

No Longer Strangers or Aliens, but Members of God's Household

Genesis 19:1-11; Ezekiel 16:48-50; Ephesians 2:17-22; Luke 23:26

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What a tragic and traumatising two weeks it has been for our land. The dusty streets of Alexandra, Ramaphosaville, Zandspruit, Reiger Park, Ivory Park, and others are blood stained – stomped by stamping feet of fury. Front page pictures place our humanity in doubt, and our rainbow reputation lies ripped in shreds.

I fear that any words I speak will seem terribly shallow in the face of such tragedy. Yet we must remember what we have been taught, that it is especially when our words feel inadequate that we are invited to turn to God's Word in the Scriptures. So I hope as we enter the Scriptures today, we will find Words that hold our pain, deepen our understanding, dispel our despair, and fill us with hope.

The first word that must be spoken is to those of you who are weighed under by the gravity of grief at this time: you who have witnessed the killing and burning and beating of your own family members and friends, you who have lost homes and a sense of belonging in a community as well as the means of making a living, you who have lost documents and photographs that have memorised your history, you who mourn the loss of trust, safety, companionship, intimacy, dreams, and hope.

To you God speaks, just as God spoke to the displaced Hebrew people of old: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt (a foreign land); I have heard their cry on account of the taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of the land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:7-8). To you who grieve, I invite you to trust that God has seen your pain and heard your cry. God understands your sufferings like no one else. God promises to be present with you in your pain. God promises action – just and liberating action – that will secure hope and newness for you. The time is soon coming when you will walk across the soil of your birth free of fear and full of food. Trust that God sees, hears, and understands you today.

The second word that must be spoken is to those of us who were born in this land. Listen to the Lord through the book of Deuteronomy: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow and who loves the strangers – providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:17-19). God loves the stranger and commands that we do too. God's argument rests on the fact that we were once strangers in a foreign land, and if only we would remember that, our hearts would be open to the strangers in our midst.

And the way we are commanded to love the stranger in our midst is to plan and prepare to care for them by setting aside the tithe every third year for them (Deut. 14:28-29). In other words, our care must be pro-active and not simply reactive! In fact, we are even commanded not to reap all the profits of our businesses for ourselves (be it grain, olives and grapes, or gold and mobile phones), but instead to leave some of

the profits for the vulnerable trinity of widows, orphans, and resident aliens [Deut. 24:19-22]. In other words, according to the Lord, the widows, orphans, and aliens (or the vulnerable equivalent) are legitimate shareholders of every business in the country. And if we give them their rightful shares, the Lord promises to bless us and enable us to live well and long in the land.

Again the Lord's motivation hinges around memory of the fact that we were once strangers in a foreign land. Pastor Mary went to purchase a huge amount of things for the displaced immigrants this past week. Before she could pay for them, the manager found out that they were for the victims of the xenophobic violence, and he gave them to her for free, saying: "I was once a refugee – I know what it is like to have to flee from everything I value – taking nothing with me." Memory brings mercy! Memory softens hearts and opens fists!

We have heard a number of people reminding us that the rest of Africa opened their doors to our exiles during the Apartheid years, so we should do the same. It is true that we should, but the fact is that the majority of us were not in exile, and so it is someone else's memory we are being asked to remember. But surely most of us here can remember the forced removals of the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's, when homes and land were stolen from a few million people. Let us remember *those* days and repent of *these* days!

We have all heard the angry accusations that foreigners "are the perpetrators of crime and have taken our jobs and our houses." We have even heard the cry that "they have taken our women," as if women were men's property! Basically we have heard that the foreigners are taking over everything of value. I must tell you that what I have discovered reading the Scriptures these past days is that foreign nationals are everywhere! And don't think that they are restricted to the book of Deuteronomy – they are not! They have crossed the border into just about every book in the Bible! Remember Ruth? She was a Moabite who married a local boy Boaz, and together they ended up ancestorizing Jesus. Yes, Jesus has foreign national blood flowing through his veins, which means that it was foreign national blood that flowed at Calvary.

