

LECTURE IN HONOUR OF DR SIMON GQUBULE

PROF L D JAFTA

Dr Simon Theocritus Ndziweni Gqubule will be remembered by posterity as an educationist, manager and politician. Some of us may think of other areas of expertise where he demonstrated his agility, his prodigy and his intrepid gift in the execution of his work, be it educational, managerial or political. Those who were present in his funeral service at Uitenhage heard all those things repeatedly said. I am a living witness of what I heard on that day

DR Gqubule was an example of a person who can rise from very humble beginnings to the highest level of society. His death was somewhat premature for me because his biography which should have been published last year was delayed by the interviewers who felt that more should have been said about Gqubule on his contribution to education. That biography is still on the way.

Dr Gqubule emerged at a time when there were very few Methodist black ministers with university degrees. Some of those who had university degrees were men like Price Mbethe, Gabriel Setiloane, Makepeace Nomvethe and others but they were like a drop in an ocean. Those who had them were usually placed in strategic appointments like missionary institutions as chaplains but rarely as governors of those institutions. It was a privilege of a white minister to be a governor of a missionary institution.

When Simon Gqubule left Healdtown Institution where he did his matric and Higher Primary Teacher's certificate and ready to assume duties at the end of 1947, he got a teaching post in the Grahamstown district where Rev AL Mncube was the superintendent minister of the Grahamstown Methodist circuit and also the manager of schools. Simon Gqubule was offered the teaching post at the lowest level that is, the substandards. An inspector of schools who nicodemously observed Simon teaching, remarked that he had the potential of an excellent teacher. The lesson for us here is that we must never

despise those days of small beginnings. There is a drop of water before there is a river or an ocean. Days of small beginnings are very significant. We begin small like a mole and we grow into a mountain. When he was teaching sub standards, Gqubule had no idea that he would later become an outstanding theological teacher.

Simon's parentage was humble. His father was a small farmer who was earning not more than two pounds and five shillings a month --- considered to be an adequate wage for blacks those days. How do you send a boy like Simon to a prestigious school like Healdtown when you earn such a pittance? But Simon managed to do his secondary and senior certificates at Healdtown under those financial constraints. Thanks to the generosity of the Rev AA Wellington who was the governor of Healdtown institution at that time. Wellington noticed the aptitude of this young boy and allowed him to continue at Healdtown. Fees, of course, had to be popped up from somewhere. It is not surprising that Simon often defended missionaries like Wellington when they were attacked of Europeanism. Having said that I must add that Simon vehemently fought against naked racism which often masqueraded in social and church programmes. While he praised Wellington, he noted the racist attitudes in some of the missionaries. The Rev Edward Grant ,for instance, did not appreciate outspoken and militant students like Robert Sobukhwe who was at Healdtown the same time with Simon Gqubule. Robert Sobukhwe alerted students at Healdtown of the hegemony and oppression of the white governments of South Africa. But Grant was well respected by the Methodist Church of South Africa. Not only was he the governor of Healdtown ; he also became the President of that church in 1948. During the recent celebrations of the centenary of the university of Fort Hare, Mr Mangosuthu Buthelezi who gave a speech is reported as saying:

Not surprisingly we soon established a branch of the ANC Youth League at Fort Hare. Mr Pitje, our social anthropology lecturer was branch chairman when I joined. He later became an advocate. He was followed by Robert Mangaliso Sobukhwe, a dynamic young politician. I can still see him drawing a map of Africa in the air with his hands declaring :

“when we say we claim our land, we mean every inch of this continent –

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This is the Sobukhwe Edward Grant would not tolerate.

The Rev John W Hunt, who was the governor of Indaleni Institution when Simon was a chaplain there, was overheard by Simon saying that he would not approve of his daughter marrying a black man. This was the subtle racism which Simon could not tolerate and which he often shared with his colleagues and students.

The legacy Dr Gqubule left behind for us is that we should not put a blanket and describe groups as either racists or tribalists or fascists but we should individualize people and take their socio – political and religious backgrounds seriously. In my first year at the FEDERAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY (1964) there used to be what was known as the principal’s hour but actually that hour was used by all the Methodist tutors to deal with any theological subject. Simon Gqubule lectured on South African Methodist mission stations outlining the chain of stations established by William Shaw. In each station Gqubule explained the aspirations, anxieties and problems encountered. One could see a missionary in Gqubule himself

Perhaps one of Dr Gqubule’s gifts was that he was an all rounder. He did not quickly specialize as some lecturers do. He taught Church history, New Testament, Greek and Systematic Theology. He did this because he had basic knowledge of all of them and could easily switch from one to the other. There is this tendency of people wanting to specialize prematurely and thus narrowing their scope and becoming parochial. While we are concerned with our liberation in South Africa, for instance, we must also ask ourselves: How did American blacks liberate themselves from the shackles of white hegemony? Reading about the struggles of others in the rest of the world arms us with the weapons for our own liberation. We have to learn that there is vast difference from a history written from ABOVE and history written from BELOW. There is a difference between a history written by an academician for

the sake of maintaining his own academic position, and a history written from the underside. People must tell their own stories however painful it is to do that. We need a PEOPLE'S HISTORY WRITTEN BY THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES. This is the challenge BMC must face.

