

**Of Power Perfected in Weakness:
Challenges Facing the Ecumenical Movement and the People of South Africa Today**

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Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." 4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'^a " 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: " 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'^b " 7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'^c " 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'^d " 11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him

2 Corinthians 12:8-10

8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

1. Preliminaries and Greetings

Vice Presidents of the SACC – Rev Joy Kronenberg and Dr Puleng Lenka-Bula

Members of the National Executive Committee

The General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches – Mr Eddie Makue

Deputy General Secretary – Rev Dr Vuyani Vellem

SACC Staff members

Members of National and Provincial Executive Committees here present

Archbishops, Presiding Bishops, Bishops, Moderators and General Secretaries of our member churches

Leaders of sister ecumenical organizations

Members of the media

I greet you all in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We praise God at the very sight of you. For we know not only the far-away and diverse places you have come from, but we are also aware of some of the challenges faced by the church communities represented by yourselves at this time. We thank God for the leadership provided by the churches in South Africa and other countries of the SADC region where several of our member churches also have a presence. We realize that oftentimes the leadership provided by churches is often behind-the-scenes and therefore does not make headlines. We thank God for the mostly unsung service rendered by local churches and local pastors – at great cost – in communities which are under the grip of poverty. Indeed we salute the heroic but generally unsung interventions in situations of conflict and protest. Above all we thank churches for their spiritual and theological leadership at this time. We note that both the global and national economic recession – which has exercised the minds and resources of governments the world over, our own

included – is not only a matter for the banks and the governments. It has affected the church and the people of God deeply – both materially and spiritually. The recession is not merely a matter affecting the pockets and therefore the stomachs of human beings. It has affected their spirits and their souls as well. The poorest of the poor have borne the greatest burden of these effects. Surviving the recession will therefore never be purely a financial and economic matter, narrowly understood. In this regard, praise God for the tremendous pastoral work of the churches at this time of recession.

2. A Time of Struggle and Resistance

Our meeting takes place during the season of Lent – a season observed by several members of the South African Council of Churches. Contrary to a much popular opinion, the purpose of lent is neither vegetarianism nor weight loss. The purpose of Lent is to help the believer prepare – through *prayer, penitence, almsgiving* and *self-denial* – for the annual commemoration of the death and especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord, soon to be celebrated in Easter. In most Christian traditions Lent is understood both as a re-enactment of and a metaphor for that period when Jesus was led by the Spirit to spend forty days and forty nights being tested and being tempted by the devil. This is the sphere we enter into during this season. Lent is therefore a time of testing and therefore a time of resistance and a time to struggle against the machinations of the evil one. At this time, we stare temptation in the face and strive to resist it. At this time, we are tested and as we are tested we are weakened; as we are weakened, we are strengthened. This is what Lent is all about. In the passage retelling the story of the temptation of Jesus several things are noteworthy. In my Good Friday Sermon at Diakonia 2009, a sermon based on the Diakonia theme ‘Crucified by Corruption’, I referred to the story of Jesus’ temptations. I suggested there that this story reveals, amongst other things, the ‘weapons of corruption’ against which we must struggle. Let me invoke only three of these weapons – for illustrative purposes.

The first weapon is to be found in the little English conjunction, the word ‘if’ – one of the most seductive words in the English language. This is a word that stops one in one’s tracks. Think of the phrases that are built on and around the word. ‘If only. If ever. What if. If only. If and only if. If I were you. If I could.’ The word ‘if’ is an invitation and a passport to the world of imagination. Many a dream is built on the wings of the word ‘if’. It is the word ‘if’ that sends the poor and their last cents to the lotto queues every Wednesday and every Saturday. No wonder then that Rudyard Kipling’s poem titled *If* has become a timeless classic¹. It evokes the seduction of which I speak. In Matthew 4, the tempter hits Jesus with three powerful and tempting ‘ifs’. He says to Jesus: i) ‘*if* you are the Son of God tell the stones...’; ii) ‘*if* you are the Son of God throw yourself ...’ and finally the punch-line and the real deal iii) ‘*if* you will bow down and worship me ... all these, I will give you’. The season of lent brings us face to face with the ‘ifs’ thrown daily at us by the tempter.

It is interesting that the first two ‘ifs’ are aimed at questioning and confusing Jesus’ identity and mission. The first dares him to perform a miracle and the second dares him to be daring – all based on a perverted projection of who Jesus is supposed to be. Oh how we fumble and fall at these types of ‘ifs’! If you are a child of God you ought not to be sick, we are often told. If you are a child of God you ought not to lack. If you are a child of God you ought not to be weak. If you are liberated you ought not to be poor. And so the list of testing, confusing, daring and tempting ‘ifs’ goes on. On these ‘ifs’ our true identities are often wrecked and our true calling often distorted.

