

*The Second*

**ERIC SYMES ABBOTT**

**Memorial Lecture**

delivered by

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## *Spirituality in a Violent Society*

My title is Spirituality in a Violent Society: the God who calls and gives a mandate. A notable phenomenon in the history of religion, especially the Christian religion, is the experience of a divine call. The beginning of Israel as a nation came about with the call of Moses by God. Exodus 3, “He called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses’. And God continued, ‘I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall bring my people Israel out of Egypt’.” Then there is the call of Isaiah in Isaiah 6, but would like to quote the call of Jeremiah, “‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you for my own; before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ ‘Ah! Lord God,’ I answered, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.’ But the Lord said, ‘do not call yourself a child; for you shall go to whatever people I send you and say whatever I tell you to say. ... I put my words into your mouth. This day I give you authority over nations and over kingdoms, to pull down and to uproot, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant.’” (Jeremiah 1.5-10)

This phenomenon of a call and a commission is carried over into the New Testament. We find John the Baptist filled with the sense of vocation and a mandate to fulfil, “He who sent me to baptise in water had told me, ‘When you see the Spirit coming down upon someone and resting upon him, you will know that this is he who is to baptise in the Holy Spirit’.” (John 1.33) There is the call of the disciples and there is Paul who wrote about, “God who set me apart from birth and called me through his grace, chose to reveal his Son to me and through me, in order that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.”

In a violent society you need a spirituality that recognises that the God of Christian faith is a God who calls and chooses people and entrusts them with a special role to play in society. In secular life it seems to happen spontaneously. People with a sense of vocation and commitment come forward to lead their own people; the phenomenon of South Africa is that it is the black youth who have felt impelled to do something about the situation which they find the black people facing. I have been amazed at the incredible sense of responsibility and sympathetic and sensitive awareness of the black youth towards their community and each other.

I have been so moved that I once wrote a prayer:

“Loving Father,  
Your young and loveable Son  
Was found amidst the teachers of the law,  
He listened and inquired of them;  
Have pity on the South African youth  
Who, in quest of freedom and a better future,  
Have been shot at, maimed and killed,  
Have fled from home and forsaken their country;

Sustain them in all danger,  
Give them your wisdom and protection,  
And let their every sacrifice  
Yield peace, justice and freedom in their day,  
Through Jesus Christ, Our Lord.”

On many occasions the youth have, in response to a situation of crisis, travelled miles to find me and to beg me to come and assist in circumstances in which they thought there was a high risk of the outbreak of violence and the danger of loss of life. I recall a funeral in one of those rural townships where a few years ago blacks were so docile and submissive that they would never have taken any significant initiative on their own. There was to be the burial of an unrest victim. The entire leadership of the youth was held in detention without trial. A young man of 17 stepped into the vacuum and made contact with me and, almost single-handedly, made preparations for the funeral, but on the day itself he, too, had disappeared. The funeral, attended by about 5,000 mourners, went smoothly because of the organising abilities of this young man.

Spirituality in a violent society will pay serious attention to those who find themselves filled with this sense of having to respond to a need in people and to discharge a commitment on their behalf. Such a call and commitment can come in various ways. For instance I was once travelling with the daughter of a man who has been detained for some years and when I asked her what she would do in life she replied that she would become a lawyer in order to defend victims of injustice. The Christian Churches ought to take cognisance of the many youth who feel challenged to give their life in meaningful sacrifice for their country and people, they ought to be able to channel this desire for sacrifice into meaningful ways of Christian living. Many black youth need guidance and encouragement to dedicate themselves to serve their community and it is one of the tragedies of apartheid that this sense of dedication cannot be utilised in an inter-racial effort by the black and white youth in peaceful efforts for the resolution of the present problems and for securing a genuine future and a just society.

