

“Ichabod” – The glory has departed: The Metaphor showing the Church’s prophetic failure in South Africa

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Abstract

This article concerns itself with the silence of the church in South Africa since 1994. It opens by reflecting on the era of Judges when the priesthood (Eli) was fading and the role of the prophet under Samuel emerged. The baby was born during the national crisis when Israel was under pressure and the Ark of God captured. This baby’s name was *Ichabod*, meaning the glory has departed. The church’s prophetic role diminished to a certain degree, regardless of the democratically elected Presidents’ affirmations of the critical role of the church in transforming the society. High profile Christians in government structures fails to influence the political power when passing the unjust laws. The redemptive solution suggested is that both the government and the church should acknowledge the transcendence and immanence of God over human affairs, re-visit the church’s confessional utterances, especially the Heidelberg Confession, on God’s desire for justice, and finally, the church to remain unmoved regarding proclamation (kerygma) and dialogue.

Keywords: Prophecy, Judges, transformation, redemption

Introduction

The emancipation of the nation of Israel from Egyptian slavery was through the powerful prophetic role of Moses. The Mosaic role was to bring Yahweh’s glory by prophetic revelations. These revelations were the glory and the will of God to his people. After settling in Canaan, the prophetic voice faded away. Moses’ successor, Joshua, was not a prophet in the manner of his predecessor. He was a military strategist and very little communication of God’s will was significant. The period of three to four centuries was turbulent as “another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel” (Judg 2:10). God intervened by raising up the *shophetim* (judges) “who saved them out of the hands of these raiders” (2:16). These *shophetim* led the nation to victories over their enemies. Their role, except that of Deborah, was not juridical as their title in English denotes. “They were ‘chieftains’ in rank and ‘deliverers’ in mission during a most unsettled and precarious period of Israel’s history.” (Lewis 1979:10). The priesthood was not reputable for ushering God’s people to God. When Eli was stationed at the cultic center in Shiloh, the nation was constantly harassed by their archenemy, the Philistines. Eli’s sons were priests by hereditary and their calling to the holy office was not admirable. Corruption in the form of oppression of the poor was at an alarming level where the beneficiaries were social elites. At the peak of the war, Eli’s daughter-in-law (Phinehas’ wife) gave birth to the baby boy and named him Ichabod – ‘the glory has departed from Israel’ (1 Sam 4:19-22).

This was the era of national crisis. The *realpolitik* was at the loggerhead with *vox populi* - politics of power could not balance with the voices of the masses. The cultic centre lost its significance, the priesthood was blunted under Eli’s leadership. The prophetic visions became rare (1 Sam 3:1). The *ephod* lost its beauty. The era of the supremacy of priesthood

was now taken over by the popularity of Samuel the judge, the priest and the prophet. Leon Wood (1970:230) tells us that

In these capacities he filled a vital need in a crucial time of Israel's history. His work in correcting religious malpractice, maintaining national morale in the face of major disaster, promoting return to faith in God, and even establishing the new Israelite monarchy was of the greatest importance.

Opposition against the priesthood was distressing. People generally stopped coming to consult the Lord both for personal or national welfare. The religious condition was deficient and morale low. People's spirits were crushed and in a despair. The foreign power took control of some of the nation's territory. These were the conditions in which Samuel's prophetic career started. The picture that is not so different from the current South Africa. Nürnberger (2004:151) paints this picture for us that

It is on the whole, the prophetic movement which gave expression to this popular opposition, beginning with the story of Samuel, the first prophet of substance. In 1 Sam 2ff we are told of the demise of the dynasty of the *priest* Eli and his replacement with the *prophet* Samuel (3:20).

This period was a transition from Mosaic era to the golden age of Davidic and Solomonic dynasties. The worship was syncretic, and morals decadent. The aim of this article is to compare that era with the current South African situation

The Glory had departed in Apartheid South Africa

The past and the present generations in South Africa need not be *pedagogised* or reminded of the evil systems of colonialism and apartheid that prevailed and ruled South Africa for about three-and-a half centuries. Ours was an abnormal territory where humanity suffered immensely through laws that dispossessed people of their land, disenfranchisement, tribal balkanisation, racial prejudices, perpetual marginalisation from human rights and resources etc. The worship, morals, values, and ethics were all marred by *realpolitik* of the time. People used power to control others' livelihood; and manipulate others movements. The system advantaged the minority elite at the disadvantage of the majority poor. Entering the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg made me come across the inscription: "For white South Africans the 1960s was a decade of boom and unprecedented prosperity. For black South Africa, the 1960s saw apartheid harden into its most dogmatic and racist form."

