

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

By Father Peter-John Pearson,
Cape Town

Two images have haunted me recently.

On the one hand I have just finished reading the first biography of Mychal Judge, the Franciscan priest and chaplain to the fire brigade who died while anointing a firefighter in the Twin Towers on 11th September, 2001 almost five years ago.

At his funeral the TV crew interviewed a firefighter, caked in dirt and having come straight from Ground Zero for the funeral. They asked why God would allow someone as good as Fr. Mychal to die. He said very simply: *'I think that God needed somebody good to help lead the others on their journey home.'*

And its that business, of *'leading others on the journey'* that that friar excelled in, that is of course the metaphor of your lives; for you are the custodians of those spaces where the journeys of many meet.

But also a few weeks ago, I saw a picture of the magnificent icon of St Giles that is venerated in the church of San Egidio in the Trastevere district of Rome.

I was fascinated by the group of symbols that orbited the central character and provided a wellspring of hope and spiritual energy, for those who gazed on it.

The picture shows him with his hand stretched out, pierced by an arrow, the hand protecting a vulnerable doe.

In the distance we see the king or a prince clutching the bow from which the arrow had been shot.

And that picture of Giles suggests that this too is an hour that calls for men and women who are prepared to be vulnerable, to be wounded, to stand in the path of the forces of destruction, as they do their damning work and say a resounding no to their malice.

And it is that latter thought that must surely challenge you; *to be vulnerable enough to be wounded, to stand in the path of the forces of destruction and say a resounding no to their malice*, that, I believe, is your contemporary call.

As much as airports are the places where the journeys of many meet, so they are also, sadly, horribly, in recent times the places where nefarious plans are hatched, where evil is incubated, where the forces of destruction begin their damning work.

To help us on our journey and to stand in the path of the forces of destruction is thus the heart of your calling, the icon of what airports must again become; but also a very special synergy; because it is the stuff of which real hope is born.

. The Portuguese novelist, Jose Saramago, reflecting on his visits to the Chiapas area, writes as he might well have written of this country:

'In recent years Chiapas has been the place where the most disdained, most humiliated and the most offended people of Mexico were able to recover in tact a dignity and an honour that had never been completely lost, a place where the heavy tombstone of oppression that has gone on for centuries has been shattered to allow a procession of new and different living people ahead of an endless procession of murderers. What is being played out in the Chiapas mountains.....reaches beyond the borders of Mexico to the heart of that portion of humanity that has not renounced and never will

renounce dreams and hopes, the simple imperative of equal justice for all.'

You have come to deliberate in a country that understands what it is to render an account of the hope that is within us, a country that is part of that portion of *'humanity that has not renounced and never will renounce dreams and hopes, the simple imperative of equal justice for all.'*

You have come to a country that notwithstanding the many deep problems that face it has known what it is to be constituted in hope.

Thirty years ago, this very year, the children of the dusty township of Soweto, rose in high revolt against the forced use of the oppressors language in the classroom and triggered the final phase in the struggle for freedom. The rest is history.

Twenty odd years later it is now a fact of history that Steve Bantu Biko, Elijah Loza, Neil Aggett and others died while in police custody as part of the states attempt to break the spirit of resistance. It is likewise history that in Cape Town, the city where we gather, in the twenty years between 1950 and 1970, at least 150,000 people were forcibly removed from their homes and properties under the villainous 'Group Areas Act' in order to ensure that the best commercial and residential land was in the possession of whites. People were ruthlessly shunted to distant areas, far from 'ancestral spaces', unleashing on an already fragmented society, all the vile consequences of violent dislocation.

Twenty years ago, in 1986, a state of emergency was declared in this country, white males did two years compulsory military service, 64 1840 black people were removed from white areas in that year, 3989 people were in detention without trial, our economic growth was 0.7%(to day it is 4.6%), 64 countries had sports boycotts against South Africa.

A few weeks ago President Mbeki said: 'Furthermore the government is making marked progress towards its various targets. Ninety percent

of those deemed eligible are now receiving social grants, over ten million people have now gained access to potable water, and over two million housing subsidies have been allocated to the poor since 1994. Likewise, whereas 4.1 million out of 11.2 million households lived on an income of R9, 600 or less per year in 2001, by 2004 this figure had decreased to 3.6 million households.'

And I mention this because twenty years ago, fifteen years ago, change was thought to be impossible, there seemed to be no end in sight to the relentless assault on peoples dignity, to the physical cruelty and exploitation and the sense of the jackboot of the security forces forever trampling down any beginnings of resistance. And yet SA remains an example that even the most intransigent, seemingly immutable tyrannies must also fall. Teresa of Avila used to say: 'even this must pass.'