Spirituality in a violent society will take God's laws seriously to heart. God's law will form the basis on which man's law will be assessed and judged. The laws of an oppressive and unjust society cannot help but brutalise all members of that society. The pass laws which are now abolished used to result in thousands of people being arrested every day. In 1984 in eleven major urban areas an African was arrested every three minutes, or 449 a day. One of the most pitiful victims of the pass laws was Mr Kind Moyo, he was a suspected pass offender and as the police went after him he leapt over a wall and landed on one of several metre-long spikes that were embedded in the ground. The Black paper *Sowetan* had this comment to make, "He risked jumping from a two metre high wall to avoid being separated from his family, or losing his job, or being sent to what a bureaucrat decreed is his homeland". The pass laws were fierce and were carried out by some pretty pitiless people. Then there is the Group Areas Act. This law prohibits people of a

different colour from living in an area assigned to another race group. Whites, Coloureds and Indians have been forcibly separated, from 1966 to 1984 2,418 White families were affected as were 83,691 Coloureds and 40,067 Indians.

The homelands policy is another law to consider. There are about ten homelands, these are ethnically designated regions. Until recently it was rigidly taken for granted that every black man would be fitted into one or other of these homelands. Most of them are dreadfully poor and incapable of supporting all the people who live there. In 1985 it was said that about 80% of the people in the homelands live below the urban breadline. The number of people without any income in the homelands rose from 250,000 to 1.43 million in 1980. The laws which treat people in this way must become at last the subject of peoples pleading with God and pleading with those in power. The Christian believes in a God who exercises fatherly care and compassion towards his children, he prays to him for daily food, and it is totally wrong that a Christian can stand idly by when people who are also children of God are condemned to live in places where they have to face starvation.

By far the most cruel and shameful apartheid policy is the one of removal and relocation of people. In 1983 a survey said that since the early 1960s 3.5 million people had been removed. Very often these people were moved from good land which they had previously owned and tilled and they were then moved to a place which was poor and where they were unable to eke out a living. "We had fields, we had work, we had food. We had a better life." "We were taken in the dead of night by force to a place where the devil lives. Our way of life was to plough, now we can't plough. I feel just like Jeremiah, he cried for the people of Jerusalem who were moved to Babylon. Even when we are dead our tears will stay on the face of the earth" (ex Mogopa resident). It is believed that a total of five million people have been removed and relocated. People like waxing eloquent in discussing what might be termed as high faluting issues such as disinvestment. For me it is dreadful just to be aware of millions of relocated people who have been condemned to a slow death. Had it not been for the women's organisation 'The Black Sash', which has a sizeable membership of people with a Jewish background, the Church would never have woken up in good time to speak against removals. Now nobody talks about those millions of relocated people who are facing a slow death except for a marvellous organisation called 'Operation Hunger'. It is, however, cruel that people should be pauperised in order that they should become the objects of charity.

The laws and policies of Apartheid have cruelly inflicted lasting suffering on large groups of the population and have forcibly abolished sharing and mutual dependence of South Africans. Many white farmers were quite content to share some of the produce of their land with blacks who found refuge on their farms. The government has decreed that only farm labourers should be accommodated on farm land and all the surplus farm population should be sent to the homelands or elsewhere. Now those who have been expelled from farms can die in obscurity without any human compassion being shown to them. White Christians in South Africa from now on are likely to be

preoccupied with questions of security and retrenchment of their own rights in the future, they will hardly give any thought to the plight of the starving and dying members of the black community in their country. Unless something is done it is victims of such suffering who will in future probably contribute more violence in retaliation.

The spirituality of any violent society, and indeed of any society if it is Christian, will inevitably be an incarnational one, “So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (John 1.14).

“O wonder of wonders, which none can unfold  
The ancient of days is an hour or two old;  
The Maker of all things is made of the earth,  
Man is worshipped by angels, and God comes to birth.”  
(English Hymnal – quoted by Kenneth Leech)

The fact of God having become incarnate is of great consequence to people and to creation. It means that all people are of immense value in the eyes of God, that the circumstances of life and the material world which surrounds us is of significant value.