The theological justification for unjust laws perpetrated some reactions and rebellions. Afrikanerdom and Reformed faith were symbiotic comrades in synergy for human rights abuse. The era reflects the church (Dutch Reformed Church) as the stable partner and mirror of the state (De Villiers 2013:37-56). Some Christian leaders and ordinary believers put their necks on the block for the purity of the gospel witness. They became the real biblical *martures* – witnesses of Christ by their death. The Christian conscience and the *imago Dei* they possessed revealed to them that the church in South Africa needs to be unshackled from the claws of apartheid towards liberation. This is captured by Alan Boesak (1976:10) that:

Behind the reality of the theology of liberation and the challenge it poses for the Christian Church, are realities hitherto anxiously ignored by the theology of the Western world - the realities of rich and poor, of white and black, of oppressors and oppressed, of oppression and liberation from oppression

These theologians were from all racial and cultural backgrounds. They were from diverse ecclesiastical formations and confessions. One can recall the likes of Beyers Naude', Nico

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Smith, Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu; and many other unsung heroes who in God's sight are or were 'known, yet regarded as unknown' (2 Cor 6:9). The church of the colonial and apartheid era suffered a crisis of conscience. Religion that was divided along the racial lines damaged the testimony of the God of the Bible. Racial laws in ecclesiastical formations led some African leaders to secede from their mainline confessional communions to form what is known as African Initiated Churches (AIC). In some places championing justice was equated with rebellion, terrorism, communism or *swart gevaar*. The nation was made up of groups instead of being an entity singing one anthem under one flag, respecting same national symbols etc. The glory had departed from South Africa. Our people in politics do not lack belief, they lack a living faith – a radical loyalty to God and his written Word. They are too comfortable with their *private* doctrine of God (VanGemeren 1990:303).

The Glory had departed in Post-Apartheid South Africa

During the liberation struggle, there were prophetic voices from churches. The government of the notorious rulers such as Verwoerd, Vorster, and Botha knew that their main opposition was not Colin Eglin or Helen Suzman of Progressive Federal Party, but the voice of the church through South African Council of Churches (SACC). This community of churches had a unified voice addressing injustice and apartheid unreservedly. Under the inspirational and charismatic leadership of the likes of Beyers Naudé, Peter Storey, Desmond Tutu, Frank Chikane etc. the voice of the church in South Africa was vocal and audible. The deafening silence is conspicuous. The only hope is found in the words of John de Gruchy that "there is a concerted effort at the moment to revive the SACC. It has undoubtedly gone through a serious slump and decline, lacking leadership and losing credibility. But the truth is that, if there were no SACC, we would have to invent one because we need such a structure" (Van Tonder 2014:3-4).

1994 is universally celebrated as the year of liberation – the death of apartheid as a legislative policy. There was a rekindled hope of the nation entering the Promised Land after years of slavery and wilderness wanderings. The secular state under African National Congress emerged. The new constitution of 1996 acknowledged the religious plurality of the country's populace. Many clergy such as Dutch Reformed Alan Boesak, Catholic Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, Presbyterian Makhenkesi Stofile, Methodist Mvume Dandala, Baptist Peter Marais, Pentecostal Frank Chikane; and many theologians such as Dr Motsoko Pheko, the Anglican Dr Sipho Mzimela, Stanley Mogoba; and others joined the civil service. These Christian leaders, some of them being systematic theologians, joined the government to its highest echelons. Regardless of their presence and position, *Ichabod* started to surface: secularism engrossed itself constitutionally in the hearts of the nationals. Morality was pushed to the furthest corners of social conscience. Peter Storey (in Bentley & Forster 2012:1-2) rightly conveys the fact that:

In 1994, when South Africa's system of government was radically transformed away from minority domination and toward fully participatory democracy, most citizens rightly rejoiced to see the old system die, but many made the mistake of assuming that because a system had changed, the essential change of the State, and therefore in relationship with the Church, had also changed. In fact nothing of the sort had happened because nothing of that sort is possible.

