundedness of community can be seen in the lack of stability, social trust¹, safety, and affirmation of self and one another. Symptoms of this woundedness is fear, mistrust and division. In as much as these divisions stem from the wounds of the past, the continued inequality, poverty, unemployment, high levels of violent crime and an uncertain political context further entrench divides and fault lines. Societal woundedness and the consequent lived trauma of communities is ongoing. As a country we are wounded of race, ethnicity, gender and social class. These wounds and divisions create multiple lived realities from which spring up diverse narratives. The wealthy white urban class who nominally have the best of everything but carry the collective trauma that comes with the perception of losing privilege and possible feelings of powerlessness and insecurity as a result. The middle and working class who have seen few, if any, material improvements post-apartheid. The working poor and the impoverished and deprived, who yearn for safety and a life of dignity, even to speak of the past longingly, imagining it to have provided them with some measure of security albeit limited material benefit based on skin colour.

Justice, Reconciliation and Unity have long been subtexts of the South African struggle and over the years it has consequently taken on different forms. Since the end of apartheid Reconciliation and Unity have had a prominent position in social discourse in the country, leaving Justice neglected in the background.

Like many other things, reconciliation has over the years come under fire and there seems to be an unwillingness from some to embrace or further engage with reconciliation. Talks of reconciliation are often met with suspicion with some even rejecting the notion, considering it to be an inappropriate conversation given our current context of inequality and slow transformation. For some, anger, hurt

¹ The 2017 report of the South African Reconciliation Barometer survey 2017 states that central to any vibrant democratic culture is trust in institutions, leadership and fellow citizens. And that the presence or absence of trust indicates whether people feel included or excluded from the system.

and pain may still be too raw, too silenced to even contemplate reconciliation. For others, reconciliation has become synonymous with selling out, compromise, and a term used to ‘appease and maintain power with only superficial change’.

In conversations hosted by IJR with young South Africans, many times, talk of reconciliation is mostly met with suspicion and some even reject the notion outright. This can be ascribed to the fact that “reconciliation is often understood today as assimilation, appeasement, a passive peace, a unity without cost, and maintaining power with only cosmetic changes”². The prevailing notions of reconciliation, predominantly among the youth, are often limited and hinged on misguided assumptions which have been informed by a long process whereby reconciliation and social justice have become delinked. As long as the idea that social justice and reconciliation are mutually exclusive is allowed to blossom any efforts to further reconciliation will come under fire. This is not unsurprising in a country where the majority of the population is impoverished.

Feelings of disillusionment among many South African youth then find fertile ground because not only do the majority percentage of youth face unemployment and little economic opportunity, they do so in a context of high inequality. As long as government institutions and various leaders are perceived to be failing to cater to the needs of young South Africans, these feelings of disillusionment will persist. This then negatively affects political participation choices of young South Africans. If youth continue to feel that the leaders elected do not hold their best interest at heart, that their economic situation isn’t changing then they are less likely to engage in formal modes of political participation and rather engage in direct action and protest which could include demonstrations, protest marches and rallies.

It is therefore little wonder that many young voices have emerged from this generation seeking justice. 2015 in South Africa has been labelled as the year of the student – marked by the bringing down of symbols of colonialism and exploitation, demands for no fee increases in higher education and the condemning of racism and of neo-liberal outsourcing practices of services on campus. The context in which the protests arose has been marked by growing socioeconomic inequality. Underlying the anger expressed by some South African youth are the legacies of racial discrimination and colonialism, high levels of unemployment and pronounced and increasing income inequality. Despite the divided opinion and support of the movements by various sectors of South African society, what it did was bring to the fore issues of inclusion and exclusion. The movements created a space where we as South Africans had to reflect on our understanding of race and belong, community and identity and inequality and ownership. These are not new topics of discussion but within the context of 24 years into a democracy that has increasingly come under scrutiny, it was a timely reminder of the unfinished work of our political transition.

Yet despite this, reconciliation as a project has over time become a recognizable model for nation building. It is perhaps inevitable that reconciliation has also been cheapened, appropriated by those looking to shrug their responsibilities by merely making symbolic gestures or by offering apologies only. And as the requirements for justice, truth and nation building in South Africa have with time shifted so has reconciliation been reinvented and redefined.

