

OPEN PASTORAL LETTER TO THE ZIMBABWEAN CHURCHES

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God". So writes Paul to the Corinthians, and this is the deepest reason why I should dare to put pen to paper. I write not as an outsider, but with the prophetic solidarity of John of Patmos: "I, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance..." And it is with a sense of humble awareness of the truth of these words from the Word of God that this letter is written, in the hope that my words may mean something to you in these times of trial and tribulation.

Since I have been privileged to be in Zimbabwe some weeks ago and saw with my own eyes the situation in which you find yourselves, Zimbabwe has refused to let of me in a way I have not experienced before. The images remain stark and deeply disturbing: the empty shelves in shops and the greater emptiness in the eyes of children, women and men; the sight of armed soldiers and the spontaneous anxious wondering what they are up to; the sense of betrayal inflicted upon a people whose only crime seems to be the audacity of their hopes and aspirations; the absence of the signs of life which we South Africans take for granted; the helplessness on the faces of those who tell us of hunger and suffering; of torture and death; the palpable fear that hangs like a miasma in the air and permeates the very words we hear. At the same time though, even as you spoke of these terrible and terrifying things, you opened your hearts for us to see the hope that refuses to die, the faith that clings to the promises of God and the expectation that the God of the promise will be faithful; the patient forbearance to which all of us are called and yet so few of us can muster; the unspoken and spoken conviction that the fervent prayers of the righteous *shall* be heard and answered. I have left your country shaken to the core and with a sense of the righteous anger that I felt during apartheid and more recently at the betrayal of our own poor, right here in South Africa.

You have told us many things and since my return you have kept me informed as best as you could about the continuing situation in Zimbabwe. Your words and what I have seen have shown just how wrong our president was when he spoke of Zimbabwe as if there is no crisis, as if the world's concern for Zimbabwe is only because of the plight of the white farmers. That might be true

for a part of the world, that world where political cynicism is the coinage of the realm, where people's lives do not matter but their death does, if it fits some selfish, self-interested agenda; that world where smart bombs make mistakes, where guided missiles are somehow misguided and pulverised children become collateral damage; where hunger and starvation, illness and the debilitation of poverty are devoid of a human face and instead become an opportunity for political posturing, easily replaced by the next point that cannot allow human suffering to hold up the agenda.

But there is another world, where people actually matter, where dying children have a face, where abused women have a body and a soul; where hunger and illness are not statistics but a cry to heaven. This is a world where we know that people die because decisions are being made, where people can be held responsible for these decisions and for their consequences and where God is reminded of his promises. This is a world where people pray and fight for justice and peace to embrace, and where we believe that God's shalom must become part of our human reality. This is a world where caring and compassion are not strategic or incidental but real and at the core of our life together, of our being human in the world. That world knows about Zimbabwe because it cares for the people of Zimbabwe. I come from that world. I recognise what I see in Zimbabwe because I have seen it before, here in South Africa. I know tyranny when I see it, and it is in Zimbabwe as surely as it was in South Africa.

That is the world who has heard your voice through some church leaders, ordinary Christians and those committed to justice, and who is now responding to your cries. We heard you when you told us of the stark and bitter reality that in Zimbabwe food is now being used as a political tool and as barter for your votes. We heard you when you told us of kidnappings, torture, political killings and the destruction of whole communities because they have campaigned and voted, you said, "for the wrong political party". You gave evidence of how the interim period towards an engineered run-off in the elections is purposefully being filled with unmitigated terror; we have seen some of the evidence, and it is frightening. This is what you said: "We warn the world that if nothing is done to help the people of Zimbabwe from their predicament, we shall soon be witnessing genocide similar to that experienced in Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi and other hotspots in Africa and elsewhere". Thank you for your courageous witness.

II

Those are chilling words and they are borne out by other witnesses like the Association of Zimbabwe Journalists. Farai Maruzani, who has previously reported the brutal assault on a man called Sekuru Jaison, whose fate remains unknown, and has asserted that "there are many political activists who have been thrown into the Kariba Dam in concrete filled aluminium coffins", has now once again reported the horrific murder of a mother from the Marume homestead under Headman Hera. Thabitha Marume, who had been deliberately

hunted down by a group of armed men, was killed in front of the whole community and her son. "One of the armed men immediately picked up his AK47 and emptied the AK47 magazine into her chest. 31 bullets". Maruzani then challenges Minister Patrick Chinamasa to check these facts with him: "I will give him everything and more" he writes. I praise God for such courage and commitment and I join him in that challenge. I have immediately sent this account to the South African Presidency with the request that they intensify their efforts to follow up these accounts. And when they see the evidence to make the truth known.