Often in those dark days and during the long nights we asked ourselves, as Martin Luther King did on that historic march to Selma: '*how long will it take?*'

In that stirring speech MLK answered his own question: '*Not long.*'

We took comfort from that. MLK reminded those tired campaigners, '*not long, because no lie can last forever. How long, not long because the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.*'

And I minister these words to your hearts this morning, not because of some nostalgia but because the skies and the world of aviation have become the new places of terror, the new refuge for tyranny and it would appear that our world is largely disempowered, unable to chart a creative way out of this spiral of violence, it seems to know no response other than to plunge us into further violence, into a welter of lies and the vortex of revenge. There seems truly to be no end in sight, the forces of darkness seem to hold sway and surely you too cry out '*how long?*'

Maybe you need to heed again the truth that empires fall and to hear again the reassurance of MLK that '*the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.*'

Sakhela Buhlungu reminds us though, and in our times we need to heed this, that what often appears as social fragmentation and crises may also contain great possibilities for social renewal.

And so I believe that President Mbeki is correct when he says *'while political and social transformation is non negotiable, it is not enough. It cries out also for spiritual power and resources to heal, to reconcile, to rebuild and to restore humanity.'*

I want to believe that you have gathered in this country at this point in your reflection on your ministries at the cutting edge of the battle for the soul because we have had the experience of waging a campaign for a noble cause while we have drawn deeply from the wells of our salvation. In that perceptive comment President Mbeki was not calling for a new factor to be added to the moral equation, rather he was calling for a retrieval of an energy that had served us well in times past.

As we begin as a faith community to invest in the restoration of a moral order in our world, allow me to suggest that we retrieve from our traditions that commitment to the belief that study provides new possibilities for our life together.

Timothy Radcliffe writes:

'We live in a culture that has lost its confidence that study is a worthwhile activity and which honestly doubts that debates can bring us to the truth for which we long. If our century has been marked by violence, it is surely because it has lost confidence in our ability to attain the truth together.'

Violence is the only resort to a culture, which has no trust in a shared search for truth.

Dachau, Hiroshima, Rwanda, Bosnia, these are all symbols of the collapse of a belief in the possibility of building a common human home through dialogue.

And so an intellectual understanding and a deep dialogue with others, with other insights, other ideologies, are critical gifts that we are

compelled to foster and then to bring to the deeper life of the nation. Many of the problems and the continuance of the fissures and distrust in our country is rooted in the fact that opinions are stated as truths and worse still are opinions that are born of ignorance, fundamentalism, fear and prejudice.

Now more than ever we need to capture the tradition of study and dialogue as part of our priestly discipline. We need to capture again the spirit of Albert the Great's invitation to the 'pleasure of seeking truth together' 'in dulcedine societatis quaerere veritatem.'

But Mbeki makes the point that we need to unleash again the '*spiritual power and resources to heal, to reconcile, to rebuild and to restore humanity*'

And despite the odds, despite the entrenched segregation and the long memory of a diabolical regime of division, there is a growing testimony to the work of the resources that have opened up for the critical task of reconciliation.

If I might just digress for a moment, on this point, it is worth noting the results of a recent survey conducted by the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation, which shows that to day 36% of blacks believe that whites are not racists, and another 22% is uncertain. Only 19% of whites find it hard to imagine being friends with a black fellow citizen. 75% of coloured and Asian South Africans do not think that South Africa would be better off without blacks; I would want to suggest that the figures would have been very different a decade ago. Given the debates about race that are so prominent in South Africa at the moment, this data suggests that there is possibly more racial reconciliation happening, or at least that the potential for racial reconciliation is greater than one might have suspected. The summary of the survey asserts that far from being a contented 'rainbow nation', South Africans are in increasing numbers rejecting the racial animosity of the past. The editors say that their data does not support the idea that South Africa is on the precipice of despair and racial irreconciliation. To the contrary they find that many, indeed a majority,

seem committed to a multi racial South Africa and many hold attitudes compatible with a harmonious future for the country. While this obviously does not suggest that very important issues do not continue to face the country and that South Africans divide on these issues according to race, or that there is an implied common progressive ideological position amongst those who feel some measure of goodwill towards the future. It simply suggests that there is enough of a foundation, a meaningful enough lowest common denominator, that would cautiously allow one to be hopeful about the future of the country.

We can testify to one fundamental truth in this country, and that is that, notwithstanding its many problems, we are a nation that knows well that there is a power at work; a power that defies the odds, that trounces treachery and that has the capacity to re ignite our social imaginations so that we might resist the tyrannies of our time. This is our experience of prayer.

Little wonder then the theologian Karl Barth wrote:

'To clasp one hands in prayer, is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.'

I know that I am going to sound very much as if I'm beating a Roman catholic drum now, but hear me out.

Mary captures all of this in her hymn of high revolt and that tradition of option for the poor, of peace, of protest flowing from prayer.

Pondering the extraordinary reversal outlined in the Magnificat, in the prayerful silence of his hermitage, the famous Trappist poet, pacifist, priest, protester, photographer, and philosopher, Thomas Merton, declared shortly before his death that he wanted to spend his entire life siding with the poor. He desired to be with the marginalised and the victims of war and injustice, the peacemakers and the persecuted.

