

**SEEING SATAN FALL LIKE LIGHTNING FROM HEAVEN:****THE POWER OF THE HOPEFUL *SIZWE*****Inauguration of the Allan Aubrey Boesak Annual Lecture Series****University of KwaZulu-Natal****Pietermaritzburg****25 August 2015**

Just more than 60 years ago, that remarkable lay theologian, ecumenical leader and social justice activist from India, M. M. Thomas, spoke words that in my view not only changed our understanding of the word “revolution” but also our understanding of the place of the people in the revolution. Speaking of the revolutions engulfing the world in his day, Thomas saw, with the Asian Church leaders, that the revolutions in the world were about “a new sense of dignity and historical mission.” In fact, Thomas asserted, “the demand of the people is for *power as the bearer of dignity* and for significant and *responsible participation in society and social history*.” Not only does Thomas offer a different understanding of revolution, he offers a new understanding of power, not as instrument for manipulation, intimidation and violence, but as the bearer of the dignity of the people to secure significant and responsible participation in the shaping of history. In doing that Thomas places the people at the centre of the revolution.

In South Africa, where the dominant narrative about our struggle, our victory over apartheid and our transition to democracy is more and more becoming a story about backdoor deals, secret pre-negotiations talks and elite pacts, completely negating the struggle as the struggle of the people, this is a crucial point we should ponder more than we are clearly doing. The so-called endgame of our struggle for freedom was not played out in the secret deals, pre-negotiation settlements, and elite conspiratorial pacts concocted by the political aristocracies from both sides, as for example political philosopher

Willie Esterhuyse would have it. It was played out in the streets of struggle, sacrifice, and hopeful determination.

When we think of South Africa's struggle for freedom, its democratic transition and the ongoing struggles for justice and dignity, think not first of the Constitution with its values shaped by Ubuntu; or of the democratic institutions put in place as guardians of the constitution. Think of the people. Think not first of the body of laws and policies and statutes. Think of the people; their struggles, their joys, their tears, their cries, their ideals and their hopes. Without them there would have been no struggle. Without them there would have been no victory over apartheid. Without them there would be no dreams of a different society and a different world. Without them there would be no hope. It is always the people, the *sizwe*, the struggling *sizwe*, the sacrificial *sizwe*, the hopeful *sizwe* that make the difference. They, like Isaiah, through the darkest days, believed and knew with Isaiah, that it would be only a little while, and the tyrant would be no more (Is. 29:10). They believed with Jesus as he assured the seventy upon their return from their mission where they saw "even the demons" submitting to them, that victory is assured, because he had already "seen Satan fall like lightning from heaven." (Luke 10:18). Jesus was not speaking on behalf of the rich and the powerful in the palace and the Temple. He, a true prophet from among the people, spoke on their behalf.

South Africa's freedom and its transition were made possible by struggle, but more so by sacrifice; by suffering but more so by resilience; by pain but more so by joyful determination; by political understanding but more so by audacious hope, by visionary leadership but more so by the courageous, determined people, who gave life to African American poet's June Jordan's wonderful phrase in her poem in honour of the Women's March on the Union Buildings in Pretoria in 1956, "We are the ones we have been waiting for." In that march the women did not only claim their right to protest against the

inhuman pass laws of the apartheid regime. They also claimed their rightful place in the struggle as simultaneously they protested against the entrenched patriarchy of the liberation movements.

June Jordan's phrase "We are the ones we have been waiting for" is an acknowledgement and celebration of the people, their power, their capacity for initiative and leadership, their capacity for grasping the vision of the revolution, making it their own and running with it, determined to see it become reality. "We are the ones" means we are no longer waiting for some external power, for the permission of the men, or for Lenin's "revolutionary vanguard", the small, conspiratorial elite who would exploit the revolutionary commitment of the people, seize power in the name of the working class and then proceeded to carry out a right-wing counter-revolution that introduced a system of repressive, centralized state capitalism and state terror.

The foundations for South Africa's transition into democracy and for a humane, responsive and compassionate society lie in the remarkable ways the struggle for freedom was waged and the consistency with which the ideals for an open, inclusive, nonracial, participatory democracy were upheld, cherished, and nurtured despite the harshest forms of oppression, the most cynical political manipulation by the apartheid regime as well as the African National Congress' political aristocracy, and the most relentless violence.

