

Jesus, South Africa and making a difference...

24/9/17

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

I have always maintained that we all witnessed an incredible miracle in this country on the 24th of April 1994, when millions of indigenous South Africans went to the polls, many for their first time, to vote for the first fully-fledged democratic vote in this country. I call it a miracle because this country was geared for war. The SADF, the strongest military force on the continent at the time, was ready and prepared to wage a civil war if the powers that be called for it. I know, because I was part of that dreadful machine for eighteen months. The miracle for me was the turn around, largely facilitated by Mandela and de Klerk that enabled a country on the brink of war, to go to the poles peacefully and vote for substantial change. I thank God every day for that miracle that transformed this country from a place of deep, dark despair, to a country of hope and change for the better.

There has been much change for the good over the last twenty three years in South Africa. For example: It may be suggested that South Africa has been transformed in every sphere with increased education levels, greater access to water, electricity, sanitation and housing. In the field of education, the senior certificate rate is at its highest at 73.9% in an inclusive education system. The number of graduates have doubled since 1994. More than 3.1 million houses have been built and more than 15.1 million people have been assisted with poverty relief programmes. Massive progress has also been made in the fight against HIV Aids.

Whilst there has been tremendous progress in this country since 1994, there are still many issues to remain very concerned about.

Today's Gospel reading is known to be a tricky one that many people struggle to explain. Many of us have the notion that justice has to do with equality. Jesus, in His wisdom, challenges this notion and thus challenges us too, to rethink how we understand equality and generosity. Matthew 20: 1-16 tells a story whereby a landowner, who may represent God, hires people to work in

his vineyard for the standard daily wage. He then hires additional people at 9am, noon, 3pm and finally at 5pm. When the hot workday ends, the landowner then pays the workers who worked only one hour the standard daily wage, the same wage as those who worked a full day.

You may immediately think, "Is this fair?"

Why would a landowner pay the same wage to a person who has worked one hour and a person who has toiled a full day? Is this equality? Is this good economic and labour practice?

Many threads could be drawn from this parable. It could be suggested that it is never too late to accept God into your life and work for the betterment of the Kingdom of God. Better late than never and God will reward us all, as long as we eventually make that commitment. It could also be suggested that the grace and love of God is so great that we are unable to understand or comprehend it with our human minds that attempt to define and explain everything. The grace of God is all powerful, and most importantly, available to all, no matter the position in society, or whether we as Christians, think they deserve or qualify for it or not...

I would like to go one step further this morning from a hermeneutic point of view and unpack the message of this parable in the light of our post democratic South Africa. I believe that it is our duty as active and socially integrated Christians to be fully aware of the challenges that remain before us in this beautiful country of ours. If we are to make a difference, if we are to extend the light of Christ into this beautiful country of ours, then step one will be for us to take cognisance of the very real challenges that lie ahead. By doing this, acknowledging and therefore taking ownership of the issues that lie before us, we can then start a conversation about how we can make a difference.

Whilst the present government of the day has been very successful on many fronts, there remain concerning issues that we need to be aware of if we are to make a difference.

- 1) It has been reported that unemployment in South Africa is at its highest rate since September 2003. Whilst the economy added 144000 jobs during the first quarter, this was offset by the number of job seekers increasing by 433 000 people. The unemployment rate is currently at 27, 7 %. This is high. The detail surrounding this is alarming with youth unemployment rate at 38, 6% and 58% of unemployed people between the ages of 15 and 34.
- 2) Whilst South Africa has gone through a political reformation in terms of the introduction of a full democracy and equitable constitution, many argue that South Africa has yet to go through an economic transformation that will see every South African citizen benefit from the wealth and industry of this nation.
- 3) Some people suggest that the new form of Apartheid in South Africa is the class system that has arisen that is based on wealth. In other words, if I am wealthy, I am able to afford private education for my children, private health care for my family and to live in a secure estate that will isolate me from the dangers of theft, break-ins and the like.
- 4) State Capture and corruption remain at the forefront as a major concern for many people who are striving for transparency and justice for all.

These are just a few of the major issues facing all South Africans today. They are issues that need to be addressed urgently and immediately, for ultimately, they may be the foundation for another civil war, which we need to avoid at all costs. I do not for a moment proclaim to have all the answers, or any for that matter. It is merely my calling as a Priest to raise an awareness about the context that we live in so that we can be mindful going forward in our prayers and actions. At the end of the day, we need to remember that Jesus was also a human being living in a society that had its own set of problems and challenges. The parable in Matthew reminds us how sometimes we need to show the grace and generosity of God to those around us who have been less fortunate than us in life.