Laws encroaching on Christian values were passed through the clear majority vote in parliament. Good examples here include compromising the sanctity of life (Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1996); fidelity and sanctity of legal marriage (Domestic Partnership Bill, 2008), the so-called gay marriages (Civil Union Act, 2006) etc. The fundamental truth that "if a policy conforms to the golden rule that 'you must love your neighbour as yourself' then it is morally justifiable" (Engdahl 2012:11) became a norm for

dereliction. Ethics were and are still been floundered, hence the irreversible endemic corruption levels in high places.

Nelson Mandela's administration recognised and publically acknowledged the role of the church during the liberation struggle and in transforming the society. At that time, the church through its ecumenical organs sat at the zenith of the new era. It implemented and practised the arm-chair theology, starting to go along with the flow. The mentality of "we have arrived" developed subtly and subliminally. They forgot their critical role in addressing the injustices of apartheid before 1994. Regardless of this stolidity, Mandela appreciated churches so much that his biographer, Anthony Sampson stated that "Mandela could find more encouragement elsewhere, particularly from the Churches, which had been so cautious in opposing apartheid at the time when he had gone to jail" (1999:314). In this treatise, Sampson outlines Smangaliso Mkhathshwa's 1968 statement of "the winds of changing were blowing inside the churches." The Catholic priests broke the white domination by producing a 'black priests' manifesto attacking racism within their Church, and vowing to become vocal in denouncing apartheid (1999:314-315). The Anglicans made a history by appointing a black Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who made an indelible mark in fighting apartheid. In diverse ways, "Mandela was reaching out to all the main Churches, with a politician's eye for future friends." (1999:315). Remembering his Methodist upbringing, Mandela congratulated Dr Gqubule on becoming the President of the Methodist Church; and Gqubule's secretary, Stanley Mogoba who later became the Methodist Bishop and a leader of Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) that both Mogoba and Mandela were comrades- in- arms in Robben Island. "Mandela especially welcomed the wind of change within the Dutch Reformed Church, the original seedbed of apartheid. He was inspired by the courage of Dr Beyers Naude'... and congratulated Sam Buti for joining South African Council of Churches." (1999:315). It is clear that Mandela gave Churches the pavilion of honour in transforming South Africa. The response of the church was unfortunately slumping into false utopia of Solomon's time when everyone "lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree" (1 Kings 4:25).

The Mbeki era saw the enhancement of the Inter-Faith Movement leaders. By 2001, Mbeki and the Churches were walking far apart from each other. On 7 April, 2001, a historic event happened when the President convened a meeting with church leaders. "The president decided to get the relationship between the government and the country's religious leaders back on track – and met 34 clerics of all faiths at the Union Buildings last week."¹ The gap between the church and the state was felt when corruption escalated in the midst of the silence of the churches. The prophetic voice was not heard in the corridors of political power centres. Sense had to come from above. Sadly, the same news release above continues that "The meeting, initiated by the president, took place under the umbrella of the national religious leaders' forum, set up in 1997 by Nelson Mandela and religious leaders."² It was the time when Ichabod's roots were penetrating deeper into the soil of South African socio-political landscape. The glory was departing from the nation. The ruling party was starting to feel the rattle of its foundations. Chikane (2012:179) gives this picture: "Between 2003 and 2010, the ANC entered the stormiest waters it had encountered since returning from exile and, like any ship battling for such a long time, it runs the risk of being wrecked."

The other attempt by Mbeki administration was on 30 April 2003, when the meeting was held with 33 religious leaders. "The two delegations reached a broad understanding on the need for the involvement of religious leaders in issues such as nation-building, reconciliation, poverty eradication, social and moral delivery and better communication with the rest of the country"³ Mbeki continued to highlight the role of the church even after his tenure as the

¹ Caroline Hooper-Box and Jeremy Gordin. <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/mbeki-holds-straight-talks-with-church-heads-1.63807#.VkJHyQV8aKpo> (10 November 2015).