Reconciliation has within the South African context become entangled with the language of forgiveness – a hangover from the national discourse informed by the Mandela’s and Tutu’s of the struggle - even when the political context of reconciliation is distinguished from the personal nature of acts of forgiveness. The language of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its shaping of current

² Boesak, A, A., DeYoung C, P. 2012. *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism*. Orbis Books. New York.

discourse demonstrates how intertwined the religious and personal and the secular and political are in the context of reconciliation work and its linkages to notions of forgiveness.

At the same time, the discourse on reconciliation 23 years into democracy remains rooted in notions of a prior unity. A rhetoric of woundedness or brokenness that implies a prior whole that had become fragmented. When, if ever, were we united? Speaking of reconciliation and even justice today, the timeframe that is commonly conjured has a starting date: 1948 the start of the state sanctioned system of institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination known as Apartheid. I'd like to suggest that because the timeframe that is used in social discourse when speaking of reconciliation is often limited to referring mainly to the atrocities of the apartheid regime, the concept of reconciliation could be used merely to reach some political accommodation and has consequently failed to address critical questions of justice, equality and dignity. Even spirituality.

And this brings me to the theme I have been asked to speak on this morning. In order for reconciliation to be meaningful and sustainable it must be concerned with, over and above the fostering of harmonious personal relationships, the restoration of justice, rights, and human dignity, and not about the protection and preservation of the wealth and power of the already privileged. History shows that it is only through the passing of time that it is possible to look honestly and uncompromisingly at the past. Dealing with the past can be a painful experience for society, yet where it is successful, it can unleash the energy needed for a culture of remembrance and mourning that contributes to nation-building. It is only through a process of remembering and through societal learning and un-learning that social, racial and political integration and the creation of a positive identity and self-knowledge can be fostered.

Injustice and Reconciliation

The struggle against injustice should be the cornerstone of the pursuit of reconciliation in South Africa. The pursuit of justice is a goal that needs to sustain the reconciliation process. There is a need for what Lederach calls "a relationship-centric- approach to reconciliation". This approach to reconciliation involves a deliberate process of learning and unlearning that offers the possibility of a new way of living. Attitudes towards and relationships with fellow South Africans from who we have become estranged, must be re-examined and shifted. Our reality must be grounded in the philosophy of Ubuntu. And not the cheapened, watered-down catchphrase, but a real internalisation of the understanding that a person is only a person through other people – a fundamental principle that informed the South African transition from apartheid to democratic rule. It is a relationship that places dialogue and reciprocity at the centre of the struggle to be fully human, suggesting that people are incomplete to the extent that they are alienated from one another.

Reconciliation will be incomplete without justice. If these two processes don't go hand in hand, it will render the reconciliation project nothing more than a façade. What a process of reconciliation does allow for however, is that it creates time and space in which to find new ways of dealing with past grievances. This time and space that is created, must be used to further material redress – both individual and at the level of social services for all victims of apartheid. Many recommendations were made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many of which are yet to have been implemented. We have been slow in responding to the recommendations, and until concerted efforts are made to do so the TRC process will always be viewed with suspicion or as having failed. Justice must necessarily also include the healing of memories. "It must further enshrine in the national consciousness the memory of past abuse, through the establishment of museums, monuments, memorials, and other

national symbols. If the national memory is to be powerful enough to check future atrocities, future generations must encounter the memory of past atrocities. The memory must, as in the case of the holocaust, be ingrained in the consciousness of every South African”³.

To the extent that the nation establishes material redress, national memory and the will to resist those forces that made for apartheid, it will have achieved a level of justice that may begin to redress the needs of most. It is here that the possibility of a creative encounter between justice and reconciliation resides. It is about promoting a process that focusses less on who we are, and more, in the words of Njabulo Ndebele, on “who we can become.”

This quest for humanity can never be a solitary exercise and it is inherently in communion with others – laughing, crying and dreaming together - where this mutual shaping one of the other is possible. This different way of being with one another as South Africans is only possible if we individually do the personal emotional heavy lifting required, asking of ourselves the uncomfortable and often impossible questions, toward transcending exclusion and alienation.

How can we then re-imagine, re-design and re-organise?

