

# IN PURSUIT OF HOLINESS: Church and Nation Today<sup>1</sup>

by

N Barney Pityana GCOB<sup>2</sup>

## DRAFT ONLY

Looking back on my life, I am proud to acknowledge the contribution of the Methodist Church to my personal development and formation. I owe as much to Methodism as I do to my family's deep Anglican roots. I recall how as a boy growing up in New Brighton I became a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> New Brighton Scout Troup at the Arthur Wellington Methodist Church. On the first Sunday of the month we would do parade and attend church very proud in our uniforms, badges, drums and bugles. The Revd JC Mvusi was had a presence that overawed to us as young boys. We always turned out at our best at Parade month by month.

Later I also recall that I went to Lovedale. As boys in the Boys School we loved the preaching of Revd Stanley Pitts from Healdtown, and later Revd EO Mthembu. I have a distinct memory of Revd Seth Mokitimi preaching a memorable sermon at the Lovedale Church that I sometime use even today. At Fort Hare, how can I forget that I was a resident at Wesley House. Even though by that time the residences were not denominational, we were infused with Methodism that was unavoidable. While at Fort Hare, I cherish even today the love and respect developed with the Revd Dr Simon Gqubule who remains a figure of considerable influence on my life.

It was while I was at Fort Hare with Desmond Tutu and Simon Gqubule as our Chaplains that we began to get involved in the University Christian Movement. It was in the UCM that I became exposed to some of the most radical and militant theologians that I respect even today. They were Methodist ministers from Rhodes University: Basil Moore, Jim Polley, and James Moulder. With them we grew Black Theology in South Africa and out of the belly of the UCM Black Consciousness was born. Recently I was very proud that Rhodes University deemed it fit to honour Basil with an honorary degree. He now lives in retirement in Australia having been ostracised by both the Methodist Church (who have not apologized), by the university which has now issued an

---

<sup>1</sup> Address at Methodist Women's Manyano 5<sup>th</sup> Tri-annual Convention, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, 30 April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> LLM PhD DD FKC MASSAf; Rector of the College of the Transfiguration Grahamstown.

appropriate apology, and the apartheid state which is no more. Indeed, one recalls participating as a Christian student leader in many training sessions in the NYLDT based in Durban.

For many years my wife and I were banned by the apartheid state confined to the Port Elizabeth Magisterial District. Throughout that time the Revd Theo Kotze of the Christian Institute became a counselor and confidant. At some cost to him he regularly visited us. It was during that time that I got to know Revd George Irvine and understand the ministry of those who stand alongside the oppressed. In exile in Europe, Theo and Helen Kotze became like parents to us, especially when we lived in Birmingham.

Perhaps my most transformative experience was to serve a curacy in the Woughton Ecumenical Parish, Buckinghamshire for three years. I loved to listen to Gordon Simmonds, the Superintendent, preach - with his booming voice and carefully considered diction. I grew took my fair share in the Preaching Plan taking services in Methodist chapels across North Buckinghamshire every week. I was also privileged to teach the rudiments of theology to lay preachers in the Circuit. Many of them have remained friends up to this day.

My fellow pilgrims on my journey have been Methodists as well. Charles Villa Vicencio struggles with matters of faith, and examines his conscience, but definitely finds the institutional church oppressive and in need of reform. Perforce therefore he finds himself on the margins of the church, but I believe that he will always and must serve as the conscience of the church. Among these pilgrims have been Cedric Mason and Itumeleng Mosala, also comrades in the faith sharing much of our passion for reasoned activism. One cannot leave out of that Roll of Honour the likes of Qambela and Gwebelentlanzi, comrades nurtured in Methodist activism who, like us, bore the brunt of a brutal apartheid policy system.

This brief biographical sketch is designed to help you understand where I come from. More importantly it situates me in the place where John Wesley was as an Anglican in Methodism. This also gives me the freedom to speak frankly to this to which I owe so much, as it were, a conversation within the household of faith.