We have heard this, and that must be the main reason why the World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches have written their recent report. In that report they too sound the bell of urgency, not just to the Zimbabwean government, but also to the Zimbabwean churches. "The Zimbabwe church has now seriously to consider the best approach to the impasse.... there is a growing need for the church to speak and be heard, and to give leadership to the people of Zimbabwe", the report says. They recount how the Mugabe regime acts in "total disregard of access to basic needs as well as respect for human rights". How officials of the Grain Marketing Board campaigned openly for Zanu-PF and issued food through the supervision of traditional leaders to supporters of the party. This cries out for the prophetic voice of the church, but the report laments that the churches "have not spoken out with one voice..."

While I have been there, I have raised some of the same issues with colleagues and asked about the prophetic witness of the church in Zimbabwe. I was shocked at the level of fearful resistance which met these thoughts. I was told of the fear with which our pastors live, how they are afraid to say anything at all, for fear of being targeted by the regime.

So, reading this report from WCC and AACC, I ask myself some questions you might very well be asking yourselves: is this fair? Are we asking too much from the church in Zimbabwe? I can imagine some of you reacting: "What do these brothers and sisters know about our situation and our fears? What would they have done if they had lived here? Is Geneva or Cape Town not altogether too safe a place to even utter the word 'prophetic'?" I think I would understand if this were your thinking. I am not qualified to speak on behalf of the WCC or the AACC, but please let me share my thoughts on this matter.

I think the answer is yes, they know, and yes, they care. They know and care because you have told them, because they have decided that your cry is the voice of the poor and oppressed, the downcast and the powerless in Zimbabwe. And they care because of Jesus Christ. Listen to them because they speak with the voice of integrity and historic authenticity. When, thirty years or more ago, the people of Zimbabwe sent out a cry to the world in their struggle for liberation, it was the World Council of Churches who heard, and acted. I know. I

was there, adviser to the WCC's Programme to Combat Racism, when those difficult decisions were made to stand by the oppressed in their struggles for freedom and dignity. Then the WCC was reviled throughout the Western world, despised by governments, left in the lurch by churches who punished the WCC severely by withdrawing their substantial financial and moral support. Churches in the West refused to be associated with a PCR with a Special Fund used for "Communists" and "terrorists". These churches, with arguably the worst history of violence against innocent peoples waged in the name of Jesus whom they since Constantine, have turned into a sword wielding man of war and a gun toting slaveholder, now all of a sudden became disciples of nonviolence and peace, meaning the peace of submission to oppression and inhumanity. How the debates raged in those days! From our viewpoint, the hypocrisy stank to high heaven, but the power of these churches was real, nonetheless. And the WCC felt it. But the WCC remained steadfast. They were encouraged by churches from the third world who loved them with the love of the Lord, but who could not do much to support programmes and by the few in the churches in the West who had heard the voice of God. The WCC persisted, helping the two factions in Zimbabwe's struggle to come together by mediating between Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe. The WCC learned what it meant to make the difficult choices and to stand on the side of the oppressed. Those were defining moments for the ecumenical movement.

Now, ironically, that same Zanu-PF leadership who were so grateful then for the costly intervention of the churches, have denied accreditation to the WCC/AACC team who wished to monitor the elections. Now, all of a sudden the churches have become the enemy. Why? Because the churches have, as they did thirty years ago, once again made fundamental choices: against the oppressor and for the oppressed; against the powerful who unashamedly abuse their power, and for the powerless. But it is the same choice the churches are always called to make. It is not the churches who have changed, it is Zanu-PF. The churches know and are in fact saying that it is not white colonialists, outside oppressors or neo imperialists who are causing the havoc and suffering in Zimbabwe – it is Zimbabweans who are doing that.

One of the deepest sources of pain for Zimbabweans must be the trauma of seeing a liberation movement become an undemocratic, oppressive, unjust regime. I think I understand some of that. After all, I knew the leadership of Zanu-PF personally for years, shared with them their passion for a free Zimbabwe, listened to their dreams for their people as together we fought to make the world understand. Today I hardly recognise those same people who were once comrades and friends. Hearing them speak is frankly disorientating. And after all, this is a danger we in South Africa are facing more than some of us are ready to admit. It is the danger of the insidious power of power, its ability to seduce and delude; its almost innate resolve to undermine ideals and dreams because these ideals, by their very nature, expose the temptations of power. And it always takes us to a greater terror than the one we have known. But it is

in itself a terrorising of the heart and mind: to see one's liberator become one's oppressor, one's hero become one's butcher, one's liberation song become one's lament. It is the pain of the contradictions of Psalm 126: The joy of the knowledge that "the LORD had done great things for us" right before the confusion of "Restore our fortunes, O LORD!"