Speaking of Jesus, let us not forget that he was a refugee at birth, fleeing genocide. And remember his first sermon? His text came from the prophet Isaiah, and like any good preacher, he littered his sermon with relevant stories to illustrate his point. When expanding on the rich mercy of God, he spoke of the foreign widow in Sidon and the foreign leper in Syria. And you know what? He was nearly thrown off a cliff for it! Jesus offered living water to a foreigner even when he was prejudicially rejected. And is not Jesus' most famous parable about a foreigner – yes, the Good Samaritan. A good foreigner – fancy that! And finally, let us not forget that the Cross-carrying-Jesus was assisted by Simon of Cyrene – yes, a foreigner from Libya.

Foreign nationals have literally taken over the Scriptures! And most often when they are mentioned, they are surrounded with promise and praise. Surely even this tiny sample of examples should move us all to declare with St Paul: "You are no longer strangers or aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (Eph. 2:19).

Now let us turn to the Scripture we read earlier in Genesis 19:1-11. I am sure you know this text well. In recent times, the Church has been obsessed with it because the Church has been obsessed with matters of sexuality – suggesting that these verses have some authoritative word to say about homosexuality in particular. Seldom has there

ever been such an abuse of a text (perhaps not since some taught that the descendants of Ham were black people – born to be the slaves of white people)!

If, however, we allow what we have witnessed as a nation these last few days to be the lens through which we read Genesis 19, I believe we get closer to the truth of the text. Sodom and Gomorrah were wealthy regions just like South Africa is. We have a per capita income of more than \$5,000 per annum, yet we are surrounded by neighbours with less than \$1,000 and as low as \$100. So Sodom, like South Africa, was an attractive and logical place to visit if one was hoping to better one's life.

Lot does the Godly thing by inviting the foreign visitors into his home. That night, however, every man in the city was banging on his door. We have seen such crowds, haven't we? They are not orderly delegations, but rather machete wielding mobs. Lot showed great courage to step outside to face them, not too different from the courage shown by many even here today. The other night, I received a call at 1:00 am from a member of this congregation saying, "Alan, they are coming down our street, door to door, searching for foreigners, and I have a woman from Zimbabwe staying with me. I will not let them have her!" She deserves the Nobel Peace Prize!

Then in verse 8, we hear Lot's horrifying suggestion that the mob be satisfied with his two virgin daughters instead of the foreigners. What father would ever suggest such a thing? And to suggest that Lot's virgin offering goes to prove how evil homosexuality is—as far too many people suggest—is sick. Surely, from the light of these violent days, we have learned that when a homeowner stands up in support of a foreign guest, she or he is exposing her or his entire family to risk. This act of radical hospitality is costly, and it may even carry the price tag of rape and death as we have witnessed by people saying: "Now we will deal worse with you than with them." (Gen 19:9b). And what was Sodom's real sin? The prophet Ezekiel tells us that it was "*pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy*" (Ezekiel 16:49). Guided by Ezekiel's commentary, I suggest that the men were banging on Lot's door because they greedily wanted to secure the resources of their region for themselves alone. They, therefore, sought to demean Lot's foreign guests so that they would leave and never come back. And the worst thing you can do to a man in a staunchly patriarchal society, is to treat him like a woman. In other words, the men at Lot's door wanted to penetrate his foreign guests, just as a man penetrates a woman – to show them that they are as worthless as women. It may be that that is where the swear word "f... you" comes from. "F... you" only makes sense when we put a pronoun in front of it: "I f... you." Meaning, I treat you like a woman! The sin of Sodom is greed and the violent lengths that we go to protect our greed!

As we now move to try and analyse the causes of the violence, we will see how amazingly accurate Ezekiel's commentary fits our situation.

I believe that there is no single cause of the violence we are experiencing. Rather, there is a cocktail of ingredients. Each of these ingredients is dangerous in its own right, but when mixed together, they are more than dangerous – they are deadly! I want us to briefly look at six ingredients in this deadly cocktail.

1. We live in a divided world, in a land with a history of deliberately designed division. The classification of people into categories according to culture, skin colour, nationality, religion, and language is addictive for far too many of us. To reduce anyone's identity to one of these or any other socially constructed categories is to oversimplify

humanity and to miss the truth of who we really are. This categorising of the “other” skills us in looking for the danger in difference and is easily exploited, especially when we are fearful.