The second weapon of corruption is hunger. Hunger! That great ravager of human bodies and human spirits. Hunger! That choicest of tool of dictators and despots! Hunger! The tool used to ‘make people talk’ – the most effective tool to ‘turn’ people! Hunger! That great softener of human resolve! In its wake human principles are thrown out the window. Hunger! One of the greatest causers of war between humans! Ravaged by it, humans will eat the flesh of fellow humans. Under its grip, men and women will sell their bodies – whole or in part. Indeed the very thought of hunger and the very fear of it is enough to

make humans throw the rule book away. It reduces humans to their most basic instincts. No wonder the tempter chose to come to Jesus when he was hungry. Mark the timing of the tempter. Hunger – real or artificial, current or envisaged, threatened or already experienced – makes humans susceptible to corruption. That is why hunger is such an affront to human dignity. That is why poverty, the mother of hunger, is a deplorable sin. That is why Moeletsi Mbeki is correct to warn us, in one of his latest books, against the manufacturers of hunger – the people he calls ‘the architects of poverty’. That is why we must not only be weary of policies that produce, reproduce and multiply hunger and poverty; we must resist them. The growing gap between rich and poor in our country is therefore most worrisome. The growing insensitivity to the fate of the poor shown by government and government agencies is catastrophic. The lack of adequate policy, political and economic interventions to deal with the growing gap between rich and poor means that generations of South Africans are being handed over to poverty and the ravages of hunger and lack. Such generations of South Africans will become ‘playthings’ in the hands of the tempter!

The third weapon of corruption is the allure of power. It is all captured in the sentence ‘if you will bow down and worship me ... all these kingdoms, I will give to you’. The desire of the kingdoms then becomes the end that justifies all means. The ambition to lay hold of that slice of power – whether it is political or economic power – prepared to do anything, including the worship of the very power they desire. Daily we hear the voice that says ‘if you will bow down and worship me’. It is not the voice of God. It is the voice of the political authorities. It is the voice of money. It is the voice of hedonism. It is the voice of violence. It is the voice of selfishness. Daily it says to us ‘if you will bow down and worship me’. And daily we succumb. One by one we fall. We succumb in droves to the seduction. This we do when we join up with the corrupt. When we pay them bribes, we succumb to the call to worship the kingdoms. When we turn a blind eye to crime, corruption and violence we become worshipers of the artificial power promised us by the tempter. We heed the voice that says ‘if you will bow down and worship me’ when we choose the side of the powerful over the weak.

When we sell our very souls in exchange of the kingdoms of this world we succumb to the machinations of the evil one. This we do when we lose all sense of integrity, all sense of ethics and morality – all in pursuit of the illusive power promised by the tempter. There must be a reason why Nelson Mandela’s favourite poem in Robben Island, *Invictus* by Victorian poet W.E. Henley, focuses on the soul:

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul*

If the soul is the innermost core of a human being then that is the core that must be protected at all costs, for it is the last line of defense. That intangible inner space, that sense of dignity, integrity and sanctity that belongs to human beings as creatures created in the image of God, cannot and should not be surrendered. Not to a despot, not to hunger, not to political authority, not to worldly ambition, not to anybody and not to anything. It must be guarded and safe-guarded. This is the sacred essence of what it means to be human. For this reason we must go even further than Mandela and Henley and assert not merely the right to captain our souls, but our determination to let God and God alone be the captain of our being.

Mandela also spoke of the need for an ‘RDP (reconstruction and development) of the Soul’ – a notion that has since been raided and plundered rather unsuccessfully for all sorts of party political purposes. Indeed, the second President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, made a strenuous attempt to speak to this notion of the RDP of the soul in his Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture at WITS in July 2006. In that lecture, Mbeki warned us of the growing culture of hedonistic consumption:

“Thus, everyday, and during every hour of our time beyond sleep, *the demons embedded* in our society, that stalk us at every minute, seem always to beckon each one of us towards a realizable dream and nightmare. With every passing second, they advise, with rhythmic and hypnotic regularity - get rich! get rich! get rich! And thus has it come about that many of us accept that our common natural instinct to escape from poverty is but the other side of the same coin on whose reverse side are written the words - at all costs, get rich! In these circumstances, personal wealth, and the public communication of the message that we are people of wealth, becomes, at the same time, the means by which we communicate the message that we are worthy citizens of our community, the very exemplars of what defines the product of a liberated South Africa. This peculiar striving produces the particular result that manifestations of wealth, defined in specific ways, determine the individuality of each one of us who seeks to achieve happiness and self-fulfillment, given the liberty that the revolution of 1994 brought to all of us. In these circumstances, the meaning of freedom has come to be defined not by the seemingly ethereal and therefore intangible gift of liberty, but by the designer labels on the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the spaciousness of our houses and our yards, their geographic location, the company we keep, and what we do as part of that company.”