The decade of apartheid rule following the election victory of the National Party in 1948, the people understood that the struggle had just entered a new phase, that the long, long, road had just become longer, that racial hatred had just been legally permanentized, officially legitimized, and politically institutionalized. But that also meant that the call for freedom had become clearer, more urgent, more compelling. They abandoned what Nelson Mandela called "constitutional protest" and opted for revolutionary resistance and engaged the oppressor in the Defiance Campaign which changed the rules of that engagement completely. They stepped away from the strategy of petitions

and appeals to successive white minority regimes as if the oppressor would feel any obligation to respond with political responsibility and a sensitivity for justice.

They decided they could no longer protest against apartheid in statements and appeals while obeying apartheid laws that called into question the very validity of those appeals. They decided that obeying apartheid laws was in fact not a sign of civil politics but complicity in their own oppression and lending legitimacy to laws that destroyed their humanity. They now understood that challenging the oppressor in the streets with actions of mass civil disobedience was the dignity they owed themselves and the generations to come. So instead of depending on the persuasive powers in letters and petitions penned by the leadership, they called upon the courage and determination of the people to be free. The people took to the streets.

It is always the people, the determined people, the hopeful sizwe. They understood that the struggle was far from over, and that yet more, and new sacrifices would be called for. They understood that the oppressor would not relinquish power without a struggle; they knew that the road to freedom would always be via the cross, but that they could not allow their dreams to be reshaped by the tyranny of racist oppression. They had come together in Kliptown and they wrote the Freedom Charter. They flooded the streets in that historic, decisive Defiance Campaign, they filled the air with songs of struggle, and they spoke through Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli:

**“The task is not yet finished and South Africa is not yet a home for all her sons and daughters. Such a home we wish to ensure. From the beginning our history has been one of ascending unities, the breaking of tribal, racial, and creedal barriers. The past cannot hope to have a life sustained by itself, wrenched from the whole. There remains before us the building of a new land, a home for (all) who are black, white, brown, from the ruins of the old**

**narrow groups, a synthesis of the rich cultural strains which we have inherited.”**

Even when, as the very last possible response to the intransigence of white power and privilege and the relentless violence of a racist, minority regime, they were forced to adopt a military strategy, the aim was not to drive white people into the sea. It was not to sow as much death and destruction as possible. It was not even to conquer. It was to uphold the dream of a nonracial, open, democratic society. So they spoke through Nelson Mandela as he, on behalf of all of them, stood in the dock facing the apartheid court:

**“The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices – submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa... We shall not submit... I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”**

In the dominant narrative, in a deliberate attempt to alienate Mandela from his people and dispossess the people of their role in the struggle, Mandela is presented as speaking only in his own behalf. In truth, Mandela may have spoken in the first person, but he was in fact speaking on behalf of all the accused, and by the same token on behalf of all the people who had taken the risks with those about to be sentenced. Mandela did no more than articulate their fight, their hopes and dreams, their determination to die if necessary. If he had spoken just for himself, the speech would have been no more than empty braggadocio. But because he spoke for the people it was filled with the authority of authentic heroism.

“This then,” Mandela told the court, “is what the ANC is fighting. Their struggle is a truly national one. It is a struggle of the African people, inspired

by their own suffering and their own experience. It is a struggle for the right to live.” It is always about the sizwe.

And when that generation was exiled, banned and imprisoned; all political activity suppressed, driven underground and declared illegal; when apartheid thought it had broken the back of the resistance, it was the children who picked up the staff and held it high, a beacon for the masses to see and follow, a staff pointing at a promised land not yet seen but always dreamed of and believed in. In their ears rang the voices of Lilian Ngoye and Tsitsi Mashinini, Hector Petersen Helen Joseph, Sophie Brown and Steve Biko as he spoke about our historic task not just to liberate South Africa, but to bestow upon the world a “human face.”

In 1983, when that new generation came together in what would become South Africa’s largest, nonracial social resistance movement which would break down the last bastions of apartheid, we understood that it is of crucial importance to allow ourselves not just to be *beckoned* by the ideals of the struggle, but to let those ideals *infuse* the struggle, lead and give shape to the struggle, so that we should not only follow those ideals but embrace them *as we struggled*:

**“We, therefore, must not allow our anger over apartheid to become the basis for blind hatred of *all* whites. Let us not build our struggle upon hatred; let us not hope for revenge. Let us, even now, seek to lay the foundations for reconciliation between whites and blacks in this country by working together, praying together, struggling together for justice... (for) in the final analysis, judgment will be made not in terms of whiteness or blackness whatever the ideological content of those words may be today, but in terms of the persistent faithfulness to which we are called in this struggle.”**

It’s always about the people.

