

The Rev. Z.R. Mahabane: The Priest, the Prophet, the Leader, the Politician, the Intellectual and the Devout African Servant of God. Delivered by Itumeleng Mosala

1. Introduction

Chairperson, members of the Executive, distinguished guests, members of the Black Methodist Consultation; I greet you in the powerful name of him who laid his life down for justice, truth, peace, freedom and, liberation. I feel infinitely honoured and greatly humbled by the privilege you have afforded me to address you on the contribution of a stalwart of the character and greatness of the late Reverend Zaccheus Richard Mahabane.

I am especially honoured because I imagine that I must be one of the few clergy and laity of my generation who had the rare privilege of meeting Z.R. in the last days of his life. Before he was called to glory, I had the pleasure to see and meet him. I was then a young 20 yearold candidate for themethodist ministry. He was in his late 80s and nearing his 90s. Even at that mature age, physically frail as he was he still caused the white settler colonial apartheid regime to tremble in its boots whenever there was a political sneeze by black people who had grown impatient with white people and their repressive regime. Whenever there was a modicum of trouble anywhere by anybody in the country, the police and intelligence forces would rush to arrest Z.R. and detain him until things seemed to settle down.

In short, as the title of his speeches that span the period 1920 to 1963 aptly puts it, the Reverend Z.R. Mahabane fought "The Good Fight". Again I was lucky to stumble upon his selected speeches in the study of Rev. Seth MolefiMokitimi when I was serving as a young

probationer in Bloemfontein shortly after Seth the Brown Bomber Mokitime died. Z.R. had died in 1971 only a year prior to Mokitimi.

2. Z.R. Mahabane: The Priest

Z.R. was an unmistakable member of the clergy. He was a devoted Methodist whose spiritual roots went back to that home of Methodism in the Free State, ThabaNchu. He served as a priest of the Methodist church for 63 years inclusive of his ministerial training. What a priest!

There was significantly more to his priesthood, though, than the formal relationship with the Methodist of church of Southern Africa. He was above all, a priest in the way in which he lived his life and the things that he dedicated his life to. As a student of the Bible, I cannot help associating Z.R. Mahabane's priesthood with the programme and commitment that Jesus had in mind in John 10:11-16. Let me remind you what it says:

"I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep. When the hired man, who is not a shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees a wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away; so the wolf snatches the sheep and scatters them. The hired man runs away because he is only a hired man and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd. As the father knows me I know the father, in the same way I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them. There are other sheep which belong to me that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them too; they will listen to my voice and they will become one flock with one shepherd"

For Z.R. Mahabane, comrades and friends, this passage of scripture was not a religious text. On the contrary, it was a thoroughly political text. It defined the

extent, the nature and the depth of his priesthood. There was no confusion for him. He did not have to determine the relevance or application of this text to the social and political situation in which he acted out his ministry. The political, community, and social engagements of Z.R. Mahabane were spelled out clearly in this text. Priesthood and ministry held implications of death or martyrdom for him. He never protested that he was only being religious and, therefore, the authorities did not have a case against him. He understood that if he lived out his priesthood as he should he would curry no favour with the political authorities of the day. He expected it and willed it. He was fearless and willing to die. And so the authorities did have a case against him. He was a priest of a different kind, more like the shepherd that Jesus describes. Theologically, he was an unpriestly priest.

Let me explain what I mean by an unpriestly priest. In terms of the biblical history of priesthood, priests are centred on and in the Temple, specifically the ancient Urban temple environment. As Robert Coote observed poignantly:

“ Thecenters for writing in the ancient world were the great urban centers with their palaces and temples. Together the palace and temple represented the state, which organized the power of the dominant families in the class of wealthy landowners. The scribal class and the priestly class who conducted the services of the temples were usually closely related to each other.”¹

Z.R. was a revolutionary priest, radically different from the priestly classes of the biblical period. He organized in society and in communities away from the temples and palaces of his time. Despite his incisive mind, his articulate style, his

¹. *In the Beginning: Creation and the Priestly Story*, Fortress Press, (1991), p. 5f.

unparalleled experience in the work of the church we hear of no evidence of his talents being officially recognised in the church that ordained him. In contrast he provided sterling leadership in black society and communities where he vehemently challenged the oppression, exploitation and repression of the majority people on a racial basis by a minority. He deplored the kind of Christianity that led white people to install themselves as god over black people. Unfortunately, he was not a black theologian, and so he defended Christianity instead of attacking it. Nevertheless, he fought the good fight as a priest of the Christian religion and the Methodist church. In a speech he delivered on May 18th 1922 at the annual convention of the Cape Province Native Congress in Queenstown, he declared:

“ The question that must agitate the mind of every Black man and woman is that of the SALVATION, spiritual and political, of the Bantu race. I am convinced that upon the spiritual salvation of my race of people depends its political salvation. The Bantu people must realize this supreme fact. No God, no hope, no life, no salvation.”²

3. Z.R. Mahabane: The Prophet

For those of us who are Black Theologians, in contrast to our colleagues who are Contextual Theologians and African Theologians, prophetic theology never really settled comfortably in our epistemological framework. We align better with the Karl Marx's critique of the revolutions of 1848 to 1851 in France. In one respect he writes about them:

²“ The Evil Nature of the Colour Bar”, Presidential Address, *The Good Fight*, Program of African Studies, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, pp. 29-30.

