

**THE CHURCH AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: CARE AND JUSTICE FOR
ALL CREATION AS A GOSPEL IMPERATIVE**
Bishop Mike Vorster

Introduction: (I speak with a Wesleyan accent)

The legacy of Apartheid has left festering wounds in three areas: Our souls; soil and society. (One may call this the triple 'S' syndrome). Like a festering boil each must be lanced to allow all the infection to come out before it can be healed properly. This is an excruciatingly painful process, hence when we talk about being bruised and healed through the cross; the cross becomes the symbol of the pain and suffering we need to go through to attain healing.

OUR SOULS: In Wesleyan (Methodist) practise we often ask each other: 'How goes it with your soul? This helps reflect with intention our inner relationship with God. The Spirit of God is within bringing us a peace which surpasses all human understanding. Peace within is greater than human reasoning. *"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."* (Romans 8: 26)

There are so many things around us that bruise our souls daily:

Rejection; betrayal; oppression both past and present; the lingering trauma of racism; violence; sexism; rape; xenophobia; Afrophobia; exclusion; poverty.

Healing for the soul starts with knowing we are loved. Do you know that you are loved? Healing for the soul starts with knowing we are loved and that God is love and that every situation is redeemable.

This can start with silence; singing; prayer; meditation; stress and trauma debriefings; meeting in small accountability groups and decolonising our minds

Healing for the soul is to know we are better than how others define us.

There is a growing national narrative about 'decolonising the mind'

Arts and literature can play a crucial role in this aspect of our healing, by contributing to the transformation of our minds, souls and how we see ourselves. Actor John Kani¹ said a society without the arts is a society without a soul. Yes we need to invest in the sciences and commercial subjects in education, but this should not be at the expense of the arts. We do so at our peril! Look at how much food is wasted.

One recent example of this is the festival Time of the Writer's theme: *Decolonising the Book*. How many books are written from an African perspective? Or are books only considered to be worth anything if they are written by western elitist writers? Let us not underestimate the contribution that literature has made to the destruction of indigenous cultures. Who were better custodians of our earth than we are? Our libraries need to be flooded with books written by African authors.

¹ Said at presentation at the Think Fest festival, Grahamstown National Arts Festival 2014

In our Methodist rules of helper it says: '**You have nothing to do but to save souls**'. The word save is often used in a very narrow fundamentalist way and loses its rich meaning. It is translated from the original Greek word *soze* which also means heal. It can also mean liberate. We can therefore say: We have nothing to do but to heal souls. We have nothing to do but to liberate souls. We have nothing do but to save the earth and all its inhabitants.

We need to ask each other constantly: How goes it with your soul? - Because, the most powerful energy² on earth is the human soul on fire.

When the human soul is on fire for justice, love and peace, there is nothing that will stop it, not even death itself. We need more fired up souls and the world will be changed for the better.

We need fired up souls who love the soil so much that we confront the abuse of the earth.

Soil has been taken from the indigenous custodians of land and earth through centuries of violent rampant colonisation; this was perfected in South Africa through Apartheid's diabolical social and economic engineering.

The soil continues to be stolen from indigenous people to make way for greedy corporates and with it they take prime water resources.

Africa as a continent has most of its minerals; oil agriculture taken from it for the benefit of those who already have more than they need.

We are experiencing extreme weather: intensive heat; drought and heavy rain in KZN, indicative that global warming; intense climate change; and all the damage we are doing to the soil is having catastrophic results for all humanity, especially the poor.

Our soil has become what author Karen Armstrong calls 'Fields of blood'³, because the land is constantly violated. She says when "humans made the transition to agrarian life. ...came civilisation and with civilisation warfare."

In ancient times Farming implements were depicted as weapons that wounded the earth, so farming fields became fields of blood.

Humans have continued to live in this trajectory and with the exponential development of unchecked technology, we are now at a place where we will not only see fields of blood, but the mutilation and destroying the earth in its entirety.

We have poisoned the soil and will continue to do so through fracking; more mining; nuclear waste from nuclear plants and the list go on.

² Original word 'weapon' is used by Ferdinand Foch

³ Fields of Blood, Karen Armstrong, pp 9/10 points out that in a period of human history there is little evidence that early humans regularly fought one another. Human "life changed forever when pioneering farmers "learned to grow and store wild grain. They produced harvests that were able to support larger populations than ever before and eventually they grew more food than they needed. As a result human population increased so dramatically that the great majority of "humans made the transition to agrarian life. And with agriculture came civilisation and with civilisation warfare."