The racism of the period before the democratic dispensation in South Africa was naked, brutal and corrosive. Those of us who were adults during that time experienced it for what it was. It had to be attacked at all fronts. This is the naked racism that people like Gqubule had to fight.

One Sunday evening Gqubule took a preaching appointment in a white society not far from Alice. He went there on a college combi driven by the principal of the college who was white. On their way back the principal attacked Gqubule on some of the statements he uttered while he was preaching. Gqubule did not take it lying low. He rebutted the principal's comments and by the time they arrived at the Seminary it was dead silence; obviously the topic was not palatable to the principal. Gqubule felt he was old enough and educated enough to say on his own what he wanted to say.

Another story told by Gqubule was that of an incident during conference in Port Elizabeth. There were the distinguished white leaders coming down the lane and a group of outspoken blacks coming up the lane and the two groups were about to meet each other. One of the white leaders made a comment which referred to the blacks as a nuisance to the church. There was no response from the blacks but the silence itself spoke volumes. Simon Gqubule played a very significant role in dissecting and trisecting the subtle racist nuances in our education. He underscored and underlined those statements which appeared simple and innocent while, in fact, they were loaded with racism. This is the challenge of BMC today—to go beyond the simple seemingly innocent statements to the dangerous and pernicious attitudes lying underneath like whitewashed tombs.

We must not fool ourselves into thinking that racism is something of the past. It is alive and kicking- but it is sophisticated and camouflaged and is disguised by many colours and forms.

Dr Simon Gqubule does not quite fit in the circle of stalwarts like ZK Matthews , the Jabavus and the Pitjes – the black academics at the University of Fort Hare who tried to make a breakthrough in institutions managed by racists; but in a number of ways he tried to follow on their steps. He would not resign like ZK Matthews did. He would not rock the boat like Robert Sobukhwe would do. But there was a lot in common with them. He believed in concerted and well planned transformation which could be brought about by a well educated leadership in secular and religious society. Perhaps there was naivety in thinking that educated minds can bring about transformation. We have seen most of them intransigent, smug and comfortable in their positions.

There is quite a significant number of black students who furthered their theological education overseas. Simon Gqubule facilitated that channel. Some of them, I believe, are with us here today. The idea behind that was that ministers must be highly educated to be effective ministers. Those students, when they came back from overseas, became leaders in their churches. The legacy which Simon left behind is that leaders must produce other leaders. No one is indispensable; no one is sacrosanct. It is not the quantity but quality of leaders that is needed. Simon quickly applauded and encouraged good leadership where and when it was obvious. I know that Dr Gqubule often ran into a conflict with Dr Mgojo on what I considered to be petty issues; but Dr Gqubule was quick to publicly applaud Dr Mgojo's leadership when something significant had been done by the other. That is a sign of maturity—the agility to put behind or aside petty differences and appreciate someone's leadership. We also will be great in our organisations when we put aside personal differences and ambitions and advance those things which are for progress.

One of the distinguished theologians of our era, Professor Simon Maimela wrote a book in which he described the sin of denominationalism. He was referring to the different colours of Protestantism which often wreck asunder the Christian Community. Maimela may have used a strong term to describe denominationalism as a sin because one can argue cogently in favour of it. But what Maimela was trying to say was that there is a tendency among Christians to waste time pointing fingers at each denomination instead of moving the church forward. Over the past few years, there has been noticeable creeping

denominationalism and Protestant churches were concerned more about their denominations than about the rights of the people of South Africa.

Dr Simon Gqubule rose above denominationalism very early in his theological life and remained at that level to the end of his life. When he taught at the Lovedale Theological School, it was an interdenominational venture with Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists training together. Federal Theological Seminary where Gqubule spent most of his time was made up of four denominations: Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Methodists. This was the institution Gqubule enjoyed the most and in which he spent 31 years 17 of which he was principal. He used to say that on the ground are God's people with no denominational labels and they are at their best without those labels. This must be reflected in the training of theological students. Students must not go out to the field with their heads full of denominationalism. As a Vice-President of the South African Council of Churches, he obviously displayed this attitude. The SACC epitomized the emblem of non- denominationalism – the Church of God.