When politicians wear T-shirts with “100% Zulu Boy” printed on them, they are being highly irresponsible. The only T-shirt slogan worth wearing is “100% human being,” or as the author of the first letter to John would say, “100% Child of God” (1 John 3:1). In other words, we should seek an identity for ourselves that all people everywhere can identify with. The extent to which we leave anyone out of our identity is the extent to which conflict and finally violence will follow. To speak of “our people” as if some people are not is a lie. As Law Professor Cathi Albertyn says, “Human dignity has no nationality.” As such, let it be known that the Apartheid of nations will crumble one day.

2. We live in a land of poverty and inequality. “Poverty is the worst form of violence,” said Gandhi. It kills in slow and cruel ways. A few years ago, I remember Stats SA saying that there are about 20 million South Africans who live on R354 per month. This is violence!

What makes matters worse is that we have islands of unconscionable wealth in the midst of this massive sea of desperate deficiency. This comparative disparity fuels the fire of resentment of the poor majority. This is why, according to Professor Stephen Gelb from Wits, “It is so important for us to make the distinction between poverty and inequality.” They are not the same thing. The SA government has done a tremendous amount of work in addressing poverty through the “social grant system,” but as Gelb points out, “Inequality has actually worsened since 1994.” According to Gelb, “Inequality could only be addressed by the transfer and building of assets such as education, skills, land, and houses. Only asset ownership would persuade people they had prospects and hope for the future. The government hasn’t succeeded at all in asset building and transfer” (*Mail and Guardian* website 28 May 2008).

I have said many times before that unless the wealth gap is dealt with, we will see an unleashing of violence in our land that will make Soweto 76 look like a Sunday school picnic. The violence of the past days has been confined to the poor and desperate attacking each other, but it is only a matter of time before they realise that their equally-struggling-neighbour is not to blame for their hardship, but rather a convenient scapegoat, and then they will turn their eyes and anger to those of us living with “excess food and in prosperous ease.”

3. Inadequate and poor service delivery, especially for the poorest of the poor, is another ingredient for the violence we have experienced. We must be careful when making such a statement not to be seen to ignore or undermine the many and great achievements that we have made in the last 14 years. A miraculous amount has been achieved in our young democracy, but equally a miraculous amount still needs to be achieved, and we must not allow the truth of the one to cover up the truth of the other! With that said, we must put pressure on the State to allocate more and more resources to provide the poor with access to houses, sewerage, water, schools, and healthcare. Let us also all be ashamed that we didn’t protest louder against an arms deal that, in effect, has stolen from the ministries of health, education, and housing, all valuable resources. Our biggest threat is from within and not from without. Submarines have not been able to protect the people of Alexandra.

4. We live on a struggling continent where we are seen as a beacon of hope. Like Sod-

om, we are an attractive destination. We therefore have people coming to this land from all over, seeking to better their lives and the lives of their families. They come to contribute and to consume, forming relationships of give and take. We should be proud of this.

The high influx of people, however, has no doubt placed extra pressure on the limited resources and services already mentioned. Already overcrowded informal settlements swell further. There are more hands looking for work, and often these hands are more skilled and willing to work for less. Their ability to speak good English is also a key factor in their securing work before their South African neighbour. All of these points were made to us by locals who had chased away all the foreign nationals from one of the soup kitchens we are involved with in town.

Added to the many economic migrants, we have the particular case of our neighbour Zimbabwe that adds between three and four million like a raging river flowing into an already bursting sea of poverty. When a roof leaks, the first thing we normally do is put a bucket beneath the leak to save the carpet from getting wet. We may have to change the bucket a few times, but we know that the only long term solution is to get up on the roof and fix the leak. This is what we have failed to do regarding our Zimbabwe. We have failed to fix the leak. And I do not mean border control! I do not mean border control because one does not lock the door of a house when there are people burning inside! I mean that we have not dealt with the oppressive and tortuous reign of the Mugabe regime that has caused an economy to collapse and a once flourishing people to flee in hunger. Our Government has been stubbornly callous in refusing to take a more hard and truthful line against Zimbabwe. Our leaders betray the history of our own liberation struggle each time they refuse to openly condemn the human rights abuses in Zimbabwe.

5. When it comes to Home Affairs and the South African Police Services, we are dealing with a mix of under-resourced, overstretched, inefficient, and corrupt departments. It takes months just to acquire asylum papers, and while one is waiting for them, there is a good chance of being arrested and deported. This long process leads to frustration, which leads to fraud, which leads to fury. Similarly, the SAPS endlessly arrest people and send them to Lindela from which they are deported, only to return again in a few days or weeks time. This process is futile, and it too leads to fraud and further fury.