² Caroline Hooper-Box and Jeremy Gordin.

³ John Battersby. <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/mbeki-church-leaders-discuss-nation-building-1.105516#.VkJH2zV8aKpo> (10 November, 2015).

President of the Republic. For instance, Peter Kenny of Ecumenical News 6 Oct 2013 reports that

Former South African president Thabo Mbeki has criticized the country's churches for not playing a greater role since the end of apartheid and has hit out at churches all round Africa for not speaking louder on issues facing the continent. He criticized South African churches for "demobilising" after the end of apartheid and called on them to become more active in responding to the challenges faced by society⁴

This sentiment is not uncommon, as the ecumenical voice has disappeared. The South African leader who is respected worldwide realises that the churches had become silent. At this Anglican Conference Mbeki reiterated that the church was one of the principal fighters for liberation but has now become demobilised. It has distanced itself in a way from responding as it used to respond to national challenges and has disappeared somewhere over the horizon. The church's voice is no longer strong as it used to be. That voice is more needed now than ever. He concluded his speech by highlighting "The leadership of the church is sorely missed."

Under President Thabo Mbeki, the administration encountered a great deal of criticism for its address of various issues. These are spelled out in Chikane's book; *The Things that Could Not be Said (2013)*. One of the burning issues mentioned and elaborated in this book is corruption and its ramifications. Indeed in our current era, corruption has taken deeper roots. The status quo shoots itself on the foot all the time. The more they try to fix, the worse it becomes. Ethics and values are godless and do not even locate *ubuntu* at the centre of civil administration. The question that any theologian can ask is "Where is conscience?" However, it should be noted that godless values come to play when conscience is seared with a hot iron. One of the Reformed ethicists, Klaukte (2012:111), says "The man of conscience fights a lonely struggle against the overwhelming pressure of dilemmas requiring a decision. But the extent of the conflicts within which he has to choose – with no one to advise and support him but conscience – tears him apart." This might explain the rationale behind Christian prophetic apathy in the political landscape.

The current President Zuma's administration is the most scathed of them all. The church in South Africa has lost its saltiness. Whatever religious statement the president utters, becomes a national debate championed by churches. The rationale behind this is that the President's ethical norms are in collision and not consonant with religious didactics. The South African Council of Churches (SACC), Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC), and The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA) become vocal only when the *vox populi* address and scathes the president's religious *gratis dictum* (mere assertions). It looks like the prophetic role of the church in South Africa has adopted the position of *cave quid dicis, quando et qui* (beware what you say, when, and to whom). Whether this is an abuse of freedom of democracy or it's just some form of indifference, it is difficult for one to tell. Some theologians may adopt the justification that free state channels its religion to privacy, since now we are *chiesa libera in libero stato*. We are a free church in a free state. This is escapism mentality. Wittenberg (2012) reminds us that we should not find ourselves in the situation like that of Solomon and theologians in that era. Solomon's obstacle to his aspirations for imperial grandeur was Abiathar the priest, "who will have tried to assert the relevance of the religious traditions of Israel and will have been critical of Canaanite influences at court" (2012:5). Solomon banished him to Anathoth after accusing him for conspiracy and treason. Typical, the priest with a prophetic voice was replaced with a syncretic and compromising civil servant; Zadok with his Jebusite background, became a

⁴<http://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/former.south.african.president.mbeki.urges.churches.to.raise.voices/22476.htm> (11 November, 2015).

more useful theologian for Solomon's purposes. Sadly, as it always happen in the South African context:

Zadok was willing not only to support Solomon's religious policies, especially his building of the temple, but also to reformulate the Yahwistic faith in terms of Canaanite religious traditions in such a way, that it became clear to every Israelite believer that Yahweh himself was sanctioning the new political dispensation. Zadok was the man of the hour... (2012:5).