When Dr Gqubule facilitated further theological studies overseas for students, he was not thinking of any denomination in particular. There were students like Danana Mkhize, Samuel Ngcobo, Basil Manning and others who were from different denominations. Their further theological studies were arranged by Gqubule. What was uppermost in his mind was good church leadership and he saw the potential in those students.

Dr Gqubule was a placid man with very strong and unshakable convictions. If he did not believe in something, even if the majority did, he would not do it or he would not go that way. For instance he was not convinced about the usefulness or necessity of stoles. He never had one. He said he was a minister without a stole or to put it more sharply, the stole did not make a minister but he would not frown upon one who uses it. In the 80s when the issues of bishops and stoles was debated in the various synods of our connexion, he was against both. There is a sense in which he was the chip of the old block because the likes of Mokitimi, Mncube and Ndubela and others had no stoles and these were ministers with great influence on him. Gqubule loved tradition and tradition is that which has been handed over to us by our forebears. One is reminded of St Paul's words to the young man Timothy "Remember the faith

that was in your grandmother Lois, and in your mother Eunice and now in you, Timothy" (2Timothy 1:5) . By the way, BMC is fond of passionately saying: ILIFA LOBABA BETHU. Gqubule used to speak very passionately about those who trained at Healdtown, Lesseyton and United Theological School.

The worst we can do as BMC is to throw the baby away with the bath water; the worst we can do is to be so modern and so technologically minded that we forget where we come from. There is a perception that even our Methodism is grossly adulterated by modernism and post modernism.

BMC should delineate those parts of tradition which should be maintained and those that should be discarded. That is the challenge before us. The pull and push should always be before us. There are always those things from the tradition which must be pulled because they define us, and those that must be pushed away because they are no longer relevant. Tradition is dangerous when people blindly go for it. But tradition is most ingenious when people creatively and consciously engage it in an attempt to transform society. This, I believe, is Dr Gqubule's legacy for us.

When we say i Sonto /Cawe lilifa labazali bethu we are correct. And we should say it louder and louder. But we need to unpack that so that it does not just become a cliché which has no meaning for us. We must be careful of repeatedly saying things which we do not know what they mean. Language changes over the years and assumes connotations which were not intended in the past.

Dr Gqubule hated long and boring sermons. He noted that some preachers are fond of preaching until some people get bored and tired and ultimately switch off because what they hear is nothing but ranting and empty talk. This reminds me of what Sir Winston Churchill once said: A GOOD SPEECH MUST BE LONG ENOUGH TO COVER THE SUBJECT AND SHORT ENOUGH TO CREATE INTEREST. This is what Gqubule was teaching his students about preaching . In fact, this applies not only in preaching but also to all modes of communication. When St Paul admonished Timothy to equip the saints, he did not mean feeding them with empty and raucous noises and repetitious statements. If we do that we will be a Methodist Church with a lot of noise but without

power and without morale. We have to keep the high moral ground in all aspects of our Christian life. How embarrassing it is when you hear people, especially the elderly people whispering: Is this the same Methodist Church I used to know? They ask this because they see and hear things which look and sound un Methodist. May be this is the case because some of us are Methodist by day and Zionist by night.

If we want to remember Dr Simon Gqubule as a theologian—and a theologian he was, we must rediscover the role of theology in society. We must remember also that in the High Middle Ages, theology was regarded as the queen of sciences. It was overtaken by other disciplines particularly during and after Enlightenment. Evangelicalism re-emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries and has now been overshadowed by technological developments. Our world has become so pragmatic and materialistic that people are concerned more about what they can see and touch and this poses a challenge to Christian faith.

Here in South Africa, Divinity Schools and Theological Faculties are either disappearing or are pushed to the background in such a way that one would think they are no longer necessary. What has taken the foreground is technology and pragmatism. While technology and pragmatism are necessary, things pertaining to Christian faith (IFA LABAZALI BETHU) must not be pushed to the background otherwise we will be a nation without religion and without morals.

We are all to blame for this demise of spirituality. The secular world is to blame for undermining spirituality and for forgetting that the world for centuries was kept alive by the moral fibre of the church. On the other hand, the church is to blame for slacking on the moral ground, for preaching a powerless morality – a morality which does not translate into action.

When I think back on the stalwarts like ZK Matthews, Platje and Robert Sobukhwe, I see men who were both practising Christians and social activists. I see people who would rather resign than serving in institutions which uphold travesty of justice. I salute Gqubule who was engaged in a cold war with a racist professor of law at the university of Fort Hare in the 1960s. I salute

Gqubule who would not succumb to his Mthembu clan chief Kaizer Matanzima when the Federal Theological Seminary was temporarily located at Mthatha. I salute Dr Gqubule who was Kwa Zulu Natal chairman of the United Democratic Front and who was also house arrested for his beliefs and for his stand against apartheid rulers of the time. I salute Dr Gqubule who was the Vice- President of the SACC.