

TIYO SOGA MEMORIAL LECTURE

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The Challenges of the Theological & Ethical Principles of Mfundisi Tiyo Soga to a Nation living in a Time between Times

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I am humbled by the invitation that I read a paper on an occasion when we commemorate an icon, an intellectual, a patriot, a pioneer, a freedom fighter, a visionary, a theologian, an ethicist, and a pastor *par excellance* - uMfundisi uTiyo Soga.

When uNkosi Ngangomhlaba instructed me to do this, I tried to resist. I indicated to him that I am a preacher and not a scholar. My protestation fell on deaf ears. But apart from the royal ears being deaf, uNkosi Ngangomhlaba happens to be a person of such an enormous stature, and gravitas, and respect that it is just impossible for one to disobey him when he asks you to do a task. My own trepidation and my own sense of limitations notwithstanding, I have complied with the instruction.

The intention of this paper is to honour and celebrate the theological and the ethical principles that have been bequeathed to our generation by uMfundisi uTiyo Soga - and to do so by exploring the relevance of those theological and ethican principles for us and what those theological and ethical principles of uMfundisi uTiyo Soga say to us as a generation that is living at this time - a time which I call "*a time that is between times*" ?

The imagery of a time that is located between times or a land that is located between lands comes from the Book of the Exodus - when God was liberating His people from the land of bondage and leading them through to the land of promise, the land of milk and honey (as they called it), the land that God had vowed that He will give to His people as an inheritance.

The scholars of the Old Testament tell us that there was a shorter route that God could have instructed Moses to follow as he moved His people from land of bondage to the land of promise. The scholars of the Old Testament tell us that God deliberately avoided leading His people through a shorter route. Instead He chose to lead them through a longer route that required them to spend forty years in the wilderness.

The scholars of the Old Testament tell us that God, in His divine wisdom, wanted His people to experience a time that was between the times - a time when they

are no longer in Egypt, no longer in bondage, no longer under the authority of Pharaoh - but also a time when they are not yet in the promised land, not yet in the land of grapes and vines, not yet in the land that flows with milk and honey, not yet in the land that God vowed to their forefathers that He will give to them as an inheritance.




I call this the time that is between times - or a land that is between the two lands. There is the land of Egypt from which they have definitely departed. And there is the land of Canaan to which they have definitely not yet arrived. And for forty years they lived in-between times, and in-between lands. They have departed from where they were. But they have not arrived where they are going to.

The analysis of the events that define our time and where we are as a people, leaves me with this thought that we are a generation that is living in a time that is between times - in a land that is between two lands.

There is, in my view, a South Africa from which we have departed, a regime that we have conquered, an old order that is behind us. But there is a New South Africa to which we have not yet entered. A New South Africa for which we continue to long, and to yearn, and to strive - the New Land of our dreams. And in-between these two countries, there is this time and place where we are now - a land that is not the same as the land from which we departed in 1994, yet a land that is not yet the land of our dreams - a land between the two lands, a time between the two times.

Question : What do the theological and ethical principles of uMfundisi uTiyo Soga direct us to do as this generation that is between times, as this generation that is between lands ?

In his paper reflect briefly on three things :

-  The call not to be shy to celebrate what we have achieved.
-  The call to pursue our dream of a New South Africa and do so with excellence, urgency and determination.
-  The call to re-define our values and anchor our efforts on a strong ethical foundation.

I believe that uMfundisi uTiyo Soga has bequeathed to us these values and is calling on us to re-embrace them as this generation of South Africans that are living at a time that is between times.

Firstly, the Spirit of Celebration.

The theological and ethical principles of uMfundisi Tiyo Soga are celebratory. They come to us in a song and dance - in joy and celebration - they come to us in music and in hymns that he himself composed and that he himself sang.

*“ Vuthelani ixilongo, nina bantu bakhe.
Ixilongo lezwi lakhe lihlokomiseni.*

*Vuthelani ixilongo, nina bantu bakhe
Maliviwe izwi lalo, ngabo bangaboni.*

*Zonk ‘ izizwe nezikude, mazilazi lona
Zikhangele konguYesu, zimthande yena.”*

(Hymn 122 - Incwadi Yamaculo esiXhosa (Lovedale Press)

UMfundisi lived, worked, and ministered in the darkest days of the South Africa of our past. When he landed back in this country, having lived in Scotland for a time, uMfundisi was struck by the strangeness and the hostility of this place he called home.

- It was a land of white masters and black servants.
- It was land of dispossession and of conquest.
- It was a land where the Western culture was idolised as of superior value and everything African was denigrated as inferior, as savage and worthless.
- It was a place he had to call home, but at his home his dignity was undermined and his race was insulted.
- It was a land of the deification of others - of Sir Harry Smith, of Sir George Cathcart, of Sir George Grey, of Colonel John Maclean - the names that strangely continue to identify some of our towns and villages in these parts of our country.
- It was a land where to be born black was a curse and to be born white was not only a blessing but also a passport to untold privileges, and status, and access to all sorts of opportunities denied to others.