## II

I like to think of the Methodist Church as born out of the movement of the common folk in England who wished to break free of the stultifying constraints of the Established Church, with its conformism to norms and class strictures, to let the spirit free to worship God in an unrestrained manner. Methodism ushered

in the era of popular religion. In other words it has been stated that John and Charles Wesley set about restoring the faith of Georgian Britain. Ronald Blythe tells us that the approach to hymnody by the Wesleys meant for common folk who could catch a “rich mixture of contemplative and social Christianity so exultantly set to music that it made them both prayerful and activist.”<sup>3</sup>

Through hymns and notes in his journal, John Wesley decried the social condition of many of the poor, but his music was a prophetic commentary from faith on a society that had become unconcerned about the plight of the poor. He also called the poor to repentance. It is therefore not without interest that the new Duke and Duchess of Cambridge at their wedding yesterday chose “Love Divine” as one of Charles Wesley’s famous hymns:

Jesus, thou art all compassion,  
 Pure unbounded love thou art;  
 Visit us with thy salvation,  
 Enter every trembling heart.

Come almighty to deliver,  
 Let us all thy grace receive;  
 Suddenly return, and never,  
 Never more thy temples leave.

The hymn ends with a glorious flourish:

Changed from glory into glory,  
 Till in heaven we take our place,  
 Till we cast our crowns before thee,  
 Lost in wonder, love and praise.

You see, John and Charles Wesley were liberation theologians long before Liberation Theology was born! “God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears;/God shall lift up thy head” he says in another hymn “Put thou thy trust in God...”, language straight out of the Liberation Theology vocabulary!

In other words Wesley was engrossed by the thought of sin. It was not just the sin of the world, but the sin that had become part of the fabric of the church. No wonder then that the Covenant Liturgy on 1 January has become such a distinctive feature of Methodism. I fail to understand how a minister who does that Liturgy year by year would remain unaffected deeply in their personal conduct and in their relationship with God.

---

<sup>3</sup> DIVINE LANDSCAPES; 1986: Viking; p238

Wesley was part of the Pietist Movement without, I declare, becoming a Puritan. Unlike so many others of his contemporaries for whom pietism was an internal personal matter, Wesley sought to embrace a holistic spirituality. Note, for example that in another of Charles Wesley's famous hymns, "Christ, whose glory fills the skies..." the last verse says

Visit then this soul of mine,  
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief;  
Fill me, radiance divine,  
Scatter my unbelief;  
More and more thyself display  
Shining to the perfect day.

In "Still nigh me, O my Saviour stand..." the writer is conscious of his inadequacy and his need of God

Still lead me lest I go astray;  
Direct my work, inspire my thought;  
And if I fail, soon may I hear  
Thy voice, and know that Love is near.

For Wesley grace was ever present to cleanse one of one's sinful nature, to "make and keep me pure within..." In other words sin was never the final condition of human nature but one from which human nature can be transformed.

It seems to me that one could not be singing the Wesleyan hymns Sunday by Sunday and not be moved throughout one's work-a-week and daily to contemplate the majesty of God, the woeful inadequacy of human capacity, the call to penitence, the assurance of Love and forgiveness. In other words the pursuit of holiness could never be a once-off event but a constant wrestling with our nature as we seek godliness. It was ultimately that godly nature that provided the tools to seek correction of the social ills that oppressed human kind.

### III

The idea of holiness was presaged in the gospels and elaborated in the Pauline Epistles. Both Mark and Matthew record the story of the Little Apocalypse as the signs of the end of the age (Mk 13 and Matthew 24). One of the signs of the coming end is that many will turn away from the faith, betray and hate each other and "Because of the increase in wickedness the love of most will grow cold..." (Matt 24:12). And yet Jesus takes as the greatest standard of faithfulness the commandment to love God and neighbor. Luke has a lovely vignette:

Your eye is the light of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it is dark, it will

be completely lighted, as when the light of the lamp shines on you (Luke 11:33-36).

Somehow the concept of the body as the temple of Christ but also the seat of human wickedness is prevalent throughout the bible. It is particularly instructive to note how St Paul has developed these themes. God gives us the capacity to examine ourselves, and the will to seek to order our lives according to God's holy purposes.

Paul insists that the body was not meant to be an instrument of wickedness, but he preaches that the faithful must "offer parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13). He warns that sin must never be a master but must be overcome because "we died to sin." It must be understood that Paul's dwells very much on sexual immorality precisely because there were schools of thought and practice at this time especially among the gnostic religions that held the view that the body was to be despised as insignificant but could be despised in favour of the spirit. As such bodily mutilation and sexual perversions were acts of faith. Paul sought to counter such prevailing attitudes as perversions of the faith of Christ. "Do not associate with sexually immoral people... not with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral, or greedy, an idolator, a slanderer, a drunkard, or a swindler..." (1 Cor 5:9). "Hand such a man over to Satan", he orders. To the faithful, he says in Ephesians: Be very careful how you live (Eph 5:15) and "But *among you* there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity, or of greed, for these are improper for God's holy people" (Eph 5:3).