“The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase”.³

The reality of prophetic theology is very close if not identical to the description of the social revolutions that Marx writes about in the above quotation. In the book of Amos in the Old Testament, the now refreshing and now dull and debilitating complexity of prophetic discourse and praxis come to a head. Robert Coote exposes three stages of composition of the book of Amos that appear intertwined in the finished product: The A stage of composition; the B stage of Composition; and the C stage of composition. An ordinary reader of the Bible is not always able to distinguish these complexes in the text. The A stage parts of the prophetic voice condemns and announces disaster, the B stage voice admonishes and offers a choice, and the C stage voice promises a restitution.⁴

Z.R. Mahabane’s history of struggle and the prophetic role he played in the social and political of South Africa exhibits the complex life of a prophet. He was fearless, forthright, critical and sharp in his challenge of the political and legislative status quo; yet he also admonished and proposed choices that could be followed; and yet again he pointed to the hope that was there for all if only they listened.

4. Z.R. Mahabane: The Leader

³ K. Marx and F. Engels, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”, Selected Works in One Volume, Lawrence and Wishart, London (1968), p. 98.

⁴ *Amos Among the Prophets: composition and theology*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, (1981), p. 8.

We must thank God for Z.R. Mahabane. We must celebrate the sterling leadership he was able to provide. He served as President and Vice President of the most illustrious resistance movements and organisations in the history of South Africa for more than two decades. In other times in the history of struggle leaders have suffered from lures and enticements that are insidious in character. One of those is the role of the mass media and their corrupting role to those who are unsuspecting and not properly theoretically grounded as well as ideologically weak. The situation of the New Left Movement in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s is a case in point. Todd Gittlin says about this:

“The movement elevated many leaders; the media selected for celebrity those among them who most closely matched prefabricated images of what an opposition leader should look and sound like: articulate, bombastic, and knowing and inventive in the ways of packaging messages for their mediability.”⁵

The world was not watching when Z.R. Mahabane was doing battle with the white colonial forces and the apartheid settler regime. Not even the church was watching as he defended Christianity from its gross abuse by Christian racists who invoked theological dogmas to justify white superiority in politics and in society. He soldiered on as the world and the church looked away and thousands of black people were being slaughtered and exploited on account only of their blackness. He lead without interference and distortion from the media. Consequently, he was never a celebrity. He was just a leader: President of the ANC twice; president of the New Unity Movement; president of the All Africa Convention: president of conference of the

⁵ Todd Gittlin, *The Whole World is Watching: mass media in the making and unmaking of the new left*. University of California Press, Los Angeles(1980), p. 154.

leaders of Thought; President of the IDAMASA, Interdenominational Association of Ministers of South Africa

5. Z.R. Mahabane: The Politician

There is more written on Z.R. Mahabane and by him on political issues than on religious issues. He was a politician par excellence. He served more political organisation than he did religious organisation. Yet he never moved away from his role, commitment and profession as a minister of religion. He gave the Methodist church a presence in political and societal affairs which the church could not and has never given itself. He may not have taken up direct action or participated in an armed struggle against colonialism or apartheid. But his was an incisive and sustained attack and criticism of white supremacy policies and practices from the 1920s all the way to the end of his life in 1971. No one has struggled as consistently and as long against racism in South Africa as Z.R. Mahabane. In paying tribute to him it is fitting to recall the words of Marx when he said:

“The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man the root is man himself.”⁶

6. Z.R. Mahabane: The Intellectual

⁶ Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, Marx and Engels, On Religion, Progress Publishing, Moscow, (1957), p. 45.

Cornel West, using the Italian Communist writer and activist Antonio Gramsci's notion of organic and traditional intellectuals has this to say:

"The ideal Christian intellectual is neither a detached seminary professor teaching potential elites of the church nor an engaged layperson in solidarity with the downtrodden, but rather the dedicated and devoted Christian member of a group or community informed by the best available systemic social analyses of self and society and guided by the most insightful interpretation of the Scriptures and tradition. The ideal Christian intellectual is an organic intellectual, simultaneously immersed in the tortuous realities of the day and enticed by the felicities of the mind"⁷

No other clergy, black or white in South Africa, has ever made such a sustained and concerted contribution to societal and political transformation through sustained discursive practices and self-immersion in the fortunes and misfortunes of our people.

More importantly, Z.R. Mahabane's political engagements and calling had nothing to do with the fact that he was a member of and had been President of the ANC or any of the other organisations. He was not political because he was ANC; on the contrary, he was ANC because he was political. It is that which situates him squarely in the intellectual tradition of a distinctive character. The Palestinian intellectual, Edward Said describes this aptly when he writes:

"...standards of human misery and oppression were to be held to despite the individual intellectual's party affiliation, national background, and primeval loyalties. Nothing disfigures the intellectual's public performance as much as trimming, careful silence, patriotic bluster, and retrospective and self-dramatizing apostasy."

He continues:

⁷ "On Christian Intellectuals", *Prophetic Fragments*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Michigan, (1988), p.271f.

“There are no rules by which intellectuals can know what to say or do; nor for the true secular intellectual are there any gods to be worshipped and looked to for unwavering guidance..

It is the spirit of opposition, rather than in accommodation, that grips me because the romance, the interest, the challenge of intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of the underrepresented and disadvantaged groups seemed so unfairly weighted against them”⁸

7. Z.R. Mahabane: Devout African Servant of the Lord

The final leadership position of Z.R. Mahabane was as President of the Interdenominational Association of Ministers of South Africa. This was the clearest indication that all his work and services all the time was from a commitment to serve his people as part of his service to God. He convinced IDAMSA to take a more visible and direct position and action against racism and segregation. He began in his later years to address more directly the theological challenges that faced black people and the role of religion in the fight against apartheid oppression and exploitation. He fought the Good Fight.

⁸Representations of the Intellectual, Pantheon Books, New York, (1994), pp. xiv and xvii.