

A call to faith leaders to keep the ecological sustainability conversation alive: Understanding the message of a peaceful co-existence on earth

His Grace the Right Reverend Bishop Dr. B.E. Lekganyane shared a public lecture entitled “Ecological sustainability as a topic of redemption within the theology of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC)” on 29 October 2019. This lecture was given at the “International Conference on Churches in Southern Africa as civil society actors for ecological sustainability” that was hosted by the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria in collaboration with Humboldt University, Berlin.

His Grace Reverend Bishop Dr. B.E. Lekganyane opened his speech with a customary ZCC greeting: “*Kgotsong!*” (Sepedi translated to English: “*peace be unto you!*”). The subject of religion and sustainable development is close to his heart. Ecological sustainability is the foundation of life and therefore a sustainable development is guaranteed only when ecological sustainability is guaranteed. The bible first teaches us that God created the heavens and the earth, land, water and the air we breathe as well as all the plants and animals on earth and in the sea. It is only after all these that human beings were created. Nature is essentially God’s first gift to people. Even though we are spiritually a creation of the almighty, our lives can never be sustained outside nature. It is long overdue for churches to start emphasizing the sacred relationship between people and nature. For example, he offered a sermon on sustainability on their new year celebration on 1st September 2019 themed: creating a legacy and this reminded the congregation that creation is a legacy of God.

While it might not be apparent to an outsider, the theory of ZCC emanates from an outlook that has a respectful attitude towards nature. African faith leaders are in a very privileged position. The Eurocentric foundation of identity is based on the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (Latin translated to English: “*I think; therefore, I am*”). However, the foundation of identity in Southern Africa is based on “*botho*” (Sepedi translated into English: humanness/benevolence). This concept is often difficult to translate and interpret. The Nguni version “Ubuntu” seems to be common. The word has two aspects: *Ubu-* (Nguni prefix meaning *to be without a definite form*) and *-ntu* (Nguni suffix denoting *a form that is being translated into our existence*). As stated by African philosophers, *Ubuntu* is a form of humanness that obliges one to be humane, respectable and polite towards others. The obligation to be humane towards others is an ethical imperative on a principle that ought to promote life and avoid killing. What is critical then is to improve oneself to be an embodiment of Ubuntu because it is a fundamental ethical judgement of human conduct. Therefore, when you kill and destroy God’s creation, you run short of something essential to your being. While you may continue to exist, you will not earn the worth of being *-ntu* and therefore you lack a humane form of your existence.

The obligation to be humane to others is not limited to those limited to you in space and time and that means that a sense of identity is not based on only those who are human beings, here and now. To be human, and humane in the context of Ubuntu stretches as far as in space as there is distance and as far as time as there is existence. Further, in order for existence to form completely, it requires community. The “being” becomes out of relations; hence it is said: “*Motho ke motho ka batho!*” (Sepedi translated to English: “*I am because we are*”).

Community includes those that exist, where they exist and how they exist and it is embedded in the natural environment that allows communities to form in the first place. Thus, it is an obligation to be humane to all those who have ever been and those who will ever become here and everywhere. Relationships are the foundation of our identity and they are perpetual. When we accept this outlook, we begin to realise that causing harm to the ecology causes harm to self and everyone else. This is destructive since it takes away our *-ntu*, which is the humane aspect of being. With that aspect taken away, what you can be as a person is taken away. This also means that you are taking away what others have been and what others can ever become. When preaching the message of peace, the peace we pray for is that which included the whole of the community, including those that exist and those to come. This include the human, animal, plant population that together form one whole community.

His Grace quoted 1st Corinthians 4:2 – now it is required those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. The use of natural resources has been limited to meet the need of future generations to come. We need to recognize that needs are dynamic and these include needs of generations of communities beyond humanity. He reflected on historical and rural origins of the ZCC. There were challenges in preaching the message of peace in the early days of the church. While the same church sought to convert people to Christianity, people were experiencing continued mass destruction of their livelihoods. More rural black communities were being deprived of the land upon which their living was exclusively reliant and this remains prevalent in our communities even today! Since the community included the natural environment, their sense of self definitely offended by dispossession of such aspects of their being. That was undoubtedly a removal of a big portion of their *ubu-*. He believes that a breakdown in the relationship between people and the natural environment and destruction of that community with nature affected the relationship that people had with nature.

On the other hand, economies of the world develop on the basis of the exploitation of natural environment. That by itself is not totally dismissed but it becomes problematic when such exploitation knows no limits. It is ironic when people pride themselves as being able to learn more than any creation on earth but it is apparent that not enough was done in mitigating the detriment of environmental exploitation when we became aware of the effects thereof. To exploit without limit destroys the environment, and this in turn destroys the ability of all to become, in the full Ubuntu sense. He mentioned that there was an intricate link between politics, development and religion in the genesis of South Africa's development journey and the spread of the gospel was tainted by that link. The effect was that instead of countering prevailing and unfair policy outlooks and practices, religion joined in perpetrating unfairness. This is an example of a reminder that religion should be above politics.

Peace cannot exist if there is not peaceful co-existence between people as well as between people and nature. Peace include achieving social and environmental justice. A prayer for peace is mindful that human conflict is borne out of contestation of natural resources. Therefore, the message for peace include a sustainable use and sharing of natural resources. Hebrews 13:16 teaches that doing good includes sharing with each other and it is sharing that pleases God. Our message of peace is linked with the broad values of Ubuntu and this includes fair and equitable sharing within members of the community. Numbers 35:33-34

teaches that we must not destroy the land that we live in, but humans have the largest impact on the environment. We have polluted the depth of the oceans with micro-plastic, we are melting mountain glaciers as a result of increased heat trapped into the atmosphere. Jeremiah 2:7: *“I’ve brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable”*. We have a problem! Human activity especially related to industrialization and increasing consumption of culture are causing serious damage to the balance of life on a scale greater than any other record in history. The poor are the most drastically affected by climate change impacts. Droughts and floods are recently experienced and we have fewer indigenous species we can count. For example, when African white lions can no longer be spotted, it is not a sign of nature’s vulnerability but a sign of human destruction and unsurpassed greed. It is almost as if it is an answer to the question in Ezekiel 34:18 *“Is it not enough to feed on the good pasture? Must you also temple the rest of the pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?”* The time for action has come and no one can sit behind watching. We should all take a stance!

In conclusion, he emphasized that it is time to encourage our governments to make and implement policies that encourage ecological sustainability. We can no longer rely on fossil fuels for our energy. It is even sad that in African countries where there is plenty of sun and wind, our energy reliance is still on the burning of fossil fuels. Business need to be actively invest in technologies that are not detrimental to our ecology. The conservation of nature need to take place in all aspects of your lives. Communities need to be encouraged to be involved in all manners that they can. His Grace is making a call to all church leaders to keep the conversation alive. *“Let us preach to our congregations and remind them about the sacred nature of ecology. Climate change has rendered the land infertile and it does not have to remain like this. But we can be redeemed”*. Our redemption depends on our ability to show that we can take care of what God has entrusted upon us. In Leviticus 26:3-4, we are ensured that the Lord shall return us to a peaceful co-existence. God said, if you walk in my statutes, and observe my commandments, and do them, then I will give you rains in season and the land shall yield its increase and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. The new year celebrations of the ZCC are marked by the rainy seasons and they that reveals the majesty of the Lord. Through the seasons, God talks to humans and his creation. When we alter seasons through the detrimental impacts on the environment, we are dismissing the messages of the almighty. Let us remember the basic principles of Ubuntu and the need to be respectful to others and nature. I thank you!