

Jesus, the Church and Decolonisation

28/5/17

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Much has been written lately, within the political spheres, around the idea of “decolonisation”. Ironically, here at St Paul’s Rondebosch, we have found ourselves embroiled in the practical outworking of much student dissension around this matter. Some twenty-three years since the first democratic election in this country, there are strong voices afoot who are unhappy with the status quo. It is in the light of a continued feeling of land and economic dispossession that the term “decolonisation” has arisen. Many indigenous peoples continue to feel an “outsider” in the country of their birth, specifically in the economic, business and education fields. Since, good theological practice does not divorce the church from the secular world and society; it is not only necessary, but fundamental that we extend the idea of “decolonisation” to the Church in South Africa.

This discourse may indeed make many of us feel uncomfortable, including myself, but it is a conversation that we need to have if the church is to remain both relevant and real to all South Africans.

As Christians, we need to be asking ourselves some serious questions:

- 1) Are we as a Christian Church promulgating the status quo inherited from the previous regime, as well as our original colonisers, be they Dutch or British?
- 2) Are we as a Christian Church open to the frank discussions that will need to take place to ensure that Christian Churches remain reflective of South African culture and values only?
- 3) Are we as a Christian Church ready to accept and apologise for any paradigms of colonisation that we may have perpetuated or promulgated in the past?
- 4) Are we as a Christian Church ready to be part of the solution and therefore part of the new Church that will be seen by all parties as relevant, engaging, post-colonial and leading?

Perhaps it would be a good place to start by unpacking the concept of “decolonisation”.

Isaac Giron writes in his essay, *“Decolonise your mind”*, that the term “decolonised” is popular amongst activists of colour, yet is very loaded and hard to pin down. It has been used to free minds, but it also has divided communities. Giron continues by suggesting that a decolonised mind defends culture by defending the root of who we are. Giron sums up his powerful essay by saying, *“A person with a decolonised mind accepts their past, loves their present and creates their future, regardless of what stands in their way.”*

Patrick Matabeni, in his essay entitled, *“Decolonising the Church in the Context of Decolonising Society”*, writes powerfully and I quote:

“Basically, we must demonstrate how many of our African Countries ought to be run by effectively running our own churches and institutions as inspired by our values of a decolonised morality and spirituality.”

Eric Ritskes, in his essay entitled, *“What is Decolonisation and why does it matter?”* suggests that Decolonisation is a goal but it is not an endpoint. Decolonisation is therefore a journey that is never finished, but, most importantly, on this journey, uncertainty is not to be feared. Decolonisation must therefore allow all parties to regenerate indigenous knowledges, epistemologies and ways of life. These indigenous knowledges are always adapting, always creating, always moving forward - there is no stopping them.

Ritskes concludes by stating that there are many views of decolonisation, often contrasting and competing, but there is one thing in common: the belief that through action, change can occur. We are all implicated in and through colonialism and how we decolonise is connected to exactly how we are implicated.

“... Decolonisation demands reorganising indigenous land, indigenous peoples, and indigenous sovereignty- including sovereignty over the decolonisation process.”

This raises some continued questions for the Church:

- 1) Are we as a Christian Church ready to “decolonise” the liturgy?
- 2) Are we as a Christian Church ready to “decolonise” our music?
- 3) Are we as a Christian Church ready to “decolonise” our traditional forms of worship?

These are some very hard questions for us to listen to and to consider.

Perhaps, we should, for a moment, reflect upon the life and times of Jesus and His journey...

- Jesus grew up in a Jewish country that was colonised by the Roman Empire, yet somehow, Jesus maintained His ministry and leadership in spite of the Roman presence.
- Jesus was able to sustain and maintain His Jewish identity, yet grew His own ministry style into the values you and I share today, in spite of the Jewish cynicism and Roman government.
- Therefore, it becomes clear, that Jesus flourished in spite of the conflict and colonisation.
- Finally, we need to remember that Israel did eventually free herself of the coloniser, Italy, and is once again free to celebrate her political and religious freedom, although interestingly, in continued political conflict.

There are no easy answers to a lot of these tough questions. Perhaps the first step is just to be open to the conversation and possible change.

I am sensitive to the prominent politician who recently suggested that we need to take the positive from colonisation as we move forward. This was labelled as politically incorrect. However, we find ourselves in a similar position in the Christian Church. We have inherited so much wealth from the West in terms of liturgy, music, theology and styles of worship. While

Jesus rises above all of this, we may do well to consider our inheritance very carefully as we strive to build a truly African liturgy that is devoid of the negative paradigm of our past colonial history but also retains that which is holy, beautiful and uplifting. This will be no easy task for the liturgical committee that is currently writing the 2025 Anglican Prayer Book, for their main role will be to “decolonise” the prayer book and to ensure that it is truly “Africanised”.

Ultimately, we are all Christians on this journey together. We are living through exciting and dynamic times that demand us to be open, transparent, honest and compromising as we move forward into a post-colonial church that promises hope and love for all in an equal society.

The role for you and I is to be part of the debate, part of the journey, part of the new social construct that strives to be inclusive, relevant and real. If we remain humble and in tune with the Holy Spirit, this journey is possible. It will not, however, be without pain and change.

Being a Christian who is engaging, responsive and proactive is challenging. We only have to look to Jesus to see someone who embodied all of these values in His daily walk.

Now it is our turn to make a difference and to be part of the solution.

May God bless you this week ahead as you reflect upon these challenging words.

Amen.