It is noteworthy that Mbeki speaks of ‘demons embedded in our society’ and the drive to ‘get rich at all costs’, the conflation of display of wealth with worthiness and individuality. These are the demons that call out ‘if you will bow down and worship me, all these kingdoms, I will give unto you’. In the process, the ‘demons’ persuade us not only to escape the indignity of poverty but to aim to be rich, richer and richest. They persuade us that our worth and essence as human beings lies in our wealth. In short, these ‘demons’ persuade us to sell them our souls and consciences. They seduce us to hand everything to them all in pursuit of ‘these kingdoms’.

It was of course Mbeki’s own government that launched what some have called the ‘Gucci revolution’. It was his government that abandoned the RDP – both the RDP of the body and the RDP of the soul. It was his government that introduced the lofty perks that allow ministers to drive the most expensive cars available in the country. It was his government that introduced the BBBEE on the back of which a few individuals became rich while the vast majority became poorer. Tenderpreneurship was born and perfected during the Mbeki era. It has been allowed to flourish by all four governments we have had since 1994. We cannot forget this and we must not pretend otherwise. There is a sense in which Mbeki’s words at the 2006 Nelson Mandela Lecture were ‘too little too late’. There is a sense in which he was attacking the symptoms without acknowledging the causes of the behavior he was decrying. One such cause was the economic policies of his own government. However, we will be foolish not to realize the warnings contained in the quotation above.

Returning to the passage of Jesus’ temptation we may ask ourselves how did Jesus do it? He was able to deal with the temptations of corruption briefly outlined above because he refused to split and dichotomize matters of the stomach from matters of the spirit; matters of the mind from matters of matter! He refused to split ethics from service, to divorce values from methods, to separate means from ends, and he refused to fall into binary thinking. He managed all these by maintaining a clear view of who he truly is and by grounding his thought, words and action in the scriptures.

3. Churches and the Economic Crisis

Churches have a responsibility to participate in the search not only of palliatives, but for the historic and systemic causes of the economic mess in which our country and other countries find themselves. This responsibility demands that we reject both superficial diagnoses of the problem as well as superficial remedies. It is our responsibility to assert and unmask the linkages and interdependencies between the major causes of the economic crisis we find ourselves in. This is not merely an economic management crisis, it is an environmental stewardship crisis and the two are intertwined. It is not merely a problem of political management but also a problem of political vision. Ours is not merely an economic crisis narrowly defined it is a crisis of *ubuntu* – our vision of what it means to be human. There is a connection between the violence of the world – in all its manifestations – and what has now come to be known as an

economic crisis. There is a connection between the dominant ethical and moral paradigms of our times and the economic recession we find ourselves in. There is a connection between the high lives of our political elite and the poverty of ordinary South Africans. There is a connection between the hedonistic culture led by a tiny minority and worshipped by our media and the compassionless society in which we live. There is a connection between certain uncritical paths of development and the ecological crisis we find ourselves. We have to lay bare these connections if we are to find meaningful and lasting solutions. There is a connection between the slap in the face of the poor dealt by NERSA, ESKOM, government and the ANC through the electricity tariff hikes of 75% in 36 months and the rising misery in the land. There is a connection between the desperate service delivery protests and a feeling of utter helplessness among the poor of this land. They feel cheated, affronted and disregarded. They see the potbellies, the big cars and the big houses of their leaders and they contrast this with the mud in which they live and sewage in which they swim.

4. Current State of the Nation

Nearly 80% of eligible voters went to the poles last year – a sign of the high premium South Africans put on the democratic system and their faith in the political process. We now have a much larger government whose size and cost is yet to be fully justified, in terms of service delivery at least. The ferocity and frequency of service delivery protests indicate the levels of frustration at grass-root level. This we say without claiming to understand, let alone condone the burning of public amenities such as libraries as well as the loss of life that has come to characterize some incidences of protest. Nor are we content with the disruption of school that occurs as a result of these protests, seeing that a sizeable portion of protesters are youth. We call on all community leaders to ensure that protests are peaceful and that schooling is not disrupted. But we also call on the SAPS to reconsider some of their strong-arm tactics. We are appalled at the shameless broadcasting of ‘shoot-to-kill’ by public officials as an official policy of the SAPS. This after several innocent citizens, including children, have been shot and killed by the police. We wish to say to the ministry of police and their functionaries; South Africa is a democracy not a police state. South African lives are not as cheap as to be sacrificed as collateral damage in the cow-boy expeditions of the SAPS. Seeing that in the days of suffering that are sure to come as a result, among other things, of the hefty electricity hikes, the poor will have no option but to protest, the policy of ‘shoot-to-kill’ might become a handy weapon against the poor, as we have always suspected.