This is the land that many of us in this room have lived in until 1994. But this is the land of our past. This is the land that we left behind when we triumphed over the system of apartheid and we shocked the whole world with our bloodless transition to non-racial democracy. The whole world watched in shock at what they called a “South African miracle.”

We are a generation that has experienced a momentous hour of victory that uMfundisi would not have even dreamt of.

Is it not strange, therefore, that we are a generation that is so melancholic, and sad, and depressed. Day after day we are becoming a despondent nation. The newspapers we read, the sound bites we listen to from the airwaves, and visuals that are beamed to us on our television screens are all bombarding us with an imagery of a failed state, or a South Africa that is lying at the ICU gasping. And because the media does not only reflect reality but it also create its own reality, it has become fashionable for us to denigrate ourselves, to tell ourselves that we

are good for nothing, that we must be ashamed of who we are, that we are a lost generation living at the worst of times.

Yes, of course, there are problems that confront our nation today, and there are many of them. Yes, of course, those problems are huge, and gigantic, and complex. But I think it is disingenuous to fail to celebrate the achievements that our heroes have made against all odds.

If uMfundisi uTiyo Soga woke up every morning at a time such as the one that he lived in and celebrated life with a song and dance - then how much celebration, and song, and dance must flow from the lips of those of us who have watched so great a deliverance.

UloThixo omkhulu osuzulwini of Ntsikana is a revolutionary song, especially when sung with the music provided by uMfundisi Tiyo Soga. *Lizalise idinga lakho Thixo Nkosi yenyano* is revolutionary song, as many of the freedom-fighters have testified by using it in the context of struggle through many generations. *Ewe siyathemba kuhlalel'ukusa ixa lokusiyisa lizakuveliswa* is revolutionary. Not only in their theology and content, but in the assertion of the right to celebrate and to sing our own songs in a strange land. In them we declare that : "We are able. We are capable. We are the sons and daughters of great heroes."

"Nizilibele na ukuba nizalwa ngobani ?"

(from a song by one of our contemporary musician – Thandiswa Mazwai)

For us this cannot be the worst of times. We know how the worst of times look like because we have actually lived through them and we survived.

To fail to celebrate ourselves will be an insult. We would be like those who spit at the graves of Tiyo Soga, of Elijah Makiwane, of John Knox Bokwe, of Charlotte Maxeke of J L Dube. We would be like those who dishonour the names of Nelson Mandela, of Walter Sisulu, of Robert Sobukwe, of Chris Hani, of Beyers Naude, of Steve Biko.

In several generations they led us through the road of struggle - a road very cruel - sometimes dark, sometimes steep, sometimes slippery, sometimes dangerous, sometimes thorny - but they persevered and lead us through.

Secondly, continuing to pursue the national dream

UMfundisi uTiyo Soga has bequeathed to this generation the importance of holding of to a national dream and the challenge of hard work, a challenge to pursue it with excellence, a challenge to pull ourselves with our bootstraps and make a success of what we dream. No one will dream our dream for us, not even our best friends and benefactors. No one will make it a realised dream, only ourselves.

In one of his writing uMfundisi speaks passionately of his fellow Africans here at home, in the African continent and of those that lived in the Diaspora in North & South America and elsewhere in the world, he says :

“ I see him (i.e. the African everywhere in the world)) keeping his individuality and distinctiveness, amid the wreck of empires, and the revolution of ages. I find him keeping his place among the nations, and keeping his home and country. I find him opposed by nation after nation, and driven from his home. I find him enslavedthough still with chains in his hands and with chains on his feet - yet he looks forward to the dawn of a better day. “

It is this unwavering commitment to a vision of “the dawn of a better day” that drove the endeavours of uMfundisi uTiyo Soga - whether in the pulpit, or at the study, or at the boardroom, or on horseback travelling, or in the garden working in the fields. He believed fervently that there will be a dawn of a new day.

This is the same vision that must propel us forward. Friends, Ladies & Gentlemen, we did not struggle to live in a land that looks like the land that we left behind us. We struggled to live in a land that is completely different from that which we once lived in.

We know how South Africa will look like when it is right.

The Preamble to the Constitution of the Republic encapsulates the national vision and the national mission. It says :

“ We recognise the injustices of the past, we honour those who suffered to free our land, we respect those who worked to build and develop it, we affirm that South Africa belongs to all who live in it.

And because of this we commit to 4 things –

- (1) to heal the divisions of the past*
- (2) to lay a foundation of a democratic state*
- (3) to improve the quality of life of all our people*
- (4) to build a united and democratic state “*

We have said to ourselves this is our Vision and this is our Mission. We have said to ourselves we cannot rest until this Vision and this Mission is attained.

For uMfundisi uTiyo Soga, as for many of our icons who have led us, the new South Africa has to be fundamentally different from the old South Africa - in the same way as the Light is different from Darkness.