It shows that people are most important. The way we treat others will affect our relationship with God, if we are unkind and unloving then that attitude will affect our relationship with God adversely, if we treat people with love, compassion and consideration it means God will approve. “You are literally, as he himself said, feeding, clothing, housing Jesus Christ when you are feeding, clothing, housing any human being: bad food, ugly clothes, dirty houses not only injure the body, but injure the soul; nay more, they do great injury until God himself.” (Stewart Headlam)

The values of society must be measured alongside this immense value which God has conferred upon Man and upon his creation. Man is of enormous value because Jesus assumed flesh taking upon himself all that which is man and because man consists also of material nature, God took upon himself this material nature. He came at a moment in historical time and he himself faced the circumstances within which human life has to be lived, therefore all people will be regarded in a very serious light by an incarnational spirituality. Man, every man and woman, will be held in the highest esteem as creatures of God and the whole of creation will be approached with great respect as being invaluable in the working out of God’s destiny for his creation.

Apartheid is the most inhuman ideology of modern times. All the other policies of the South African Government derive from this policy. Basically apartheid means a separation of people purely on the basis of the colour of their skin. Some people, merely because of the colour of their skin, have the vote, enjoy all kinds of privileges such as residing in the best areas of the land and others, also because of the colour of their skin, are confined to certain areas only, have no vote

and are condemned to live in areas which are generally poor and suffer a serious lack of amenities. It is apartheid which has led to the present state of violence in South Africa. Apartheid means that black people, especially those living in the townships, have no voice and therefore no means of redressing whatever injustices they may feel are done to them. For someone growing up in the black townships there is no visible hope that there is a future for them.

Two major problems of the blacks are, firstly, the refusal of the Government to redress the grievances of black youth with regard to education. Grievances in education sparked off the Soweto Riots of 1976 which soon spread to different parts of the country. Until now the Government has not resolved that difficulty. The black children would like a non-discriminatory system of education and they would like to see some of the content of that education changed in a way which would make it meaningful for them as blacks. Secondly, another major source of grievance in the black townships is the lack of amenities. There is a widespread determined boycott against paying rent in many townships across the country. In a township close to where I lived the young were so angry at the bucket system of sanitation, where often the bucket would be so full it would overflow and smell; sometimes it stood for days before it was emptied, that they carried these buckets and emptied them in front of the office of a white administrator. The violence which we see in the townships is an expression of the anger of people who have been suppressed and not heeded for too long.

The sin of apartheid will continue as a scourge in South Africa. To divide people racially and to rigidly confine them to separate areas is an ingredient for deep and lasting animosity, it fuels the natural suspicion which manifests itself in the 'us' and 'them' type of attitude; it encourages each group to believe the worst about the other. The tragedy of it is that all along, up until now, there have been remarkable signs of continuing good will amongst the blacks towards the whites. A mock poll election run by the *Sowetan* newspaper, at the same time as the recent all-white election in South Africa, came up with the amazing results that blacks voted whites into what would have been a national government. Their voting cut across racial, party and ethnic lines – ANC, PAC, UDF, AZAPO, the ruling Nationalist Party, the Progressive Party and so on all were represented. This government was to be led by Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Archbishop Tutu but even PW Botha, the present State President of South Africa, had enough votes to hold the position of a Junior Minister. The solution to the South African situation lies in the people of different races deciding to come together before it is too late and breaking down all the walls of separation which foster psychological, physical and emotional barriers. To me, and I think to many South African Christians, it was tragic that the European Economic Community Commissioners were not able to bring the leaders of all South Africans together and that the Eminent Persons Group were such a dismal failure in their endeavour to get South Africans involved in serious discussions. The one hope for South Africa seems to be to get all South Africans to begin talking to each other while there is still time.