Zanu-PF, it seems, have caved in before that greatest of revolutionary temptations: to place "The Cause" before and above and indeed, in place of, the people. And as author William James has said, "The word 'cause' is an altar to an unknown god". Because the revolution becomes a cause unto itself and the power elite see themselves as the only legitimate owners and defenders of that cause (in Zimbabwe's case, "to keep the country from being sold again into the slavery of neo colonialism" they say), the cause becomes an altar on which the people's hopes, dreams and aspirations are sacrificed; where togetherness, solidarity and humanity go up in smoke, and on which, with tragic inevitability, the people themselves are bodily slaughtered. It is an unknown god, because such leaders have turned away from the God they knew: the God of love, liberation and mercy, of justice and peace and humanity. They have turned away because they can no longer bear that God's demands for justice; this God no longer suits their revolutionary programme where the interests of the people have been subverted and the interests of the elite hold sway.

This god of "The Cause" is unknown, because although they deny it, they have made themselves into gods who now determine with grim, careless rapaciousness the lives of the people. The sacrifices the people have made over the years, and are in fact still making are sacrifices to *them*, to satisfy their greed and insatiable lust for power. But in their perversion the people do not know them anymore, except in the manifestations of evil they represent: hunger and want, fear and terror, mistrust and confusion, inhumanity and death. But the church knows these gods, because the church knows the true living God. And as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said about Nazi Germany in times very much like those you live in: "Hitler has shown himself clearly for what he is, and the church ought to know with whom it has to reckon". But for our encouragement Jeremiah reminds us: these gods, whatever they might think themselves to be, are "no more than scarecrows in a cucumber field".

That is why the church has chosen to stand alongside the poor and oppressed, the hunted and terrorised in Zimbabwe. It may well be that Zanu-PF and others like them (including those in my own country) do not like this stand, and find that the church should have remained with its choice of thirty years ago. But for the church it does not matter *who is in power*. It is what they do *while in power* that matters. It is how the people are affected by that use of power that matters. What matters is not whether they have a "liberation record", have been in exile or "in the bush". What matters is whether justice is done, whether peace is sought, whether the rights of the poor are recognised, respected and fiercely upheld. In short, whether they contribute to the humanising of the world, and

whether they are worthy of the trust the people have placed in them. The church confesses that in Christ Jesus we are God's chosen people. And so it is. But once God has chosen for us, through the Cross and the Resurrection, we have no choice but to choose for those who are considered "the least of these", the poor and dejected, the suffering and afflicted, the victims of power abuse; no choice but to raise our voice to speak for the voiceless, no choice but to stand on their side, for that is where God stands. We are the chosen people of God, but the chosen shall be known by their choices. It is a lesson the church in South Africa has had to learn through painful experience.

III

During the 1980s the churches in South Africa were also confronted with realities we had had no experience or preparation for. We too lived with fear and suppressed anger. We too felt the chains of oppression, injustice reigned, death stalked our streets. The choices we had to make then brought the wrath of a vengeful and cruel regime upon us, but also split the churches down the middle. With us then as with you now, there were those in the churches who supported the government, who benefitted from their ill gotten largesse and who baptised their evil deeds with biblical justification. Some were just afraid, for ourselves and for our families, and sought to preach a gospel devoid of all political challenge, as if justice and peace were not biblical words, or were meant for our inner lives only, with no meaning for the messiness of life we were forced to confront. As if Christian love is a mere sentimental feeling that came to us from the clouds and not via the cross.

Then, as I am sure it is in Zimbabwe today, we learned the "church leaders" and the institutional church are not always sensitive to the prophetic call. We learned then that the true church does not come to life in the stance of its leaders or its institutional bodies (although we praise God when that does happen!), nor in the reactions of the masses of Christians; it is seen rather in the faithfulness of its prophets. So in that sense one need not wait for "the church" to discover the truth in a particular situation. That truth is known, shaped and upheld by those who sometimes find themselves a minority within the church, the prophetic minority who refuse to succumb to the enticements of those in power – even if they have been former Christian comrades who think they speak the language of the church well. We might be "naturally" inclined to hear the voice that issues forth from the altar; but God calls us, like God called John, to be especially sensitive to the voices that cry from *underneath* the altar. I beg you: hear those voices.