I think the duty that must weigh heavily on every leader that leads at this time that is between times - whether she or he leads in government, or in business, or in community, or in traditional affairs, or education, or in religion, or in the conduct of elections (like me and others) - is the duty to be actively engaged in the creation of a South Africa that is fundamentally different from that which we

left behind in 1994. If we are doing the same things that they did before, and acting in the same manner as they have acted, and behaving with the same attitude as they have behaved, and deliver with the same pace as they delivered to us all, and embracing the same values and attitudes as those values and attitudes that we found prior to 1994 - then we are failing to live up to uMfundisi uTiyo Soga's vision to be transformational. For what was the reason then for rising up against the old order, if we are now comfortable to embrace it ?

To achieve the kind of transformational change that uMfundisi uTiyo Soga spoke of in his imagery of Light and Darkness, we ought to constantly interrogate our daily activities against the question : "What am I achieving that is fundamentally different and better than what those who were here before me did ? " If our answer to that question is "Nothing" then we are betraying our transformational mission. When we get into office, high or small or average, our intention must be to make a remarkable difference.

This calls for a spirit that is never satisfied with mediocrity but is every striving for excellence.

I have paraphrased the words of King (Jnr) as follows :

*" If you can't be a pine on the top of a hill,
Be a scrub in the valley, but be the best little scrub.*

*If you can't be a river that meanders between the high mountains,
Then be a stream in the village,
But be a good stream, make the gardens beautiful.*

*If you can't be the sun or the moon,
Then be a star.
Be a twinkling, twinkling little star, make them wonder what you are
Like a diamond in the sky.*

*It isn't by size that you will win or fail.
Just be the best of what you are*

You do not need to be a premier to make a contribution to your province. You do not need to be a mayor to make a contribution to make a contribution to your area. You do not need to be a Vice Chancellor to make a contribution to your university or a principal to make a contribution to your school.

Some of us will remain just us - but we will make sure always that we are the best us.

Lastly, a quest for a strong ethical foundation

UMfundisi uTiyi Soga has bequeathed to us a need to commit ourselves to a firm ethical foundation and to anchor our endeavours on that solid foundation.

It is said that one of the major contributions of uMfundisi to African people was to argue the necessity of modernity or civilization. But in arguing the necessity of this he raises a fundamental question: What should be the signs of that civilization ?

Put differently and made relevant to our time, the question he is raising is : What are the signs of progress and what are the signs of success ? How we define success has become a major national project, in my view.

Is it correct that we define success today by the amount of riches that we have amassed and by how much we flaunt those riches for the poor to see how rich we are ?

Is it correct that we define success by the ridiculously huge houses we build or buy, and the obscenely large and numerous the cars we drive or just park in the yard for on-lookers to see and be ashamed ?

Is it correct that we recognise successful women and men by the high positions of power and influence that they occupy - by the ridiculous sizes of their office buildings - by the number of the bodyguards and "servants" who attend to them ?

Is it correct that success is measured by the opulence of our life-style, the grossly huge luxurious parties that we throw, the excessively expensive food we serve, the exclusive label of the whisky, and brandy and wine we consume ?

To be successful it must be enormously huge. Small cannot be beautiful.

I believe that uMfundisi uTiyi Soga is reminding us today that we cannot build a New Land – a South Africa that is caring, compassionate and humane - unless we re-write our ethical values and re-define what being successful really means.

We are indeed in a wilderness, and we will remain and perish in the wilderness, if we define as successful people of our society the people who trample down on others, scavenge on those who are weak and helpless, rob their workers of a decent salary in order to maximise the profits they earn.

We are indeed in a wilderness, and we will remain and perish in the wilderness, if all we want in this life is to get ahead at all cost and get rich with whatever means possible - and to steal, to kill, to destroy - not because we are hungry but because we just want to be ahead and we want to appear successful.

We must applaud the announcement by the Premier of this province that businesses that amass wealth through unscrupulous means will be blacklisted from conducting business with the state. We must add to that a requirement that businesses that conduct business with the state, at national or provincial or local level, must be required to declare their labour relations practices and divulge the rates of wages that they pay to their workers.

We cannot define our value as human being by the size of the things we own. Our value as human being must be defined by the contribution we make - to uplift, to reach out, to reach back, to reach down and to support others to progress, especially the weakest in our societies.

As theologians, and preachers, and ethicists - as traditional leaders and people of influence in the societies where we live and lead - as educators and intellectuals and academics - as leaders of our organisations at every level where we lead - as mothers and fathers / uncles and aunts / granddads and grandmas / bigger sisters or bigger brothers to our siblings - I believe we have to make a concerted effort to re-focus the moral compass of our generation. We are a generation that requires re-schooling so that we know that we will earn our respect in society by the quality of the values we hold and embrace, and not by the abundance of the riches we accumulate for ourselves.

*Nkosi khawusikelele
limfundiso zezwe lethu
Uze usivuselele
Siphuthume ukulunga.*

Thank You.