There is a standard among the faithful that must be higher than that which obtains in the society round about. In a real sense Christian behavior and conduct was meant to be the opposite of that which obtains in secular society. Jesus himself sets a higher standard for his disciples: "If your brother sins rebuke him; if he repents, forgive..." And they cried out "Lord increase our faith..." (Luke 17:5). To the disciples Jesus charges that their conduct of trust must be such that the houseowner must find them ready when he returns and receive a true account. They are held to a higher standard of conduct. For those among the Christian community who are called to special orders of ministry and even higher standard of probity is demanded.

In Corinthians Paul confesses "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God " (2 Cor 2:17). "We have wronged no one; we have corrupted no one; we have exploited no one" (2 Cor 7:1).

Paul does not just insist on a higher standard, he also believes that the faithful are also called to holiness of life, and he offers his own life practice as an

example, “You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed” (1 Thessalonians 2:10). God, he asserts, did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life (1 Thess 4:7). For those who are called by God, an even higher standard and to a life of holiness are invoked. “From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth (2 Thess 1:14). Sanctity of life is the definitive mark of a Christian soul. God chose us “to be holy and blameless in his sight” for “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...” (Ephesians 2:10). He goes on to caution that we must “never weary of doing good” (Galatians 6:9). There is only one purpose in God’s calling. It is to do God’s purpose (Romans 8:28).

Those whom God has called should be regarded as “servants of Christ” who have been entrusted with “the secret things of God” (1 Cor 4:1). We also learn from Romans that “those whom he predestined he also called, those he called he also justified, those he justified, he has also glorified” (8:30). Therefore those who have the privilege of divine calling must “with unveiled faces reflect the Lord’s glory, (are) being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory” (2 Cor 3:18).

The Christian imperative to holiness is, I argue, more than mere ethics or morality although it is. It is about holiness of life that is an engagement with all life, and becomes an imaging of God. That is the reason that an even higher standard of morality is expected of those who present themselves as those called by God to serve and to minister.

#### IV

Holiness is one of the marks of the Church as the Nicene Creed sets out. We say that we believe in “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church...” Of course, it is not ‘one’ as discrete from the others that define the church but all four states held and functioning together characterize the church. In the Apostles Creed we also say that we believe in the communion of saints. Jurgen Moltman says that this may have two meanings: fellowship shared together in sacred things, and, the meaning I wish to refer to, “a fellowship of sanctified people, called and justified by God The *congregation sanctorum* thus becomes a communion “in mutual concern for one another and mutual self-giving”<sup>4</sup>.

There are three means of grace by which the church expresses fully its nature: *kerygma*, the proclamation of God’s holy word as good news; *koinonia*, the

---

<sup>4</sup> THE CHURCH IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT; Fortress Press, 314

fellowship of the faithful who gather together to hear the word proclaimed, and the sacraments celebrated, and enhance each other's faith and hope and love; and *diakonia* meaning the service of love and charity. The church is not simply church because it has always been there, and continues to gather and share the sacraments. It is not church, Moltman reminds us, by sheer unbroken succession from the time of the first apostles. The church becomes church by faithfulness in life and practice to those first principles first enunciated by Christ, and which have become part of our missionary charge, and heritage.

Our faithfulness to Christ becomes our badge of honour precisely because we believe that Christ has been faithful to his church. Somehow it is not about our goodness but in spite of our sinfulness. The church transcends our individual failings and wretchedness. "The believed and acknowledged continuity of God's faithfulness is itself the grace from which the messianic community lives and for which it hopes" (Moltman: 313).

Elsewhere, Moltman says that the church as a fellowship of faith "is a sign, instrument and breaking-in of Christ's lordship..." and as such "it will direct its life and actions towards these things.." It strikes me in the light of that that it is not possible to have anything called church that is sinful or evil or immoral because once such signs become evident and become a feature of the life of such a community it ceases to deserve to be called a church. Likewise ministers of the church, the moment they lose they taste for holiness, they cease to be ministers called by God to fulfill God's holy purpose. Therefore, says Moltman, "All rule in the church is only legitimated by its correspondence to the rule of Christ..." (293). Those who have been called are commissioned in the name of Christ from among the congregation of the faithful for special sanctified tasks: "They come from God's people, stand up in front of God's people, and act in God's name" (303). What they speak comes from the heart of God in whose name they speak and act, and their holiness is the mind of Christ, as the hymn puts it, the mind of Christ should abide with us, "live with us from day to day/ by his love and power controlling/all I do or say." The faithful want to hear Christ's voice, celebrate his fellowship and have the assurance of his commission.