How can we then re-imagine, re-design and re-organise? How will we then make a new South Africa? A new world? Perhaps the answer lies in recognising that the timeframe used to explain and understand our collective woundedness should extend beyond just apartheid and its material, social and psychological effects but should include our history of conquest, the transatlantic slave trade, genocide and chattel slavery. And in so doing break from this appeal to return to a fantasy of original unity but to rather create new connections of belonging, justice and deep democracy. When we speak of reconciliation within the context of South Africa, and embrace in sincerity the truth of the memory of the atrocity of our collective past, it could hold the promise of opening up of spaces for a new sense of being with one another. “Does not the face of trauma and historical experience call us to make friendships for the first time and to create, again for the first time, a sense of home?” (Drabinski, 2013: 126).

Perhaps then in accepting the ‘burden of culpability of our past’⁴, and in creating these new spaces we can jointly create communities that are safer for women and any other marginalised groups. Where the daughter of the farm worker has the same future opportunities as the son of the farmer⁵ and where guilt is not used only as a noose.

Storytelling as re-imagining

Much of the work of The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation is concerned with creating platforms and safer spaces where diverse audiences can dialogue and share their stories. The sharing and telling of stories has historically been the cornerstone of the South African reconciliation process and much

³ Villa-Vicencio, C. 2002. *Reconciliation as Metaphor*, in Holness, L., Wustenberg, Ralf, K., *Theology in Dialogue: The impact of the Arts, Humanities and Science on contemporary Religious thought*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Michigan: United States of America.

⁴ Boesak, Allan. 2017. Will Zacchaeus remain sitting in the tree: Reconciliation as Justice or as a Form of Capture? Cornerstone Institute, Cape Town.

⁵ Prof H Russel Botman, SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor, in his 2007 inaugural address.

has been written on the role of storytelling during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and how the sharing of stories can pave the way for fostering healing and reconciliation following violent conflict.

The art of storytelling and the importance thereof within communities is evident in our rich oral history traditions. Indigenous knowledge and information has for years been preserved and shared through stories. Not limited to the African context only, storytelling is a gift of humanity that for centuries have enabled teaching, lending meaning to experience, and for remembrance. We are by our very nature storytellers. An act which allows us to make sense of the many layers of events and interactions that inform our experience.

John Lederach describes storytelling as a living, interactive process through which new ways of engaging and being with one another are born and that the four elements needed for reconciliation – mercy, truth, justice and peace – are most significantly enacted through storytelling. As South Africans we need to cultivate a culture of reflecting on the ways in which political and cultural influences shape our stories, how our stories are intimately intertwined with and embedded in those of others and the important ways in which they reflect the world around us. This allows us to avoid the ‘dangers of single stories’ and shift us towards possibilities of change. It has been argued that in the context of South Africa where most of society’s stories were destructive, we need to consciously allow for a multiplicity of stories and importantly, be brave enough to have our stories, and the stories we tell of other, be challenged. In this way we are able to co-create and tell new stories. In this retelling of stories and forming of new stories, common ground can be created for understanding one another and acting in more just, fair and inclusive ways.

Sharing and listening offers possibilities for the restoration of human dignity. Charles Villa-Vicencio writes that the act of storytelling assists us in the process of accepting and celebrating our differences and it enables us to understand each other well enough to co-exist. Acts of storytelling contributes in important ways to the building of a common nation that genuinely celebrates its rich diversity and thrives in difference. As we begin to share stories, we begin to renegotiate the boundaries between us. This is much needed in a society like ours where there are so many barriers to meaningful engagement.

The Church must lead in intentionally creating spaces among the congregation that allow for a sharing and a hearing of the stories of others. But this kind of openness can only begin with an awareness of one’s own story and how it has been shaped by our socio-political conditions. This awareness also has implications for praxis and must be reflected in sermons, in ministering, in counselling, through healing in the Church both as a physical and spiritual space in community.

I would like to conclude with a quote by Dr Allan Boesak who said, “Twenty-three years are not a marker for a moment beyond sanity. We may be confused, but we are not mindless; bewildered but not crushed; battered but not beaten down; cheated out of our expectations, but not robbed of our dreams; perplexed but not hopeless; lost but not irredeemable. Reconciliation, always at the heart of our struggles, real, radical and revolutionary, is still alive, and it is beckoning. We can, if we want to, still recover it, reclaim it, re-embrace it, enact it”⁶.

It is then therefore important that we be a generation that follows in a long tradition of dissident youth who were dissatisfied with the status quo and who consciously, deliberately and with great effort seek justice for all.

⁶ Boesak, Allan. 2017. *Will Zacchaeus remain sitting in the tree: Reconciliation as Justice or as a Form of Capture?* Cornerstone Institute, Cape Town.