

Presentation at 66th Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Johannesburg on Saturday 28th October 2023

Christians and the Election by Mr Bobby Godsell

1. The provincial and national general elections which are due to take place next year somewhere between May and August will be the most unpredictable elections since 1994. In every election since then the nation has expected one party to win handsomely. Now it is possible that at both national level, and also in some provinces, no party will achieve a 50% plus majority - and coalitions may be necessary.
2. Next year's election also provides our country with a second chance - a chance to recover that belief that the country belongs to all, and we must work together to offer each and every citizen a decent life.
3. Our scriptures tell many wonderful stories of second chances. In the Book of Numbers chapter 14 the story is told of God's command, conveyed by Moses to the Israelites who arrived at the border of the promised land just months after leaving Egypt, to enter. Fearing the Canaanites, and lacking faith in both their God and themselves, they elected rather to spend the next 38+ years in the desert.
4. In 1994 some 20 million South Africans stood in lines to elect a government of national unity. Under the interim constitution each party that achieved 3,5% of the vote was guaranteed a seat in the cabinet. Though perhaps most citizens may not have been aware of this provision, almost all voted in the belief that the country belongs to all who live in it - black and white. And that black and white should work together.
5. That is the dream we have lost. Now political parties compete on the basis of race and personality and co-operation between parties is frowned upon.
6. Christians played a critical role in ending Apartheid and ensuring the transition to democracy was largely peaceful. Nowhere was this more evident than in the role of church and business leaders in drafting the 1991 Peace Accord, and the creation nationwide of peace committees to enforce this code. What role can Christians (and considering where I am speaking) specifically Anglicans play in ensuring we grasp this second chance?
7. FIRSTLY, we can ensure that every Anglican in this Diocese is a registered voter. In 1994 there was no voter's roll. All a citizen had to do was to arrive at her or his voting station with some form of ID. It is estimated that a very large majority (high 70%) of eligible adults voted. Some 20 million people. In the last municipal elections only 26 million of the 46 million eligible adults were registered and only 12 million voted. Less than a third of eligible citizens.
8. It is very easy to register. You can do it online. Perhaps parishes could assist those in their congregations who don't have access to the internet to register. Perhaps there could be registration parties where we could celebrate those congregants who put on the cloak of disciple citizenship.
9. SECONDLY, disciple citizens can use their vote informed by a sense of what God expects of our Government. Each individual citizen must decide for her or himself who to vote for. This is an act of individual conscience. Yet it should also be an act of fervent discernment. And it surely it is possible that Anglicans together could discuss not who to vote for, but how we can make this choice informed by the vital imperatives of our faith about justice, integrity, concern for the poor. Love for your neighbour.

10. Next year citizens must make a double choice. Given the very real possibilities of coalitions we must choose not only the party that most closely reflects faith but also consider how this party will behave should coalitions be needed. Some party supporters are more consumed by their hatred for other parties than their loyalty to their own. This will make principled, faith-based coalitions impossible.
11. FINALLY given that next year will be the most highly contested election since 1994 the Church as an organisation could play a role to ensure that voting is peaceful, and the counting of the votes is fair. Our Electoral Act provides for organisations to register as observers and be present at both voting booths and in the counting process. If individual parishes were to provide a few individuals to play this role we would make this our election, not their election.
12. Beyond the election and politics there is much that active citizens can do. Our City of Johannesburg is in crisis. Bishop Steve has agreed to lead a group of active citizens to help fix Johannesburg. A group of experts is being assembled to identify projects that could address the problems of water, roads, crime and other ills. Another group is exploring the possibility of raising municipal bonds for a particular purpose and with a governance structure (independent of politics) that would ensure the money was spent effectively for the purpose for which it was raised.

Dr Gillian Godsell

How you feel about the elections is really very closely intertwined with how you feel about the beloved country. So, I'm going to start with a quote from Deon Meyer's latest detective novel, set mainly in Stellenbosch. Warrant officer Vaughn Cupido says to warrant officer Bennie Griessel:

I feel you, Benna. Dinge lyk nie great nie. But we both know this is a transition phase. Never as good as we hope, never as bad as we fear. En in hierdie land fix ons op die ou end alles. Skeef en krom I grant you, maar ons fix dit.

Now I am not talking about Christians fixing the election, in any sense of the word fix. I'm not talking about how Christians should vote. I am talking about how Christians should speak about the election, how we should listen, especially to people we disagree with, and the work we need to do in our own hearts, instead of standing on the sidelines and pointing fingers at other people.

You will be relieved to hear that as I start to talk about the Christian response, I am not going to quote from popular crime fiction, but from James 1:19:

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

We can't control how the politicians speak, but we can control how we speak. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can remove not only anger, but contempt and venom from all of our discussions of these elections.