I was alerted of the untimely passing of anti-Mine activist⁴, Sikhosiphi Bazooka Rhadebe He was shot eight times by two unknown attackers. He was one of the leaders of the Amadiba Crisis Committee who are resisting titanium mining in their ancestral lands in Xolobeni, Wild Coast, by Xolobeni mineral sands a subsidiary of Australian mining firm, Mineral Commodities Limited (MRC)⁵. In order to bring this into the limelight so that investigations can be intensified, let us boycott all things Australian.

Every new mining company that is allowed to function destroys the soil and communities. Yes it offers survivalist economies for a very short span of years (e.g. Karroo 30-year mining licence), but they never eliminate poverty. The only beneficiaries are the wealthy.

Also everywhere we look, rapid urbanisation; industrialisation. We have resigned ourselves to accept that 80% of the population will live in cities... this means that all our focus and resources will be sucked up in cities at the expense of rural development. Again we will completely destroy the soil and people of the soil.

Our Souls and Soil need to meet and have a serious conversation about how we need to live in peace with each other. Does not our Creator demand this of us? *“.. That the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves,”* (Romans 8: 20 to 23)

We need fired up souls who love people and confront abuse within society.

SOCIETY is a collection of souls in a particular time and space. When we talk about healing our society, we at the same time need to speak of socio-political and economic influences.

Jesus' soul was on fire when he walked into the temple and saw how the poor were being exploited and excluded from the temple; he overturned their property and used 4 the proverbial whip to sort them out. “So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.” (John 2:5) He confronted destructive corruption.

Our souls need to be on fire as we confront those who are allegedly holding our fledgling democracy to ransom through the so-called capture of our state by wealthy business people. I am pleased that the ANC is taking this seriously. We have named one family thus far for scrutiny by the Public Protector. We also need to investigate the wealthy white elite who allegedly keep black people out of their white economic club unless they bring political favour.⁵

⁴I was alerted by Paddy Kearney through an email from Di Oliver on Thursday 24 the March. Other information courtesy of Saturday Star, 26 March 2016

⁵ 6 PROF STEVEN FRIEDMAN: “Prior to 1994, South Africa was run by an exclusive club defined by race. I will argue that what has happened over the last 20 years is that quite a lot more people have been admitted to the club. The club is still intact. It is still there. We could not decide as a society to dissolve the club in 1994 and start a new club which all people belonged to. We stuck with the old club and more people were allowed to join it. While admitting that a lot has changed since 1994, Prof Friedman argued that the club remains intact and that is obstructing progress in the country. Culturally the club remains still active as can be seen in most of the media. For example, what is acceptable or not tends to be the views of a small section of the population. The same is also seen in the academia. But perhaps the most important area in which the club is very much in operation is in the economy and we are paying quite a significant price for that. In 1994, the new government inherited a society in which there were huge amounts of poverty and inequality. This is not a very easy club to get into. The private sector, in particular, is not an easy club to get into. If you are black and you want to get into this club, the message you keep on getting from a lot of business is ‘You are very welcome. We would like you to be an Executive. But do not come here expecting to manage it.’ Thus if people cannot climb up the ladder in the private sector, they will use the public sector as is seen in the tenders. We need to be liberated from this club.

7 Perhaps this is the real reason why many have sought to find wealth through other sometimes corrupt means. The rotten relationship between business, politicians and government needs to be investigated by appropriate Chapter 9 institutions.

I want to echo the words of Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan: “*no single family or group of individuals must determine the fate of 55 million citizens of the country... cronyism was everywhere in the world... So don't think you are unique in South Africa. We need to find a unique formula in South Africa that we don't allow what is supposed to be to the benefit of 55 million people. That is what we have got to be careful about.*”⁶

With the revelations of the so-called capture of state, is this not a Kairos moment when all of us in each sphere of society (the Premier reminded us)⁷:

- Public; Private and Civil, need to have a 'crisis of conscience'?
- Are not NGOs economically captured by donors?
- Are not churches economically captured by the big givers who want to dictate how the church should be run?
- Are not churches captured by money through the prosperity Gospel?
- Is not the private sector captured to the practise of profit before people?

At a recent Anti-Corruption Symposium I attended, the point was made that we can change the socio-political-economic system, and this will not necessarily guarantee that corruption will cease. What was needed was a life-style audit of every politician.

This was also the experience of the ancient Hebrew peoples. They had a good functioning system under the Judges, but the sons of Samuel used it for their own benefit: “they took bribes and perverted justice.” Guess what, the people demanded a change of system. They wanted to copy their neighbours and demanded a monarchical system; they wanted a king. The Lord is not pleased with this demand, yet allows them to get the governance they deserve: “and the LORD said to Samuel, “listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being King over them. ... 9 Now then, listen to their voice; only - You shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.” – (read 1 Samuel 8).

Yes we can remove leaders who are corrupt and this must happen, but will it guarantee that others who follow will not do likewise? The key practises for all those in leadership and their followers are: honesty; integrity and accountability.