I uttered these words in 1983. But we did not know then that the decade of the 1980s would become the darkest hour of our struggle. In response to that “persistent faithfulness” I spoke of in 1983, the white regime unleashed repression and violence that in its ferocity was unparalleled in the history of the resistance against apartheid. During the two successive states of emergency repressive legislation reached frightening proportions and was ruthlessly enforced; over 40,000 were detained without trial, 40% of them younger than 18; bannings were the order of the day; we went from funeral to funeral – it seemed the killings would never stop. Of the innocence with which the children of Soweto, Elsie’s River and Lingelihle began that era, there would be nothing left.

It was the heyday of Security Police operations, of cross-border wars and the reign of terror by the military in our black townships. It was the time of unparalleled military action and the emergence of specialist search and destroy and torture units like the infamous 32 Battalion; of police impunity, of chemical warfare against our people and the unchecked power of men like Dr. Wouter Basson whose reputation earned him the nickname “Dr. Death”. It was the decade of imprisonment and torture; of the frightening notoriety of places like John Vorster Prison, Pollsmoor Prison, and Vlakplaas – the operational base of the secret police’s most notorious counter-insurgency group and its commander Eugene De Kock, whom journalist Jacques Pauw called “Prime Evil.” It was the height of apartheid’s arrogance, fear, and hubris; a time where I had seen things I still cannot banish from my mind. For the first time, the world really understood why apartheid was declared “a crime against humanity.”

But at the same time it was a time of amazing courage, of extraordinary sacrifice, of relentless determination, of audacious hope. The hopeful sizwe would not give up. And even though Luthuli was no longer with us, we could still hear him say, “The road to freedom is via the Cross”. And even though our generation had never seen Mandela, never heard him speak, never touched his

hand, we could still hear him telling us about his “cherished ideal” and that we too, must not submit - we should fight. And even though apartheid still seemed to reign supreme we saw our freedom rising as bright as the morning sun. And just as the women in 1956, when they marched against Pretoria and Prime Minister Strijdom, sang in defiance: ***Strijdom, wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo! Uzokufa!” Strijdom, you have touched the women, you have struck a rock! You shall be crushed!”***, so we marched in Cape Town and Durban, in Johannesburg and Pretoria, in Port Elizabeth and Kimberley and right across the country and sang, ***Ukanamandla! Ukanamandla! Ukanamandla, uSatani!’ It is broken, it is broken, the power of Satan, it is broken!***

The hope of the people could not be crushed.

### III

These are the wellsprings of South Africa’s transition. It was because of this that when the time came, we made the kind of choices that stunned the world and caused many to speak of the “miracle” of our transition. And in truth, it was not completely far-fetched. We struggled against all odds for over three centuries and we won. We were locked in battle with truly demonic forces and we never gave up. We stood alone in the world for so long but we endured. We were traumatized by indescribable violence and dehumanization but when the time came for fundamental choices we chose the open hand reaching for a shared future, not the closed fist grimly gripping the past. We chose solidarity with and justice for the living rather than revenge for the dead. We chose reconciliation over retribution, the risk of forgiveness over the triumph of justified condemnation.

We chose the political justice of Kempton Park over the criminal justice of Nuremberg. We set aside justifiable victor’s justice, did not claim the power of well-deserved victim’s justice, but chose for the vulnerability of survivor’s justice. In doing this we went further than most have seen or recognized: we



did not say that all *black* South Africans were survivors. We called *all* South Africans survivors: we all survived this horror called apartheid. And at the deepest heart of *that* lies Ubuntu: the understanding that my humanity is inextricably bound with your humanity; that I am only what I am when you are what you are meant to be; that in hurting or despising or dehumanizing me you are hurting, despising and dehumanizing yourself; that in my embracing and forgiving you I restore your humanity and mine and restore the community that was lost because of what you have done. This is a generosity that is stunning in its depth and its width. This is a spirituality that has far-reaching and radical political implications.

This is not the work of one person, not even of President Nelson Mandela, extraordinary human being that he was. This was the work of the faithful, sacrificial, hopeful *sizwe*, and the only response to this unbelievable magnanimity, this indescribable forgiveness, this unimaginable trust, is the reciprocity of justice. We are still waiting for that response.

#### IV

That “persistent faithfulness” I spoke of in 1983, is the same faithfulness that is our driving force still today. I said something else that day:

**“South Africa belongs to all its people... This country is our country. Its future is not safe in the hands of persons, white or black, who despise democracy and trample on the rights of the people. Its future is not safe in the hands of people, white or black, who, to build their empires depend upon economic exploitation and human degradation. Its future is not safe in the hands of people, white or black, who need the flimsy and deceitful cloak of ethnic superiority to cover the nakedness of their racism. Its future is not safe in the hands of people, white or black, who seek to secure their unjustly acquired positions of privilege by repressing violently the weak, the exploited, and the needy. Its future is not safe in the hands of persons, white or black, who put their faith simply in the madness of growing militarism. For the sake of our**

**country and our children, therefore, whether *you* be white or black, resist those people, whether *they* be white or black.”**

It is now clear that we have long since reached that point.