We can learn – and this will not be an easy task and may be a task for the rest of our lives – to see political parties as our neighbour, and individual politicians, every single one of them, as being exactly what they are: made in the image of God.

In Isaiah 58:9–10, 12 we are promised that God will say “I am here’ provided we remove all oppression, the accusing finger, and malicious speech; then, we are told,

.... our light shall rise in the darkness, and our gloom become like midday.... That would be nice, if the current political gloom became like midday.

“Repairer of the breach,” they shall call you, “Restorer of ruined dwellings.”

I don't know if we can manage to restore even one ruined dwelling, either figurative or literal. But removing the accusing finger and malicious speech? Sure. We can do that. Although that also might take the rest of our lives.

How we do it is beautifully expressed in this poem by Jane Hirshfield, called ‘Spell to be said against hatred’:

Until each breath refuses, they, those, them.
Until the list of characters on the book's first page says
Each one is you
Until hope bows to its hopelessness only as oneself bows to another
Until cruelty bends to its work and sees suddenly I
Until anger and insult know themselves burnable legs of a useless table

If we abandon rage and fear and insult in this election campaign, just in our own conversations, we make room for hope. When David Dinkins ran for mayor of New York, and became the first black mayor elected, his slogan was ‘vote your hopes not your fears’. Hope is such an appropriate thing for Christians to feed into an election campaign.

Not a meagre hope, but abundant hope, best expressed for me in the words of the Message interpretation of Romans 15:13

Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope.

Hope, joy, peace, in the hearts of Christians, are building blocks.

In Tessa Dooms' book, 'Coloured', she writes:

Post-apartheid South Africa, consumed with building homes and providing electricity, did not have the resources or the capacity to rebuild our souls. (p39)

I think she's right, and I think we risk exactly the same thing with this election – making it about potholes, rather than about principles, or souls.

This Synod may have had to, because this is the nature of Synods, talk about what can't be done, and what resources are not available, but what this synod surely does have, is the resource and capacity to rebuild the nation's soul.

With building blocks of joy, faith, trust and hope.

Some years ago, when I was working at the Wits School of Governance, I supervised a doctoral student from Gaza, Said elNamrouti. He currently lives in the South of Gaza, with his children, and 6 grandchildren under the age of four. Since the war in the Middle East began, I have been messaging him every day. So far, he has replied every day. Sometimes we share prayers, sometimes he tells me of his fear and panic, sometimes he sends videos which I am too scared to open. Last Thursday, when nothing in particular, certainly nothing good, was happening in that region, he wrote:

Good morning, Dr Gillian

New day full of hope that all this will end and we will be able to live in peace and freedom.

If Said elNamrouti can find hope within his situation, who are we not to hope?

Hope becomes even more powerful when paired with imagining something better, something which does not yet exist but could exist.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, an orthodox rabbi living in New York, pleads with us, in her response to the war in the Middle East, for a return to the liberatory imagination:

We must, says Rabbi Danya, keep the fires of the liberatory imagination burning.

Especially, in the face of so much death and despair.

We must remember what's possible.

We must try to envision new ways.

We cannot find our way out of this moment if we cannot even begin to imagine what else could possibly be.

We cannot ever, writes the Rabbi, do anything differently if we cannot even begin to grasp how we might begin to get there.

In 1994 we had hopes, imagination, dreams, and visions, for our beloved country. Maybe it's time to get them back. To return to half-forgotten phrases and ideas like nation-building, as well as imagining new ways of being together, like Beloved Community, a community where love transforms opposers into friends, where each person is committed to the other's flourishing and the flourishing of the whole.

Hope and joy are not the response to something good happening; they are fuel for making something better happen.

Valarie Kaur, a Sikh woman who worked in America after 9/11 when Sikhs in particular were targeted - beaten and killed, their places of worship burned - because they wear turbans - had this to say about the usefulness of joy, and the importance of joy in shaping our legacy:

In the face of horrors visited on our world daily, in the struggle to protect our loved ones, choosing to let in joy is a revolutionary act. Joy returns us to everything good and useful and worth fighting for. It gives us energy. May we let joy in. For we will be someone's ancestors one day. If we do this right, they will inherit, not our fear, but bravery born of joy.

Joy is something we choose to let in. Of course, it isn't always there, but if we are not open to joy it will never be there. Hope is not a response to a good external situation. It is a choice we make every day – every hour when the going is particularly rough. Hope, says academic Rebecca Solnit, is the emergency axe we need to break down the door to the future.

May our contribution to these elections be our hope and not our fear. Our joy, and not our anger.