

The Diocese of St Mark the Evangelist

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To All: Clergy
 Churchwardens
 Leaders of Organisations
 Diocesan Youth Council

Dear Friends in Christ,

Greetings in our Lord Jesus Christ who came to establish the reign of God – every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

(Philippians 2:10-11)

Over the Rainbow?

This letter is based on my sermon at the Manche Masemola Pilgrimage 2016.

1 The Rainbow Nation

It was former Archbishop Desmond Tutu who coined the phrase “The Rainbow Nation” to describe the newly democratic South Africa in the exciting days of 1994. It seemed to sum up the feeling of hope that abounded after the release of Nelson Mandela and those first democratic elections.

Looking back we realise that much of the sentiment was probably more romantic than realistic. We had not yet faced the hard realities of land redistribution, economic freedom, repentance, restitution, forgiveness and reconciliation. In recent months I have heard a number of influential people rejecting the idea of a Rainbow Nation.



I have been thinking about it a lot in the last few weeks as we prepared for the local government elections and participated in them. It is still a valuable image... but we need dig into it a bit more deeply to understand what it is really about. At first sight a rainbow is something beautiful – the sun breaking through the clouds, lovely colours representing the different races and cultures living together in peace and harmony, our great strength as a country when we express our unity in diversity.

But since then we have had many disappointments in areas like crime, education, health, corruption, the economy, service delivery protests (often violent), and even the disaster of Marikana. Some people have become disillusioned, and we have all started to ask serious questions about where we are and how we can move forward. It was reflected in the unprecedented interest in these elections.

So, what does it mean to be a “Rainbow Nation” in this context? Let’s start by reflecting on matters of life and faith.

2 What Was It?

2.1 Manche Masemola

What was it that gave a young girl, Manche Masemola, the strength to hold on to her newly discovered Christian faith in the face of incredible pressure, persecution and death? What gave her the courage and perseverance to stand firm in spite of being repeatedly threatened and beaten by her parents, and although the church probably didn't understand what she was going through? What quality was it that had such a profound influence that her friends committed the rest of their lives to service as a religious community, and her mother ultimately became a Christian herself?

2.2 South African Heroes

What was it that enabled the heroes of South Africa to keep struggling for freedom, justice, democracy and peace in the darkest days of apartheid – through repression, states of emergency, institutionalised racism, detention without trial, long prison sentences and banning orders or exile? What gave others the courage and strength of character to give up privilege voluntarily, offering themselves in humble service to the church and community or becoming conscientious objectors from military conscription? What has given some the grace to repent publicly from the sins of the past, apologise for what they did, try to make things right or forgive those who hurt them?

2.3 Jesus

What was it that gave Jesus the strength to proclaim the kingdom of God and stand for the truth in the face of a hostile interrogation and unjust trial at the hands of the Jewish and Roman rulers of the day? What empowered him to endure the cross, disregarding its shame (*Hebrews 12:2*), despite the physical, emotional, social and spiritual pain that was inflicted on him? What enabled him, in the midst of the venom of his enemies, to cry out, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do!" (*Luke 23:24*)

3 Faith! (*Hebrews 11*)

3.1 Reward

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus and all the heroes of faith were looking beyond the suffering of the present to the reward that God had prepared for them and others who would benefit from their faithfulness. This is way different from the prosperity "gospel" (which is no gospel at all!) that says you will be blessed with wealth in this life if you belong to God! Indeed, Hebrews tells us that many of those who are faithful do not experience the reward themselves, at least not in this life:

- ✦ "All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth..." (*Heb 11:13*)
- ✦ "All these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised..." (*Heb 11:39*)
- ✦ They recognised that the ultimate reward will be found in "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (*Heb 11:16*) and not in worldly prosperity.

In the same way, those who suffered to bring in the new South Africa did it because they could see the long term benefits for all.

Of course there are blessings in this life as well: miracles, answers to prayer, knowing we are in line with God's will, knowing that we are being used to transform church or society (*Heb 11:33-35a*).

The way to gain this reward, to store up treasures in heaven (*Matthew 6:19-20*), is through a life of costly, sacrificial service: Some "were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground." (*Heb 11:35-38*)

Those who live for themselves now, or use their positions to benefit themselves, have already had their reward, said Jesus.

3.2 Confidence in God

Faith is being confident in God – believing that God rewards those who seek him (*Heb 11:6*). It is the assurance that God will answer our prayers and be faithful to his promises (*Heb 11:1*). It comes from a living relationship with God:

- ✦ Receiving Jesus as Lord and Saviour;
- ✦ Allowing the Holy Spirit to flood and overflow from our lives;
- ✦ A life of communicating with God through the Scriptures, the sacraments and constant prayer;
- ✦ Fellowship with one another as we encourage and “provoke” each other to do good (*Heb 10:24-25*).

3.3 Obedience

This kind of genuine faith leads to obedience, as James wrote in his letter: “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead... Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith” (*Jas 2:17-18*). So the writer to the Hebrews gives examples of people who proved their faith by doing what God commanded:

- ✦ Noah built an ark on dry land, and saved his family and many creatures from the flood (*Heb 11:7*);
- ✦ Abraham went to an unknown land, and God made him the father of all who believe (*Heb 11:8*);
- ✦ Moses turned away from his privileged position in Egypt, identified with his oppressed people, and God set them free and led them to the promised land (*Heb 11:24-26*).

4 Back To The Rainbow

The rainbow was a sign that God gave after the flood which had been the most terrible act of judgement on sinful humanity. It was God’s promise that, even when people failed in the future, he would not destroy us again by a flood (*Genesis 9:9-17*). It was God promising to be with us and, ultimately, to save us at great cost to himself.

Calling ourselves the “Rainbow Nation” is acknowledging that we need God’s mercy and grace in order to be blessed. It is crying out to God in intercession for guidance and salvation.

In a sense the “Rainbow Nation” is like our Constitution. It is “aspirational” – a bold declaration at what we are aiming at becoming, and struggling to become. It is a call to each of us to play our part in building a South Africa that is just, a place of hope and blessing to all who live in it. It is both acknowledging that we depend on God and committing ourselves to make it happen for the rest of our lives.

So we must choose. What will you do? Will you turn away from the rainbow and focus on the clouds? Will you forget about others and work only to benefit yourself and your loved ones? Will you become cynical and bitter, or devote yourself to short-term pleasure? Or will you respond with the faith of Manche Masemola and the heroes of the faith, the heroes who made the “Rainbow Nation” possible, and Jesus the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith”? (*Heb 12:2*)

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”
(*Heb 12:1*)

Yours in Christ,

†Martin

†Martin: St Mark the Evangelist