President Zuma constantly appeals to religious leaders to participate in the social cohesion and poverty eradication initiatives. Common in the current state of affairs is the promotion, elevation, and commendation of the president and some of his cabinet ministers by the leaders of African Initiated Churches, especially those of charismatic inclinations. Constantly one sees, reads, or hears of the visits of these ministers to some cultic canters where they are being prayed for, and affirmed in public. One hardly hears from these ecclesiastical formations, any prophetic voice rebuking the wayward conduct of politicians or religious leaders. This anomaly takes these politicians to as far as Nigeria, to receive the man of God's rubber stamps of their political steps. Like in many of African territories, this always happens before or around the times of elections. The African Initiated Churches had always suffered political abuse in the hands of politicians. This is probably due to their church leaders' theological ignorance or shallowness. Their indifference regarding political ramifications is exploited for political gains. President Zuma himself regularly visits these ecclesiastical formations where he always receives a hero's welcome. It is true indeed that "the churches and its groups as a rule appear only as part of a recital and are seldom subject to systematic analysis of or investigation" (Mathwig & Lienemann in Lienemann-Perrin & Cochrane 2013:35) not to mention participation in policy formulations.

In 2012, just prior to African National Congress Conference in Mangaung, when ecumenical prophetic voice's fade was felt, some Christian leaders convened and drafted a letter to the government to express their concerns regarding corruption. This formation is known as South African Christian Leaders Initiative (SACLI). It brought together mainstream Christian leaders, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and the African Initiated Churches leaders together. Their letter received some gravel reactions, especially from the ruling party, the African National Congress, through its General Secretary, Gwede Mantashe. In response "he labelled as "mischievous" and "vitriolic" the letter written by the clergy."⁵

Ichabod-the glory has departed from South African political landscape. Natural laws and natural justice are no more considered when laws of the land are formulated. Christianity provides for an ethics of responsibility intertwined with ethics of duty. Once the natural law is compromised, values suffer inevitably. "Natural law theories base ethical norms on the facts of nature" (Wurzburger 1994:11). In other words, morality, values, behaviour and ethics work symbiotically and synchronically to articulate and form a just society governed by just laws. This is because "natural law is both a scientifically based description of how things normally do behave and a set of precepts as to how they ought to behave" (Grenz 1997:46). Morality can be seen in the order or nature of things. The present generation grows in godless society, and the environment infested with sexual promiscuity and violence. What our government fails to see or realise is that "where promiscuity increases, families are destabilized and more and more children grow to adulthood in environments marked by emotional deprivations, stress, abuse, and violence" (Miller 1987:87).

The common enemy (colonialism and apartheid) had been defeated. All stakeholders, political and ecclesiastical, were singularly united against the apartheid regime. But now, comrades in arms are fighting each other, various forces position for power against one

⁵ <http://gatewaynews.co.za/mantashe-warns-clerics-to-back-off/> (11 November, 2015)

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another. Instead of nation-building, there are internal strifes and conflicts; and the Church is conspicuous by her silence. What can be said about the church in South Africa is succinctly put forward by Mike Boon (1998:74): "The team which was strongly united, suddenly falls apart because its vision disappears." Transformation in all spheres of life has commenced moving with a snail pace. The tradition of our liberation fighters had become stagnant. By tradition here I mean what de Gruchy refers to as "handing on from one generation to another something that gives meaning to life and shapes the identity of persons and communities today" (2011:12).

How Should the Glory Return?

First and foremost, the time has come for South African churches to reflect on the attributes and the character of God. I agree with Tshaka (2014:6) that "Theology has a significant role to play. Yet honest theology is one which does not dismiss the past but uses it wisely to learn from it with the objective to avoid similar mistakes made in the past." There is no doubt, as Tshaka and Kame (2015) mentions in another place that religion is a catalyst for moral and spiritual values for development. We are all theologically in agreement that the triune God is infinite and personal, transcendent and immanent, omniscient and good etc. If doctrine of God is skewed or unknown, flaws can be expected in all processes of life such as decision-making, problem-solving, and stipulating laws. God is not broken into some fragments of the universe. He is both transcendent and immanent. "Transcendence and immanence refer to the dual truths that, though God is present in creation, He is separate and distinct from it." (Parsely 2007:67). The message to be taken to the politicians is that "God is not merely a quality of nature or of humanity; he is not simply the highest human being. He is not limited to our ability to understand him. His holiness and goodness go far beyond, infinitely beyond ours, and this is true of his knowledge and power as well" (Erickson 1999:76). This God exists above and at the same time independent from creation. The whole universe, including nations and their governments exist in God and for God for the purpose of receiving glory, honour and praise from them. This is what transcendence means. On the same note, theologians need to educate politicians of God's immanence, which is "that God is present and active within his creation, and within the human race, even those members of it that do not believe in or obey him. His influence is everywhere" (Erickson 1999:76). As a society, cultural incorrectness emanates from the views or perceptions about God. The belief in the transcendent and immanent God aligns the decisions to be taken when deliberating on moral or ethical issues. When worldviews collide, nations hang in a balance. Our nation is at the stage where returning to God should be inevitable. Politicians should accept Brueggemann's (1984:97) assertion that "God is not an elective or a hypothesis, but a definitional and determinative partner who establishes norms and with whom we must deal." No alternatives, no substitutes. For this to happen, there should be a great emphasis on the need for discernment. I refer to the kind of discernment that involves making choices and determining the right approach "at the many seemingly unimportant crossroads of everyday practice" (Derkse 2008:453).