How can we as Christians go about making a difference in the South Africa that we live in on a daily basis?

- 1) Be mindful. Be aware of what is going on around you in your community. Be aware of national and local news and issues.
- 2) Get involved. Join that NGO or ministry group that works at making a difference in the local community. Never think that your action is too small or insignificant. Everything you do to help makes a difference to someone.
- 3) Pray for our country. Daily. The more we pray the more we can be assured of the Holy Spirit making a difference in our world.
- 4) Vote. If we don't vote we have no right to complain for change. This is your civil right, duty and responsibility.
- 5) Accept that sometimes life is unfair. Perhaps you did not get that job you applied for because of BEE or some other policy structured to address past inequalities. Remember the parable of Matthew. Be the grace that God shows to others, even if it is hard and challenging.

Today and tomorrow we celebrate National Heritage Day and all that goes with it in terms of family, friends, braais and good times. This is a beautiful country that has come from a very dark place to a place of hope, light and growth. As we celebrate the diverse beauty of this country, be mindful of the continued need for hard work and progress in many fundamental areas.

Jesus made a difference.

So can you.

Perhaps we need to be reminded of the address by Professor Jonathan Jansen to South Africa as Rector of the University of the Free State in 2013:

***"My South Africa** is the working-class man who called from the airport to return my wallet without a cent missing. It is the white woman who put all three of her domestic worker's children through the ...same school that her own child attended.*

"It is the politician in one of our rural provinces, Mpumalanga, who returned his salary to the government as a statement that standing with the poor had to be more than just a few words. It is the teacher who worked after school hours every day during the public sector strike to ensure her children did not miss out on learning.

*"**My South Africa** is the first-year university student in Bloemfontein who took all the gifts she received for her birthday and donated them – with the permission of the givers – to a home for children in an Aids village.*

"It is the people hurt by racist acts who find it in their hearts to publicly forgive the perpetrators. It is the group of farmers in Paarl who started a top school for the children of farm workers to ensure they got the best education possible while their parents toiled in the vineyards.

"It is the farmer's wife in Viljoenskroon who created an education and training centre for the wives of farm labourers so that they could gain the advanced skills required to operate accredited early-learning centres for their own and other children.

*"**My South Africa** is that little white boy at a decent school in the Eastern Cape who decided to teach the black boys in the community to play cricket, and to fit them all out with the togs required to play the gentleman's game.*

"It is the two black street children in Durban, caught on camera, who put their spare change in the condensed milk tin of a white beggar. It is the Johannesburg pastor who opened up his church as a place of shelter for illegal immigrants.

"It is the Afrikaner woman from Boksburg who nailed the white guy who shot and killed one of South Africa's greatest freedom fighters outside his home.

*"**My South Africa** is the man who went to prison for 27 years and came out embracing his captors, thereby releasing them from their impending misery. It is the activist priest who dived into a crowd of angry people to rescue a woman from a sure necklacing.*

"It is the former police chief who fell to his knees to wash the feet of Mamelodi women whose sons disappeared on his watch; it is the women who forgave him in his act of contrition. It is the Cape Town university psychologist who interviewed the 'Prime Evil' in Pretoria Centre and came away with emotional attachment, even empathy, for the human being who did such terrible things under apartheid.

*"**My South Africa** is the quiet, dignified, determined township mother from Langa who straightened her back during the years of oppression and decided that her struggle was to raise decent children, insist that they learn, and ensure that they not succumb to bitterness or defeat in the face of overwhelming odds.*

"It is the two young girls who walked 20kms to school every day, even through their matric years, and passed well enough to be accepted into university studies. It is the student who takes on three jobs, during the evenings and on weekends, to find ways of paying for his university studies.

*"**My South Africa** is the teenager in a wheelchair who works in townships serving the poor. It is the pastor of a Kenilworth church whose*

parishioners were slaughtered, who visits the killers and asks them for forgiveness because he was a beneficiary of apartheid.

"It is the politician who resigns on conscientious grounds, giving up status and salary because of an objection in principle to a social policy of her political party. It is the young lawman who decides to dedicate his life to representing those who cannot afford to pay for legal services.

***"My South Africa** is not the angry, corrupt, violent country those deeds fill the front pages of newspapers and the lead-in items on the seven-o'clock news. It is the South Africa often unseen, yet powered by the remarkable lives of ordinary people. It is the citizens who keep the country together through millions of acts of daily kindness."*

I am reminded of an inspirational quote by Nelson Mandela, who said:

"Sometimes, it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom."

May God bless you in the week ahead as you continue to make a difference in our beautiful country with the light of Jesus.

Amen.