This is the "we" I am referring to, and I hope that prophetic minority is alive in Zimbabwe. Our choice to stand with our people in their struggle for freedom brought fierce debate, sometimes rejection, sometimes retaliation, from the church as well as from the state. We were attacked, called names, humiliated in public, shamed in the streets, thrown in prison, threatened with death and many

of us indeed did not live to see liberation. We did it because we believed in the God who loves justice, even though today some are tempted to ask the painful question: "Was it truly worth it?" But where justice is concerned, it is *always* worth it.

During those dark, fearful and turbulent days, 25 years ago this year, my church, the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church formulated and adopted a confession we call "The Confession of Belhar". It has become the bedrock of our theological existence and reflection, a witness from us to the people of God in the world. Today, that confession speaks as clearly to us as then, and has become a source of life and inspiration to millions across the earth – everywhere where God's people are subjected to injustice, suffering and brokenness. In Article Four the confession says;

We believe that God has revealed God self as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of enmity and injustice God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoners and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the strangers, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that God wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right;

That the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

And then the confession says: that the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

That, my beloved brothers and sisters, has been the inspiration of my life in the struggle for justice and freedom for all God's children, and that is why Zimbabwe refuses to let me go, and that is what emboldens me to write this letter to you.

As you grapple with the situation in your country and you watch that situation worsen, the church continues to be challenged to speak and act prophetically, courageously, boldly, on behalf of the people, for the sake of the people, in the name of Christ. I cannot, and will not dare to tell you how to do it, except to say that in South Africa we have found that the church, if it is to be true to its calling, has no choice. God expects this of you.

In our own history, you may remember, we came to the point where we had to remind ourselves that God is indeed a God of justice, and that God calls the

stand where God stands. There was no way we could ignore the pain and suffering of the people, or the fact that we have come to the breaking point. The reformer John Calvin in whose theological and spiritual tradition I stand and do my ministry was very clear about that breaking point. This is what he says as he ponders on the words of Psalm 13:

"Tyrants and their cruelty cannot be endured without great weariness and sorrow... Hence almost the whole world sounds forth these words "How long, how long?" When anyone disturbs the whole world by his ambition and avarice, or everywhere commits plunders, or oppresses miserable nations, when he distresses the innocent, all cry out: How long? And this cry... is at length heard by the Lord... [The oppressed] know that this confusion of order and justice is not to be endured. *And this feeling, is it not implanted in us by the Lord? It is then the same as though God hears Himself when he hears the cries and groaning of those who cannot bear injustice*".

In the cries of anguish of the people the church hears the voice the Lord. This is what we should remember when we hear the groaning for justice and see the pain of suffering.

In a situation like Zimbabwe's, people in government often speak as if they were God, knowing they have the power to threaten and maim and kill, like the arrogance in the words from one of Zanu-PF's most powerful men, General Emmerson Mnangagwa, chief of the feared Joint Operational Command when he responded to a journalist's questions about the ongoing violence in the countryside: "Since when do we have to reveal to the press how we are doing things in government, I have nothing to confirm or deny, besides to say, *we are the government*".

We too have heard this, and then we had to say to government in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "Mr Minister, you are not God. You are merely a man. And one day your name will only be a faint scribble on the pages of history while the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, lives forever."

When you report on how government is subverting justice, how power to distribute food is turned into blackmail, how the violence is a calculated campaign of terror to reverse an election they have lost, how in all this there is no respect for people nor fear of God, I am reminded of what I myself had to write to South Africa's Minister of Justice in 1979: "I think the time has come for your government to make a choice: you are either the 'servant of God' of Romans 13, or you are the 'beast from the abyss' of Revelation 13. Unless and until the right choice becomes evident ... Christians in South Africa shall be called upon, for the sake of their faith, to resist you as we would the beast of Revelation 13. For the Christian, obedience to God and God's Word must be the first priority".

It came to the point where Christians in South Africa had to say: "The South African government is blatantly unjust, oppressive, undemocratic, and unrepresentative. In our constant suffering the children of God cry out to God. To whom else should we go? If the rulers will not hear the cries of the people, if they continue to prevent justice, let us pray them out of existence. God will hear our cry. We do not believe in the power of violence, but we do believe in the power of prayer". Of course we had to understand that prayer is not spiritual escapism or the mumbling of just words. "It is an expression of hope and an act of faith. It is to know, not by instinct but through faith that God is able and willing to respond to the cry of God's people. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is the Living One, who, in contrast to the false gods of human making, does care, does hear, does act. This God is the same yesterday, today, forever". This is the call that led to the Day of Prayer for the Fall of Unjust Government in 1986.