Since the coming of democracy, as a nation South Africans have without a doubt achieved much. Our decision, in dealing with the crime against humanity called apartheid, to make a fundamental choice for reconciliation rather than retribution and revenge, remains an enormous gift to South Africa and the world, spiritually and politically. I remain convinced this fundamental choice is foundational for the building of open, democratic, inclusive, humane and peaceful societies, and not just for those emerging from situations of protracted serious and deadly conflict. South Africa, in making this choice, has done itself, and the world, a great service. Yet this very same reconciliation process is wracked with contradictions with immense political and social implications for issues regarding the restoration of human rights, human dignity, and justice.

As a nation we have framed one of the most progressive constitutions of any modern democracy based on the principles and values of ubuntu. We have deleted political and social apartheid from our statute books, yet not from the political, economic and social life of the nation. In fact we have vigorously defended, and continue to defend and justify our enthusiastic embrace of neo-liberal capitalism despite the quite disastrous consequences of this policy choice for the vast majority of the people of South Africa, especially women. Especially poor, rural, black women. Today South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world.

It is time that the prophetic church in South Africa draws some inspiration from the courageous, visionary honesty of Pope Francis as he speaks of our global condition and the ravages caused by neo-liberal capitalism, the worship of money, the idolization of self-serving power, and the disdain for God's creation and God's people that lie at the heart of it. Speaking of the unfettered

power of capital – in other words, deregulation, the ruthless suppression of people’s rights in pursuit of profits, the reckless destruction of the Earth, Poe Francis speaks with the truthfulness of a true prophet, his words devoid of the sycophancy our economic and political aristocracies demand and expect:

The earth, entire peoples and individual persons are being brutally punished. And behind all this pain, death and destruction there is the stench of what Basil of Caesarea called ‘the dung of the devil’. An unfettered pursuit of money rules, the service of the common good is left behind. Once capital becomes an idol and guides people’s decisions; once greed for money presides over the entire socio-economic system, it ruins society, it condemns and enslaves men and women, it destroys human fraternity, it sets people against one another, and as we clearly see, it even puts at risk our common home.

## V

But there are signs of hope, because the people cannot forget their own struggles. They have seen the light of the truth of freedom, and they will not rest until they find it. The people have heard and understood Albert Luthuli as he told us that “Somewhere ahead there beckons a civilization, a culture, which will take its place in the parade of God’s history beside other human syntheses... It will not necessarily be all black; but it will be African.” So we continue to fight for that nonracial, inclusive, profoundly African society.

The hope I am speaking of is not the optimism of wishing-well politics. It is grounded in the history of struggle. This year marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the most remarkable political moments in South African history. In Kliptown on June 25 1955, the people came together, over 3000 delegates from civil society, political and religious formations; from across every community, white and black, to write and adopt the Freedom Charter.

Apartheid was just beginning to tighten its grip on every aspect of life in South Africa. So the people responded, with righteous anger but not with hatred; with utter disdain for legalized racism but with no thought of racism in

return; with unequivocal rejection of the society that was being forced into shape but with an unerring eye on the society they dreamed of and worked for. So, against all the realities of apartheid, against the distorted imaginings of white superiority and black inferiority; and in the face of white dispossession of their land, their dreams, *and* of their future, they spoke through the Freedom Charter:

“South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people... that our country will never be prosperous or free until all our people live in brotherhood... without distinction of colour, sex or belief... And therefore we, the People of South Africa declare...”

This was a moment of amazing political insight, but even more it was a moment of hope. This is a document that finds its place among the great political declarations in history. Every sentence is a ringing condemnation of the political, social, and economic intentions of apartheid; every phrase an exposure of the evil of apartheid; every word a resounding declaration of resistance against the politics of apartheid. In one single paragraph the fundamental truths about genuine democracy are held up as a scorching judgment of apartheid South Africa:

- It exposes and rejects the foundational distortions and fallacies of apartheid: “South Africa belongs to all who live in it...”
- It stipulates the basic requirement for legitimate governmental authority: there is no true government without the consent of the governed;
- It spells out the difference between naked power and legitimized authority;
- It exposes apartheid’s political heresies by holding on the belief in the strength of a common humanity responsive to, responsible for and accountable to one another, and to the belief in the power and necessity

of a nonracial, inclusive democracy based on equality and reconciled diversity.