We have a marvellous Constitution and Bill of Rights that is hospitable and compassionate. Our law refuses to put people into refugee camps on our borders and instead allows for the full integration into society. This is boldly biblical. However, this policy of integration seems to have meant “out of sight out of mind”! And this has allowed the authorities to pretend that there is no crisis in SA and in Zimbabwe. This is why we still hear endless debates about the facts and figures of how many foreign nationals are actually living in SA. There needs to be a proper accounting of foreign nationals, so that their plight can be properly addressed.

6. Criminals have also been involved in the violent attacks. They have surely exploited and piggybacked on the xenophobia. No evidence, however, suggests they were the cause!

Now let us turn briefly to the response to the violence that has seen around 50 people being killed and thousands fleeing their homes for safety in church and community halls and police stations around the country. At best, the Government has been lethargic in its response. This reveals just how out of touch it has become. It has been

distracted by in-fighting, and its focus has been split by two centres of power. It has forgotten its core business of caring for the people who have given them the privilege of serving them.

No matter how humorous Mr. Zuma was attempting to be when he said, “The ANC is even blessed in heaven and that is why we will rule until Jesus comes back,” he reveals an arrogance of government that will backfire if it is not soon addressed. We would do well to remind Mr Zuma that his initials are JZ and not JC! Yesterday’s struggle credentials have devalued in currency. People are more interested in the delivery of jobs *today* than whether anyone was a hero yesterday. I do take my hat off to Mr Zuma; at least he finally went to the communities and heard their angry threats with his own ears.

It has been distressing to hear some in Government react to the scapegoating xenophobic violence by searching for scapegoats themselves, by first blaming it all on criminals, and then when that ran a bit thin, to blame a third force. These are nothing but distractions from the truth, and those from whose lips these words came should be ashamed for not facing the real issues before us.

There has also been a massive outpouring of compassion and courage in our land. The many nameless people in violence-drenched communities who have stood in solidarity with their foreign national neighbours are to be praised. The local leaders on the ground, who have gone door to door as a preventative measure making sure the violence doesn’t spread any further, are to be honoured. The generosity of food, clothing, blankets, and finances has been astounding. It, of course, raises the question of why we have to wait for people to be killed before we learn to share.

The violence we have witnessed has rightly been condemned. Those responsible have been called savage and barbaric, but we should take care not to allow these violent acts to blind us to the deeper savagery and barbarism that may include many of us. Surely living day in and day out without a care in the world for the hungry when we are over fed and for the homeless when we have empty rooms in our houses is even more savage. We may not run around with blood-thirsty mobs, but we do sometimes follow blood-thirsty markets that excuse justice with the unquestioned rule of supply and demand. If we do not change, we will burn like Sodom.

Some have used these attacks to validate long held, but seldom spoken, racism. The phrase “black on black” violence is as primitive as it is prejudiced. We need also to guard against an Afro-pessimism that relies on a selective reading of history and over-generalised assumptions that are never helpful in deepening our understanding of the situation before us.

“What can we do?” is a question I have heard a lot lately. Well, we can all start by watching our language. We can learn to speak about people without categorising them, and instead reach for terms of identity that all can identify with. We can be intentional about integration – seeking to establish relationships of rich diversity. We can refuse to exploit the people we employ – paying them liveable wages above the going rate. We can pour some of our profits into educating and teaching people skills with the means to make a productive contribution to the economy, remembering that the vulnerable poor are our legitimate shareholders. We can visit the violence-torn areas and see for ourselves the conditions the majority of people have to live under, lest we forget as soon as this no longer makes front page headlines.

In closing, I remind you of the Rabbi who asked his disciples when one knew that the night had passed and the day had come. After thinking for a while, the disciples replied, “Is it when you can spot the difference between a goat and a sheep at a hundred yards?” “No,” replied the Rabbi. The disciples tried again, “Is it when you can spot the difference between an olive tree and a fig tree at a hundred yards?” “No,” replied the Rabbi. “Well, then, you tell us, Rabbi,” they pleaded. “One knows that the night has passed and the day has come when one can look into the face of a stranger and see a sister or a brother!”

May the night pass and day soon come in our beloved country!