In Pre and Post 1994, we held the ANC in high regard; we felt they are people of honesty; integrity and who always put the suffering of people first. Many of them are and still remain such people, but something seems to have changed, we by and large, keep falling back to the unhealthy socio-economic-political default position of corrupt relationships which is at the heart of neo-liberal economics.

What should have happened in 1994 is that the same negotiation that happened in the political sphere needed to have happened in the economic sphere. Because we didn't have that negotiation, we are now bearing the consequences
"Diakonia Briefing 2014

⁶ 8 The Mercury Monday 21st March 2016.

⁷ Said by Premiers' at the consultative engagement with the Provincial Interfaith Religious Leadership, Cabinet Executive Councils boardroom. Pietermaritzburg, 22 March 2016.

According to a criminologist, 20% of people are inherently good; 20% of people are inherently evil and 60% of the rest of us can go either way when it comes to corruption depending on the circumstances.

Peter the disciple of Jesus was bold to say I will follow you. But when Jesus is arrested, fear grips Peter. He was a stalwart follower of Jesus, but when confronted with being identified with Jesus, he denied knowing him three times. Given the circumstance of Peter being arrested and sharing a similar fate to Jesus, Peter had a choice - admit and die or deny and live. Then the cock crows, Jesus looks at him and Peter's conscience awakens. He realises that he has betrayed his best friend and he wept bitterly with remorse. We need more corrupt people to be awakened to their conscience to weep bitterly for what they have done. Cry the beloved nation filled with corruption, Cry like Peter in remorse or self-destruct like Judas.

What is needed is a life-style audit in what our Premier¹⁰ reminded us the three aspects of our society: Public (governance); Private (business) and Civil Society (including religious and labour)⁸.

Jeremy Rifkin in his book the *End of Work*¹¹ points out that there are basically three economic realities in society: Public economy; Private economy and Social economy.⁹

The World Economic Forum has identified economic inequality as a major risk to human progress, impacting social stability within countries and threatening security on a global scale.

This massive concentration of economic resources in the hands of fewer people presents a real threat to inclusive political and economic systems, and compounds other inequalities – such as those between women and men. Left unchecked, political institutions are undermined and governments overwhelmingly serve the interests of economic elites – to the detriment of ordinary people. The USA alone is involved in over 134 wars globally overtly or covertly, to protect its economic interests, which in the main is oil. Of course we are all complicit every time we fill up with petrol.

With the advent of technology many jobs have been lost (look at parkades; where are the workers?). He advocates that we need to invest more in the social economy which broadly speaking is the arena of those who work in caring and working for a more equitable world which in essence is civil society. Rifkin also warns that the social economy also has those who are in organised crime: human trafficking; drug trafficking and gun trafficking being the major ones.

This dark side of social economy will grow, unless more is invested from those who have wealth in the social economy/civil society.

In human history, dare I say we made some bad choices, because of our insatiable appetite for power and wealth? As a result we have become like zombies, walking dead who are soulless with little feelings for the other only concerned with profit. UK Church of England priest Rev Tim Yau says *“Popular fascination with all things undead (first world movies and TV series)*

⁸ 10 Meeting between Religious leaders and the Premier, Tuesday 22 March 2015

⁹ Technology, Jobs and your future, END of WORK, The decline of the Global Labour force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era, Jeremy Rifkin Tarcher/Putman Book, and Published G.P. Putman's Son NY c. 1996.

seems to hold up a mirror to our own unchecked consumerism. Ultimately, we end up destroying ourselves, and it's not some evil monster: it is a soulless gluttonous humanity devoid of emotion and rationality. We are our own worst nightmare. ¹⁰

As much as we need to act locally, we at the same time need to be aware of powerful global influences. In other words we need to act locally and think globally.

Let us not forget the major global economic influences Recent research by Oxfam has revealed that: *“Almost half of the world’s wealth is now owned by just one percent of the population, and seven out of ten people live in countries where economic inequality has increased in the last 30 years*¹³ The consequences of which, has made us turn to violence both direct and indirect violence to maintain the wealth of the 1%.

Those with bigger guns control the economy of the world.

Weapons are no longer manufactured for defence but for profit. It is a huge money making industry. The more wars the more profits... with no thought of the real cost in human and environmental destruction. The biggest beneficiaries are from a country where on the currency is written: “In God we Trust.”¹⁴ 7

Most wars are about land and soil (oil etc.) Wars cause death, injury and refugees; Poverty destroys communities;

Violence continues to fester in our society: The residue of Apartheid violence festers on in places like the Hostels in the Durban area. We see how they have become the breeding ground for violence, corruption and ethnicism. In Glebelands more than 57 people have died and KwaMashu Section B hostels are a hotbed of violence and unrest.