That is why this is such a credible example of what M. M. Thomas meant when he spoke of the power of the people as the bearer of dignity and for significant participation in the shaping of their own history.

In its judgment on apartheid and its claim on the altogether different vision of the future the Charter did one other, profound thing. It wrested power from the hands of the powerful oppressor and placed it firmly in the hands of the powerless people, thereby empowering the people beyond measure. Apartheid may have shaped the past; it may have a stranglehold on the present, but it shall have no right to fashion the future. That right belongs to the people.

In claiming that right the Charter, in ways we may not have fully understood or appreciated, gave the people the power and authority of authentic speech. It is a speech vested in the will of the people, a will now being asserted over against the willful, arbitrariness of apartheid. The emperors of ancient Rome proclaimed, "All is mine to decree." Those were decrees backed by the merciless violence of the empire, always against the interests of the people, disdainful of the hopes of the people, destructive of the life of the people. It is a decree because the people could not withstand it, change it, rise up in resistance against it. These were decrees that always benefited the rich and powerful, the privileged inner circles of imperial patronage.

In like fashion, against the will of the people, against the common good, and against the yearnings of the future, apartheid decreed its laws, its crimes and its inhumanity. Now, through the Charter, the people assert their will, and the people declare. That is the power of transformed and transformative speech. It is the language of revolt, the grammar of hope, creating space for the politics of freedom; nullifying the certitudes of apartheid by making it a site of struggle and creative contestation.

You the oligarchs of darkness *decree*, but we the people *declare*. You the potentates of apartheid *decree*, but we the people *declare*. This was a moment

of startling political insight, of awesome courage, of audacious hope, not denying the manifested realities of apartheid, but nullifying their validity over their lives. Apartheid decreed the intentions of capitalist enslavement; the will of the people declared freedom. Apartheid decreed the power of arrogant racial domination; the people declared the authority of equality, diversity and inclusivity.

It was a moment that shifted the power from those sitting on the thrones of racist presumption to the people walking in the shadows of the light: in the shadow of painful struggle, but in the light of confident solidarity; in the shadow of sacrificial suffering but in the light of contagious courage; in the shadow of constant betrayal, but in the light of unstoppable freedom. This is the hopeful politics the people have bestowed as a gift to every generation, and this is the politics that should inspire us now, at this moment of new and renewed struggles. There might be shadows, but they are shadows because of the light.

And when there are signs of corruption and Thuli Madonsela proves herself not afraid to take the powers that be head-on, her support amongst South Africans is overwhelming and the admiration for her is boundless. She might find herself in sometimes vulnerable places when she faces the powerful, but amongst her people her feet are firmly planted and her hand is firmly held.

When Anene Booysen, the young black woman from rural Western Cape is brutally beaten, tortured and raped, and white fashion model Reeva Steenkamp is shot down in a bathroom of an upmarket Johannesburg apartment, not just the women, but the vast majority of South Africa's people, black and white, stand up to speak up and fight for both women and against the scourge of gender-based violence.

The people will not give up.

When our reconciliation process stumbles as it does now because we have de-linked it from the restoration of justice, human dignity and the rights of the

poor and defenseless, it is the people who stand up to remind South Africa that we shall not be denied the justice that we have earned through sacrifice, and that the price of a cheap reconciliation will ultimately be too high.

We shall continue to remind them that for reconciliation to be the justice-bringing, restorative power it is meant to be, and for hope to be the transformational, life-affirming power *it* is intended to be, South Africa's hopeful people will have to reclaim their space, their dreams and their power.

Writing of the world-transforming politics of the Afro-Arab Spring, which started its hopeful politics in Tunisia, Columbia University scholar Hamid Dabashi writes, "For Muhammad Bouazizi to remain the martyred witness of a revolution that will not replace one dictator with another, one false prophecy of freedom with another, there is only one logical and lasting measure: the people." It is as true for the Afro-Arab Spring as it is for South Africa.

The South African revolution is an incomplete revolution. The compassionate justice, the equality and dignity we have fought and sacrificed for, is not yet a reality. But the dream of a completed revolution will remain, the hope for the power that is not the instrument of threat, mendacity and deceit; of intimidation and repression, but the vessel of the people's dignity and agency to create a new history will be sustained. The people, determined, militant and resilient, will not give up because like Isaiah, they know that it only a little while, and the tyrant shall be no more, and like Jesus, they have seen Satan fall like lightning from heaven. With students from Cape Town in 1985, they will continue to believe and sing, ***Ukanamandla, ukanamandla, ukanamndla, uSatani. It is broken, it is broken! The power of Satan, it is broken. Ukanamandla!*** The hopeful sizwe will not go away.