Thomas Merton says that we are "spiritual men when we live as men seeking God."<sup>5</sup> The call to holiness, of course, is not about mere perfection, but both about the recognition of our inadequacy and also seeking to walk in step with God. Spirituality at its best induces a spirit and knowledge that one is not complete, but "needs to be completed, enriched and broadened."<sup>6</sup> Holiness

---

<sup>5</sup> THOUGHTS IN SOLITUDE; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 47

<sup>6</sup> Philip Sheldrake: IMAGES OF HOLINESS: Explorations of Contemporary Spirituality; London: DLT13

therefore is not complete or a state of perfection, but a process, a continual movement towards God. It is a searching for God, waiting and sharing. The call to holiness is also a call to conversion, towards a perfection of life. Sheldrake puts it well:

... growing closer to God involves a deepening awareness of the fact that we are far from perfect and far from sinless balanced, of course, with increasing trust and hope based on the realization that we are not called and loved by God as a result of our efforts to make ourselves worthy.... holiness is, in the experience of many, connected to failure and the acceptance of failure.<sup>7</sup>

I have stated elsewhere that the church can never be absolutely holy but that the church is holy to the extent that it is conscious of its need for repentance and conversion – *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Ultimately the cleansing of the church and its restoration as a “house of prayer for all nations” may await those who have turned the church into a “den of robbers” (Mark 11: 17).

## V

It must therefore be universally accepted that those whom God has called, the church has commissioned to diaconal service, are sanctified for service, and are as such called to a higher conduct in holiness.<sup>8</sup> In other words they are the ones to whom have been entrusted “the holy things” of God. They reflect the Lord’s glory with unveiled faces, and must have renounced the secret and shameful ways, as Paul puts it. The injunction of Paul applies to them: “Be very careful then how you live...” (Ephesians 5:15). Judgment and forgiveness are in their hands. Those whom God has called must prove to be faithful. They must not rush to judgment, or hasty condemnation: “Wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts” (1 Cor 4:15).

The general human well-being, says JL Mackie, or the flourishing of human life, is the foundation of morality.<sup>9</sup> Faithfulness is about the maintenance of trust. In a moral world it becomes important that the relationships of trust are never breached without moral examination. There are limits to human freedom. Those are determined by a consideration of what is good and necessary for human well-being, and human well-being is according to God’s will. That is the reason

---

<sup>7</sup> as above, 29

<sup>8</sup> For an elaboration of this circle of compassion between inner spirituality and social action see Gail Straub: *THE RHYTHM OF COMPASSION: Caring for Self, Connecting with Society*, 2008: High Point.

<sup>9</sup> *ETHICS: Inventing Right and Wrong*; 1977: Penguin Books; 193

that Paul's statement about living truthfully (2 Thess 1:3), about being careful *how* you live and about living *faithful* lives are all moral principles.

It cannot be tolerable, therefore for those commissioned to minister in the church of God that they should knowingly live disgraceful lives as can be argued within sections of ministry in the church: the apparent prevalence of infidelity in marriage, serial adulteries and multiple partners, sexual exploitation of women, deceitful collusion within and among those in authority, protectionism of the kind that has brought the Catholic Church to disgrace, are all not unfounded within our churches, not least in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. It would seem that the more immoral ministers are, the more likely they are of being elected to higher office. Women ministers in the Methodist Church are never safe from the clutches of older men in authority who demand to exploit them sexually, who subject them to sexual harassment and exploitation that may well be a feature of living in the environment of the church. Women at events like these ought to confront this matter, expose it and make the church safe for generations of women to worship and serve God without any fear of exploitation, or sexual harassment, or being taken advantage of within a milieu of unequal power relations. Organised women's organizations like this one must signal and end to this prevailing conspiracy of silence, and expose immorality in our midst.