Spirituality in a violent society will be prophetic. “The relationship between the pursuit of justice and the knowledge of God is basic to Old Testament theology. To know God is to seek justice and to correct oppression.” (*True God*, K Leech, p. 379) It is amazing how modern people insist that there is a separation between the political and the spiritual. Christians must insist in following the tradition of the Bible in which the Law and the Prophets were involved mainly with the issues of justice and society.

The prophetic role in any society is a difficult and even dangerous one. In a violent society it is even more so, but regardless of the circumstances Christians in a violent society are duty bound to take up the issues of goodness and evil in the structures of the society in which they live and to make vigorous protests, when necessary, against any evil or injustice in their society. God has never left himself without witnesses at any time in the history of South Africa. The deepening gloom that engulfs that country as a result of a heavy swing to the right will probably galvanise the Christian Churches into playing a more vigorous prophetic role.

As far back as 1984 the Assembly of the Baptist Union was “gravely concerned at the rising tide of bitterness, resentment, non-cooperation, hatred which is evident among those people concerned by the suggestion of the elimination [sic] of their existing rights.” A statement of the Bishops of the Anglican Church said, “If ... the Europeans seek to preserve for themselves the exclusive benefits of western civilization and to allow the Non-Europeans merely its burdens, South Africans will inexorably draw apart into mutually antagonistic racial groups”. (John de Gruchy)

Kairos, the most important Christian document which has come out of the South African turmoil has this to say: “Prophetic theology differs from academic theology because, whereas academic theology deals with all biblical themes in a systematic manner and formulates general Christian principles and doctrines, prophetic theology concentrates upon the critical situation in which we find ourselves. The theology of the prophets does not pretend to be comprehensive and complete, it speaks to the particular circumstances of a particular time and place – KAIROS”.

The denouncing of evil and wickedness by the Churches and the calling of attention to the suffering, and the injustice and oppression of the poor is essential in a violent society. The oppressed and the oppressor may not be “brutalized into wisdom and understanding” but conscience continues to function and the collective conscience of a people is capable of being touched and influenced. White South Africans are a people with certain common national characteristics. They may believe that they can defy the whole world and they are capable of doing this to a very large extent but surely their consciences cannot continue to defy world accepted standards of morality, justice and human compassion without serious consequences. Ultimately the regime in South Africa is going to collapse because darkness cannot overcome light, evil cannot triumph over goodness and God will ultimately defeat Satan. So the Churches must not cease to exercise their prophetic role.



The prophetic role of course properly belongs to individuals through whom God's spirit powerfully proclaims his will and exposes and condemns evil, and appeals and pleads with individuals and nations to turn from their sinful ways and return to God. In a violent society such individuals are indispensable. The role of prophet is a daunting, demanding and dangerous one, here are the words of someone who is an undoubted prophet of our day and who is unquestionably the most hated amongst the powers that be in his own country: "White South Africa, please know that you are deluding yourselves, or you are allowing yourselves to be deluded, if you think that the present ordering of our society can continue. Blacks will be free whatever you do or don't do. Don't delay our freedom, which is your freedom as well, for freedom is indivisible. Let it be now and let it be reasonably peaceful. I call on all whites to join the liberation struggles on God's side for justice, peace, righteousness, love, joy, laughter, compassion, caring and reconciliation." (Archbishop Desmond Tutu.) There are at present other major prophets on the South African scene such as Dr Beyers Naude, Archbishop Denis Hurley etc.

Perhaps most important of all, spirituality in a violent society will confront the sources and situations of violence and seek to discover the most effective means of implementing and encouraging non-violence. South Africa is perhaps a leading example of institutionalised violence. I have endeavoured in the earlier part of this lecture to show you just how much violence has been perpetrated upon the blacks in South Africa. Now I want to deal with violence at the grass-root level and as it manifests itself in what is actually taking place in that country. South Africa is living under the State of Emergency with a fierce clamp down on news of what is happening in the black townships. The police have a frighteningly wide range of powers of arrest and detention without trial. Bishop Sigisbert Ndwandwe, my fellow Suffragan Bishop of Johannesburg, is a man of great spiritual stature. His integrity cannot in any way be impeached. He was arrested and detained without trial. He and other ministers of religion were deeply embarrassed and humiliated by being subjected to a stripping in the presence of many laity. For me that outrage was as devastating as it would have been had the Pope been subjected to the same treatment. People who do that sort of thing to people who are symbolic representations of the God whom we worship just have not got enough imagination.