Politicians should be conscientized of theological transcendence; which is "an interdisciplinary conversation between theology and sciences" (Veldsman 2008:137). While politicians immerse themselves into socio-economic macrocosms of legislative rhetorics, they should examine the motives and critically reflect on the impact and outcomes envisaged by these legislations. This means they should attune themselves to theologians' transcendental advice. In other words, theologians appeal to both natural and social sciences to come to satisfactory conclusions that work positively towards human dignity and natural justice. On the other hand, the church's prophetic role should start by exploring "to undertake revision of our transcendent rhetoric, and to articulate the theological implications of these findings... to discern theologically the ways in which God's relation to the universe" (Veldsman 2008:137), is to be applied to political manoeuvres of governance. The silence

that makes church conspicuous in the political landscape of South Africa should come to cul-de-sac.

The second proposal is that the church should assert itself prophetically by revisiting its confessional statements. Near and dear to the hearts of God's people are also the confessions.

The confessions certainly do not serve the purpose of replacing the Bible; the confessions do not even stand on a par with the Bible. Rather, the confessions are the work of the Spirit to lead the church, usually in response to the presence of false doctrine, to explain clearly and succinctly the truth of God revealed in the Scriptures. The confessions hold the prominent place in the history of the church. They are concrete manifestations of the Spirit of Christ's work to 'guide the church into all truth' (John 16:13), and they have been used by God to lead many of His people into a clearer and fuller understanding of the truth (Decker 2011:3)

In this case, a reference is made to the Heidelberg Catechism. The debate around the Heidelberg Catechism, referring to the just and merciful God (Question & Answer 10) makes one to think of how the church and politics should work together towards the just society living by just laws. Here, we are confronted with a "God who is not caring, but a God of law and order" (Van de Beek 2014:116). This is an attribute that lacked during Eli's time, when the glory departed from the nation. It is not different from South Africa of today. There was indifference towards the truth that God does not permit transgressions of his law to go unpunished. Law and order guarantee citizens safety and security. It also enhances citizens' trust and hope in the state or government. The bottom line is that the prophetic voice in civil affairs must be audible and clear. Tension can be expected, as Bodo (in Lee & Marty 1964:159-60) asserts: "The tension between prophetic integrity and popular expectancy is always present, at least latently."

Finally, theology (dogma) and confession are *scaffolded* by proclamation (*kerugma*). The church cannot find itself cushioned in confessional *dogma* without proclamational utterances. Passivism is not ideal. Boesak (1984:74) correctly points out that "The church of Jesus Christ must have the courage and the obedience to join with God in the struggle throughout history for the sake of justice." The internal workings of Christ in believers lead them to verbal expression, not only of what they believe, but persuading others to believe. This is how hearts are changed. Nürnberger agrees with the church fathers and the reformers that the biblical traditions must be passed on for the purpose of changing lives.

The Word of God must be channelled from past history into ongoing history. Those who have received the Word of God are called upon to pass it on. This process passes through human hearts, human minds and human patterns of behaviour. It involves communities and institutions. It is a never-ending task which we call *biblical hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics retrieves the meaning of the Word of God from these ancient documents and interprets it in such a way that it speaks authoritatively and redemptively to our contemporaries in their own situations (Nürnberger 2004:7).