There are three problems about this. First it suggests that the church has wrongly commissioned those who are not worthy of the calling or who violate their calling. To the extent that they persist in their evil doings they violate the ministry of the church. Secondly, to do so with impunity means that the whole church is enveloped in the sinfulness of one and no longer deserves to become the church. It has become a 'thing' or an instrument of convenience for the gratification of the desires of some. Thirdly, in truth, anyone who is not faithful to their marriage vows will not consider himself bound by all the other vows to which he has committed himself, including the vows they took when they were baptized, confirmed and ordained.

Further than that it also means that other forms of sinfulness, like corruption, abuse of all forms of trust will become fair game. Actually, it may begin by being cheating on one's wife, but it continues in cheating on church funds, and time and the work of God. Any life infused with unfaithfulness may have a beginning but it has no end, and may become uncontrollable like a psychotic condition. By all accounts those who do this have no sense of shame, are devoid of a spirit of penitence, but are capable of drawing the church with them to the pit.

Finally, in such a situation a minister ceases to have authority over those who have been entrusted to him. No one should trust such a minister with the superintendence of one's children, especially, girl children; there can be no

sincerity in preaching in a life that is lived a lie because one ostensibly does not practice what one believes and teaches others. It becomes unsurprising that so many congregations are riven by conflict. People who are supposed to be called to faithfulness have come to believe that the church is a theatre for struggle, for power games, for political manipulation, and insistence on control by the clique, however powerful it might be. Conflict of the kind that has become so common and endemic in many of our churches is a sign of unholiness.

Whenever the church is riven by corruption and sin, it is surely ripe for reform. The reformation movement was a reaction to a church that had failed to live up to its calling. In every generation the church must open itself to reform – from within and from without.

My last point is perhaps the most important. Where the church is infused with unfaithfulness and sinfulness, it is no longer capable of proclaiming the gospel with any credibility. It no longer understands or subscribes to the truth. It is inclined to make compromises where integrity demands that the church be set apart. It purports to make deals, or looks the other way. The church is no longer a credible instrument for prophetic proclamation, or for correcting wrongdoing, or directing and guiding society towards the values of goodness. Instead the church becomes like the rest: “In those days Israel did not have a king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 21: 25). The church can no longer serve as the moral barometer for society, or an arbiter of society’s wrongs, and all may do whatever their interests dictate. Instead of becoming the sign and symbol of the society we wish our country to become, of social cohesion, of moral, holy and peaceable living, we are riven by conflict and corruption. There is a prevalence of sexual immorality, and there is no sanctuary within its walls and without, especially for the weak and vulnerable – women and girl children.

Our society is in desperate need of moral voices and moral leadership. In our world women and children are never safe in their homes, at work, at school and in church. There are predators entrusted with the care who, instead, become hyenas exploiting those who have been entrusted to them, be they teachers, parents, relatives and ministers of religion. Our society is in desperate need of the simple quality of gentleness rather than aggression and gratuitous violence. That explains that police who are supposed to protect citizens are able to kill innocent people, precisely because they do not expect any adverse consequences for their criminal actions. We live in an age where I for one can never believe much of what the President as Head of State promises, whether it is jobs, or a promise to combat crime and corruption, or to improve service delivery. From what I can see there are many people out there who vote for the governing party regularly who have lost trust in their government. One does not hear much from the church about rampant corruption, about the fact that the poor cannot access

health care, or housing or education; our children are deprived of growth and development at schools, and many go to bed hungry in the midst of plenty. In other words demonstrably the values of our society are inverted rather than responsive to the needs of the most needy, or about the moral decay that characterizes South African society.

And yet in all of that, the voice of the church is silent. The exception may be when we observe palace priests singing praises of the status quo in our political establishment, deflecting all criticism in pseudo-theology and yet remain within our communion. How is it that we do not distance the church from the activities of some who claim to speak in our name by reason of the fact that they hold the commission of the church as ministers? More pertinently, where is the voice of Christ in our world today. Instead, the church spends much time becoming like the society that is ripe for revolution: a revolution of hearts and minds, a rediscovery of the soul of our nation. None of that would be possible without the church becoming faithful to it's calling: towards a holy, righteous and sober life, as the Anglican Liturgy puts it. It may be instructive to ask the question for ourselves today: What hymns would John and Charles Wesley be writing for the church today?

5<sup>th</sup> Tri-annual Connexional Women's Manyano Convention  
The Methodist Church of Southern Africa  
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University  
Port Elizabeth  
30 April 2011.