I want to tell you about an African 'Job' – Joseph Thobela. He was Chairman of the Duduza Parents and Pupils Committee. He and his committee asked my advice as to how to make contact with the authorities of Black Education. They were arrested on the day they were due to give their report back in the local community hall. After their release Joseph Thobela's home was firebombed by what are widely alleged to be agents of the state. Joseph and his wife were injured, one of their daughters, Sonto, was burnt to death and the other one, Zanele, was so badly burnt that she died about a month later. In the previous State of Emergency Joseph was detained without trial, at the end of it he was released but was badly affected in health as he suffered from diabetes. When the current State of Emergency was declared he was again detained, that was about 1986. About two months ago the powers that be decided to bring him and others to trial. After a few

appearances Jo was set free, he had suffered nearly two years in jail although he was innocent.

The State of Emergency is a terrible legislation. It gives the police wide ranging powers to detain people without them having the opportunity of clearing their names. In South Africa the police already have sweeping powers to deal with opposition. The State of Emergency gives opportunity for the abuse of power and makes the population believe that the authorities are only out to oppress and suppress them.

Towards the end of 1986 we were made aware of thousands of children who were in detention without trial. The Detainees Parents' Support Committee alleged that there were 4,000 children held in prison. The Government openly admitted that there were "only 256 children under 16 in detention". Quite horrific. To many people, to hold even just one child under the age of 16 in detention without trial is terrible enough. The blacks in South Africa are powerless to persuade the Government to release these children. White South Africans in general do not seem to be affected by their detention. I am distressed that there is no help from outside South Africa – are British MPs happy about it? Does the British Prime Minister approve? Are Christians in Britain powerless to help?

There is a lot of violence in South Africa today. The black communities in the townships feel constantly harassed, hunted and punished by the authorities and none of their grievances seem to make any impression on the Government, consequently they loathe anyone who is identified with 'the system'. A similar hatred is the hatred which the French people felt for those who collaborated with the German Gestapo. Therefore black policemen can no longer walk freely in the black townships and anyone who is suspected of being an informer is regarded with unimaginable loathing. Blacks do not as a rule hate and inflict pain on their fellow blacks, what makes it tragic is that often black township people have irrefutable evidence of collusion between such people and the police. The township people regard themselves as being at war with the apartheid regime. That sense of war has gained enormous momentum. They have adopted non-violent strategies such as the widespread township boycott against paying rent.

In a violent society prayer will assume its rightful place which is, to be at the centre of the life of the Church. When you are subjected to intense mental, physical and spiritual evils and you continue to believe and trust in God, prayer will begin to assume a primary role in your life. My mother was in my house when it was firebombed, though not much damage was done, and related the incident to me as follows: "after putting out the fire, from 3 o'clock in the morning until your brother and sister-in-law arrived, I sang psalms and hymns". We may pray for musicians in the following prayer: "O God who in the gift of music hath given us a revelation of thy divine beauty: teach us to love thee in all thy gifts, and so devote ourselves in all our work to thy glory, that through music you may raise people from the sorrows of this world to the enjoyment of thy divine loveliness". When we do that we will normally be thinking of beautiful settings of music offered in

lively parishes and in great Cathedrals. That is good and that is marvellous, very uplifting and inspiring stuff. However, that is not what the writer of Colossians meant when he wrote: “Sing thankfully in your hearts to God, with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”. (Col 3.16) Nor is it what the writer of Ephesians meant when he said: “Sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord; and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ give thanks every day for everything to our God and Father”. (Eph 5.19)