'It is my intention to make my entire life, a rejection of, a protest against, the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race of humanity and the world. By my

monastic life and vows I am saying no to all concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the nuclear weapons and the wars. If I say no to all these secular forces, I also say yes to all that is good in the world and in humanity.'

And so our prayer becomes the beginning of the right ordering or the reordering of our world.

This is a work in progress, an unfinished task. It is messy, unpredictable and uncomfortable as all prayer is and yet it is pregnant with potential.

Pope John Paul II at the prayer service at Assisi after September 11th, called on all special places of grace to also be special cenacles of peace building, peace praying and peace making. Peace is now the special privileged option that we make with the poor. It is the place where ultimately we grapple with life, in the full understanding that our God comes to us, yes obviously in prayer and sacrament, but our God also comes to us disguised as life.

Almost every one of the great mystics understood this, that union with God is expressed or manifested as union with life. Union with God is union not with some esoteric experience, but union with the daily round of life with all its vicissitudes. We have to listen to the symphony of life.

St. Benedict begins the great rule with that sage advice: *'Listen O child with the ear of your heart.'*

Karl Rahner says that we must celebrate the liturgy of the world before we celebrate the liturgy of the church.

But our sacred spaces are also the custodians of the values that make for lasting peace. To quote Martin Luther King once more.

'I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin to shift from a 'thing' orientated society to a person orientated society. A nation that continues to spend year after year more money on military defence than on programs of social uplift

is approaching spiritual death. America the richest and most powerful nation in the world can well lead the way in the revolution of values. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take priority over the pursuit of war. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a, sometimes hostile world, declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons and daughters of God, and our brothers and sisters wait eagerly for our response.'

But just to link that little word 'response' that we have just heard, to the scene of the Visitation. Here Elizabeth's response to Mary in fact provides us with a key to our own inner practice of peace, of prayer and indeed to our own inner education.

Elizabeth makes room for Mary. Elizabeth makes room for the vulnerable other. Prayer teaches us, helps us make space for the other, embrace the other in ourselves and in others literally, so that we can be more than we thought we could be.

I love that song by Josh Groban: 'you raise me up so I can stand on mountains / you raise me up to walk on troubled seas/ for I am strong when I am on your shoulders/ you raise me up to more than I can be.

We must never forget one thing that Mary came to Elizabeth, betrothed, yes, but with child before they came together. In Israel of her time this meant not only disapproval but the real possibility of death and at very least social convention expected such women to be shunned. Elizabeth is radically different, she accepts Mary and with it the difficulties and receives it all with a listening heart. Elizabeth provides space for the illogical, the unusual, the 'it only makes sense in the shadow of God' kind of reasoning, and allows herself to grow through all of this experience.

What we accept into our lives in the other, changes our own sense of what life really is about. For that reason acceptance is never merely tolerance, it is vision. It is the new music of the soul that comes from understanding. It is what stretches my spirit beyond the truisms of yesterday. It offers its own blessings.

Anna Akhmatova says in a very profound poem.

'If all who have begged help
From in this world
All the holy innocents
Broken wives and cripples
The imprisoned, the suicidal
If they had sent me one kopec
I should have become richer
than all Egypt....
But they did not send me kopecs,
Instead they shared with me
Their strength
And so nothing in the world
Is stronger than I
And I can bear anything, even this.'

Prayer offers us the space to accept the other, to be blessed by their unexpected giftedness and to be in C. S. Lewis' famous words, to be 'surprised by joy.' In unexpected places, in the hum drum of everyday life, from the most curiously unexpected people.

There, somehow in the midst of the daily round, she turns our minds to thoughts of new beginnings.

Sister Marie Antoinette, an American sister of Long Island NY, a sister of St. Louis de Montforts Daughters of Wisdom, was one of the missionaries murdered in the terrible massacres in the Congo in 1964. She was 'subjected to degrading humiliation, beaten with rifle butts, sticks and machettes at the foot of the Patrice Lumumba monument, and her body thrown into the Congo river.'

Just some days before she had written to her sisters: 'God alone knows what will be the ending of all this chaos and strife, but whatever we do now will be a beginning.....'

Maybe that too is all that can be said of our prayers and of our peacemaking. In the midst of all the demands, the competing voices, it remains everyday, daily, a new beginning.

You are at the new frontier, the cutting edge; the place where treachery and terrorism need to be met with the spiritual power and resources that *'heal, to reconcile, to rebuild and to restore humanity'* You need to be bold and noble and true so that indeed you can lead us on the journey home. I can only offer you the valuable insight of our beloved Madiba. Mandela wrote:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves: "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?" Actually, who are we not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We're all meant to shine as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

My prayer is that at this critical juncture in your crucial ministry your presence will liberate all of us from our fear and help us to manifest the glory of God that is within us.

Peter-John Pearson.

Director: SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office.
Cape Town. *South Africa*

I am always haunted by those words of Martin Luther King: 'now is the judgment of God upon us, either we learn to live together as brothers or sisters or we perish together as fools.'

Airport Chaplains Conference.

Ritz Plaza Hotel, Cape Town.

4th September, 2006