This calls for communication of God-desired values that we confess to the political leaders without any fear of repression or rejection. The example of Jesus is to be followed; as Nyathi (2004:120) points out that "Jesus was the perfect communicator. He challenged his (Jewish) culture where it was wrong and unjust." Boldness in proclaiming the ethical demands of God's justice is a non-negotiable *klēsis* – calling that cannot be reversed. The Church's relevance depends on it being prophetic in the history of humanity, offering hope to present generation. The prophetic role of the Church in South Africa is of vital importance since the majority of the population is bleeding inside due to negative systemic socio-economic

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experiences that had become part of their daily lives. The political voice is not audible enough to assure the citizens of their survival, safety, security, and livelihood. This offers the church an opportunity for proclamational incarnation in the hopeless situations. The voice of the church should surface and give hope to the hopeless and peace to the weary.

Proclamation, confession, and dogma cannot be practical without dialogue. Dialogue is practised through and within the atmosphere of discernment. Discernment calls the communities (church and politics) to the table. Discernment is always a result of interaction between the two parties or different individuals. It is indeed true that “discernment is also undertaken when groups and societies have to reflect on the divine will in times of transition and change” (De Villiers 2013:133). *Kerygma* is the church’s *modus operandi* and *raison d’être* (method and purpose) of prophetic assertion in the secular society and age. In *sancta simplicitas*, the church is called upon to break its silence by *reculer pour mieux sauter* – in simplicity the church is to draw back to take a better leap. It should withdraw to examine its theological mandate in order to advance its prophetic role. This is done through kerygmatic initiatives such as dialogue, discernment, and rebuke where necessary.

The fact is South Africa is at the stage where the public spaces have been supposedly been emptied of God. The reference to ultimate or transcendent reality is far-fetched. The church’s mission of healing the world is hampered by political chasms created by unethical and unjust legislations. When justice is thrown out of civic affairs, “topics such as philanthropy, humanitarian solidarity, fighting for justice, reconciliation, heroism, and a fixation with trying to capture ethical life in codes all come under review” (Lincoln 2011:70).

Conclusion

Boesak’s (2007:69) cry is a reality: “We thought we were free, we thought exile was over.” The church is silent and the culture had become decadent. The South African government is marred with corruption due to the lack of faith-conscientized legislations. Boesak continues to caution the fact that:

The gap between the new black elite and the poor black masses is as wide as any gap that ever existed, only more pain-filled. And in the impoverished rural areas and the teeming squatter camps, where the pain was always greatest, they still hear that they must ‘tighten their belts’ while parliamentarians voted in by the loyalty and hopes of the poor, vote themselves two salary increases in one year (2004:69)

The arrival of freedom and democracy in 1994 interpreted the new era as utopia – the arrival into the Promised Land. The rigorous prophetic voice of the church ceased. All the democratically elected presidents acknowledged the role of the church in national transformation, but the church coiled into the cocoon. The ecumenical formations such as SACC, SACBC, TEASA, Institute of Contextual Theology (ICT) and many others disappeared from the public domain. The glory departed from South Africa. The gap opened up to engross secularism, humanism, and egoism. When the prophetic voice diminishes, chaos in socio-political terrain escalates to systemic level. Most of the time, this is at the expense of the poor and the previously marginalised masses. Development processes and projects are diverted to enrich the aristocrats and political elites.

The redemptive steps suggested to address the situation is that both the government and the church should re-think their theological understanding of the ultimate reality. The state and the church should embrace the transcendental politics without any reservation. This reality is belief in the transcendent and immanent God. Further, the church should situate or re-align itself with and within its confessional utterances, especially in reference to Heidelberg Confession’s referral to the just laws that should govern the society. Finally, the

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church must enhance its stance on ethical issues through its *kerygmatic* activities. Proclamation of the truth and dialogue should be the method used to foster natural and social justice in the civic matters. This is summarised by Peter Storey (In Bentley & Foster 2012:3-4) that scripturally, rulers are accountable, service, rather than self-aggrandisement, is required of rulers, God requires integrity in rulers, righteousness is what exalts a nation, economic justice should be paramount; and that God requires reconciliation and respect between those who are different, rather than enmity and division.

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