The closest approximation of what is meant by these passages is the music of Taizé:

*Stay here*

“Stay here and keep watch with me.  
Watch and pray, watch and pray”

*Jesus Remember Me*

“Jesus remember me  
When you come into your kingdom  
Jesus remember me  
When you come into your kingdom”

I believe that there is such a phenomenon as may be termed a ‘singing spirituality’. It is a way of praying which is firmly based in music. To a people who are naturally endowed with a sense of harmony and rhythm, the chant and the chorus and the dance can be a way of penetrating to the deepest roots of one’s personality and therefore an instrument by which the soul can be enabled to perceive divine realities.

I recently encountered a black theological student who said to me, “If I want to pray deeply, I take a pen and a piece of paper and I write down what I want to pray about and then I sing my prayer. I sing it for a long time and at the end of it my heart is satisfied. Sometimes I just sing the Kyries or the Lord’s Prayer. I had gone far away from home, and when I got back I found my wife had deserted the home. I just knelt down and sang a Xhosa hymn”.

I was once with the Bishop of Zululand and the then Bishop Tutu and we went to express our condolences to a bereaved minister’s wife. After the greeting formalities Bishop Tutu began singing:

“Nge gazi le mvana  
Nge gazi le mvana  
Nge gazi le mvana  
Siya sindiswa”

“By the blood of the lamb  
By the blood of the lamb

By the blood of the lamb  
We shall be saved”

We sang the chorus several times over and in that moment we were led to the root of our being where we encountered the Lord and our departed colleague and found each other and the widow and were strengthened by the unity won for us through Christ’s reconciling blood. So, spirituality in a violent society will compel Christians to discover the riches of their culture and to offer them to Christ for the benefit of his Church. The spectacular funeral crowds of unrest victims in 1984, 1985 and 1986 have opened up possibilities of liturgies capable of addressing the emotional, psychological, physical and mental needs of people. Extemporaneous prayers, poems, chants and choruses enabled people to take part in a corporate liturgy.

Besides indigenization in the sphere of prayer Christians will be led to an awareness of the richness of the Christian tradition of prayer. Whenever sermons are preached on prayer in South Africa people are intensely attentive. The teaching of the Bible, the teaching of such spiritual guides as St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross, together with modern writers on the subject, arouse much interest. Prayer itself becomes very real. Perhaps above all other aspects of prayer, intercession assumes greater importance. When you have experienced the panic of a house on fire and the danger of being trapped and being burnt to ashes you will begin to have a deep appreciation of the prayers of other people for you and you, yourself, will have a deeper sensitivity of the needs of others.

Spirituality in a violent society will be ecumenical. It has been most edifying and encouraging how Christians of different denominations have borne powerful witness to the truth of the Christian faith. “The Churches of this land are torn apart by political division, ideological conflicts and doctrinal disputes. Now is the time for unity of purpose grounded in the total rejection of the heresy of apartheid. Unless the Church is prepared to do this it will be rejected as irrelevant by the people of God who reach out for his gift in Christ of justice, freedom and life”. It is out of this ecumenicity that a member of the South African Council of Churches could say, “God looks at Pretoria and weeps.” It is much more effective in South Africa when an eminent member of the sister churches of the Dutch Reform Church can say: “In terms of any modern concept of democracy, as well as in terms of Calvin’s understanding of legitimacy, the South African Government is neither just nor legitimate. For the reformed tradition, a government should be obeyed because it has the authority instituted by God”. (Dr A Boesak) When the Government was alleged to have banned any prayer for those detained without trial, it was the most powerful act of witness to have Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Stephen Naidoo of the Roman Catholic Church and Dr Allan Boesak, offering prayers in St George’s Cathedral, Cape Town, in defiance of this ban.

So now may this lecture be all to God’s glory – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.