The painful, bitter truth is that the Zanu-PF regime, whatever it once may have been, is now oppressive, violent, not worthy of the trust of the people, illegitimate. The time has come for the churches to say so. I hope you read this as it comes from my heart: not as a hectoring lecture or to dictate to you in your very difficult circumstances, but to share with you our experiences and our faith, and the hope of deliverance that never dies. And to assure you of our constant love and undying solidarity. We will continue to do all we need to do to remain on your side.

IV

I was part of a South African Council of Churches delegation which a few days ago had a two-hour meeting with President's Mbeki and his mediation team on Zimbabwe. My political experience and instincts allow me some understanding of the position president Thabo Mbeki is in. I understand also the complexities of any negotiation process. As a theologian I take into account that those involved are mere human beings, with human flaws and frailties, human ambitions and fears, as well as the difficulties of keeping apart the interests of self, the party and the nation. I understand also the dangers and pitfalls of international politics, the private agendas of nations like Britain and the US whose national interest override the realities of suffering of the people of Zimbabwe. Then national, regional, and often personal pride also play their subtle and sometimes not so subtle role. In short, I do not think we as a church should have a romantic view about these matters and of the players involved.

President Mbeki represents his own government as well as SADC. They must perforce deal with protocol and such matters sensitively. People might not like Zanu-PF or Mr. Mugabe, but they are the current government in Zimbabwe and have to be recognised and dealt with as such. As mediator, Thabo Mbeki has to take into account both sides, even though it might be clear to the rest of us that one side is lying. He has to accept judgements of the Zimbabwean courts even

though it is clear to the rest of us that the judicial processes in Zimbabwe are seriously tainted. Besides, he works in a new world order, where the spectre of "regime change" as a result of the foolishness of the Bush administration, is a frightening possibility for every country not in the ideological orbit of the US. We must all have understanding for that.

The situation of the churches, however, is different. Our mandate does not come from SADC, it comes from God. We must ask the fundamental questions of justice and injustice, we must insist that in all political decisions people come first; we must forever keep the human face of suffering before those who make those decisions. We must speak for those who have been deprived of the right to speak, even if it goes against "protocol". Whether Mr. Mbeki wants to or not, we *must* indict those who perpetrate injustice, who cause suffering, who rob the people of their right to make their own choices in the political process; whoever they might be. Our respect for protocol can never stand in the way of truth. Our criteria are not international or internal politics, personal, regional or national pride, nor loyalty to a political party, but the Kingdom of God and the justice it demands. Whereas politicians can afford to ignore the pain of ordinary people because a sensitive political deal might be in the offing, the church is led by the need to respond to suffering. The promises of politicians are always subject to, and suspect because of, the promises of God. We can never argue that the suffering of people is the price to pay "for the sake of the greater goal". Which goal, whose goal? we ask. We are always aware that behind every "goal" are powerful interests that are served, and those interests do not often take justice for the powerless as the main criterion. Our first concern cannot be to speak in such a way that politics must have room to manoeuvre, but in a way that will allow the innocent to live, not merely survive, but to live in the abundance Christ has promised them. Politics can allow the lie to live, with a view that the lie is necessary in order to make politics possible. The church knows that the lie covers the truth that people are dying.

For all these reasons, and more, we have understanding for what politicians may want to do, but understanding can never mean compliance or unconditional support. Our responsibility is to constantly remind them that politics is not just about safe positions, strategies or national interests; it is primarily about people. Those created in the image of God, for whom Jesus Christ gave his life and rose from the dead, those who deserve justice, peace and a life of fulfilment. Therefore the church will continue to speak up, to stand with those who are wronged, to rise up in outrage and compassion against injustice and suffering, even if it causes embarrassment to those in power. Chief Albert Luthuli's words on South Africa's struggle are just as true for you: the road to freedom is via the Cross. And without carrying that cross there is no hope of resurrection, not for us and not for the people of Zimbabwe. But Luthuli's Cross bears a capital "C": the crucified God, Jesus our Saviour, is not above, outside, or aloof from our struggles for true peace and justice and humanity.

And as we had to say to ourselves the words with which the Confession of Belhar ends, we say also to you: "We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the church is called to confess and do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

Jesus is Lord".

So let us keep praying and working together, do not let despair and fear rob you of your courage, of your hope and the freedom which is yours in Jesus Christ.

Now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Your brother in Christ and humble servant in the Lord, and standing by you in struggle until true freedom comes.

Allan Aubrey Boesak

Somerset West, South Africa

In the week of Pentecost, 2008