Hostels need to go and the process of proper housing sped up.

Sexism; racism festers every day in our society...the appalling numbers of violence against women: murder and rape.

Our souls, soil and society need healing. But first we need to lance the boils to release the ugliness within. This is the way of the crucifixion on the cross... a terribly painful experience.

THROUGH THE PAIN OF THE CROSS HEALING AND A NEW COMMUNITY IS POSSIBLE:

The book of Isaiah reads: *“But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”* - Through our bruises we can become wounded healers for others. (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)

At the foot of the cross a new community of radical empathetic¹¹ 15hospitality is born: *“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to*

¹⁰ Fresh from the Word 2016

¹¹ The great writer and freedom fighter Frantz Fanon was described as one who had radical empathy. When we have a radical change within our souls; this transforms us into people who develop radical empathy especially with the damned of the earth.

his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home." (John 18:1-19:42)

Through the pain of the cross, Jesus, (Ephesians 2) comes to break down the walls of hostility between races; tribes; men and women and urges us to embrace an entirely new economic dispensation based on his proclamation of the "year of the Lords favour" (Luke 4:19) which advocates that humanity lives by the principles emerging from the Hebrew Scriptures in Leviticus 19 and 25.

A careful reading of these chapters shows the essence of the convergence of Soul, Soil and Society.

One way is the formation of hundreds of self-audit/accountability groups. The underlying goal of the formation of such groups is to "...consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds" 18(Hebrews 10:16-25).

The late Chief Justice Pius Langa was humble enough to subject himself to a Methodist Class meeting which is the equivalent of a small cell group which was designed to assist with spiritual and ethical growth. One can detect deep spirituality in the constitution which he assisted in developing.

During the days of revolution, one of the most effective tools was small secretive cell groups of passionate dedicated cadres (units). Let us return to this practice, but instead of preparing ourselves for war let us prepare ourselves for healing and a just peace.

What is needed is a life-style and accountability audit in the public, private and civil facets of our society.

Let us imagine if in these groups we asked each other:

- How goes it with your soul? Is your conscience clear?
- Have our policies liberated the soil and given it back to the indigenous owners?
- Have we discriminated against anyone because of gender; race; age; sexual orientation in our society?
- Who are the least and last among us that need reparations because of the damage done to them?
- Do our policies favour the well-being of the soil/earth?
- Are we buying local to enable healthier economic practises?
- What is the new South Africa that we can imagine is possible?

For instance: I would like to put forward an imaginative proposal which will favour the poor; offer free education from cradle to grave; it is a proposal which the late South African New Economist, Margaret Legum researched: If we tax every electronic transaction that takes place we will raise more than enough taxes for the National Budget. Thus eliminating the need for VAT; PAYE etc.: It would be a good thing if Government researched this possibility and then make up its mind.

But alas we have a crisis of imagination¹² and are unwilling to pay attention to new radical ways of doing things. Instead of paying attention to imaginative more just alternatives, we prefer to go back to old default positions. Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, SACC General Secretary, says: “Reversing the trend might be as hard to change as reversing a *compulsive eating disorder*.”

For example years ago a broad coalition of Trade Unions; faith-based communities and civil society called for a highly imaginative and well researched Basic Income Grant (BIG). If those in power had listened to this Coalition, instead of listening to the wealthy, extreme poverty would have been eliminated by now. Our premier reminded us that of 10.6 million people in KZN 3 million are living in extreme poverty... One wonders if the BIG had been implemented when it was first muted, if these 3 million souls would still be living in extreme poverty today.

We witness the beginnings of this movement of healing through the National Action Plan to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; and anti-corruption campaigns and through the shack-dwellers movements; the Khoi San movement, national

TRC type hearings movement and so on. All these efforts need to be intensified.

Let us form thousands of groups throughout the land where the poor; the oppressed begin to tell their stories of pain in safe spaces and move from victims to wounded healers, whereby dignity is restored.

Healing between our African compatriots will come when there is a better understanding of each other’s oppressive and violent histories. (Diakonia and others are working hard at this already)

Let us remember that the cross as an instrument was meant to ensure maximum pain. This could be likened to the needle which pierces the boil that needs lancing as a metaphor for the pain of sacrificial; courageous and honest conversations we need to have with each other as South Africans.

This will be a costly journey for the soul. It would mean taking up our cross daily of voluntary personal and communal sacrifice and through this sacrifice make a new world possible.

Many have sacrificed themselves for our freedom; let this not be in vain. The late Nobel Peace laureate, Inkosi Albert Luthuli, once said: “Freedom comes via the cross.” Then peace and justice will follow. And never forget: We are God’s beloved.

¹² A term used by Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba at the opening of service at the Grahamstown Arts Festival 2013