We recognize the scourge of crime and unacceptable levels of violence in the land. Women and children continue to be raped and South Africans are not safe in their own homes. The crime of murder remains very high in the country. Indeed, church pastors have also become a soft target for criminals – with the late Father Blondel of Diepsloot being but one among several pastors killed. Many churches have become victims of both burglary and armed robbery. We shudder to think what kind of a society we are becoming when our homes and our places of worship have ceased to be sacred places of refuge. We call on South African communities to unite and organise against crime, starting at the local level. We also call on the SAPS and all its divisions to deepen and intensify their crime prevention strategies beyond the ‘shoot-to-kill’ platitudes.

We have observed with trepidation some of the key appointments made in key Chapter Nine and other para-state institutions – especially the appointment of the National Director for Public Prosecutions and the recent elevation of Advocate Mpshe as an Acting Judge. We call on the President not to take the concerns of South Africans for granted, but to act with wisdom and sensitivity when making key appointments.

We remain unsatisfied with the current levels of perks offered to ministers – apparently in keeping with the ministerial handbook. How long can poor South Africans endure such opulence in contrast to their own dire circumstances? How can South Africans believe that the recession affects all when there is no

change in the lifestyle of government functionaries? We call on the presidency to hasten the process of revising the handbook and toning down these perks. Indeed we call on parastatals and the private sector to follow suit.

Having listened carefully to both the state of the nation and the budget speeches, we are not convinced that the government is doing enough to use the opportunity presented by the recession to think out of the box in terms of the macroeconomic system in the land. We are not convinced that enough is being done to stimulate the creation of jobs, let alone the creation of decent jobs. We therefore call on the ministries of economic development and planning to show leadership in this regard and not merely seek to maintain a failing system. It is our wish that the envisaged planning commission will also include people of faith so as to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the challenges we face.

We have already expressed our dismay at the blatant disregard of people's views by NERSA, ESKOM and government. The allegation that the ruling party is a potential beneficiary in some of ESKOM's expansion programmes leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. We call on the ruling party to come clean on this matter or risk being forever tainted in the eyes of many South Africans who are about to be assaulted with hefty ESKOM hikes.

We have also issued a statement on the so-called Babygate scandal involving the President's fathering of a child outside wedlock. While we have accepted the apology of the President, together with millions of South Africans, we remain nevertheless appalled by his behaviour, both for ethical and practical purposes. We therefore reiterate our call for the President to go beyond issuing an apology to making a commitment not to engage in this type of behaviour in the future. We have no doubt that if the President will make this commitment, God will help him to keep it. It is important for the President to realise that his behaviour impacts on the dignity of his person, his office and on the dignity of the country.

We welcome the new and far-reaching anti-HIV/AIDS measures and strategies announced by the President late last year. However, as long as service delivery levels are poor, many of these good plans will not make any difference in the lives of people living with the virus.

We have noted with concern recent newspaper reports about *tenderpreneurial* practices and tendencies among certain political leaders. We therefore call on the President to call upon and to authorize SARS and the office of the Auditor General to initiate a formal regime of lifestyle audits based on proper and clear criteria and terms of reference. We suggest that the audits also include the auditing of systems and structures as human beings act within systems and structures. The selected lifestyle audits being done by newspapers are therefore not helpful and they may serve to impede a proper lifestyle audit regime. Dismissive statements about lifestyle audits by the President and other senior leaders have not been helpful. There is a groundswell of South Africans who feel the need for such audits to be done. We urge the President not to dismiss these sentiments but to take the opportunity to clear the air.

We look forward to hearing the President speak about allegations that, contrary to what is required of members of the executive, including the President, he himself failed to declare his financial interests within the 60 days period as required in the code of ethics for members of the executive. We note that both the fact that his predecessor had declared his financial interests and the fact that the code specifically indicate that 'members of cabinet' include the President should have been sufficient to convince him to declare his financial interests. We look forward to the President taking the appropriate action.

We have noted with pleasure the growing enthusiasm related to the looming FIFA World Cup. We see the FIFA World Cup as one of the many gifts bequeathed us by former president Nelson Mandela. For us, it is a remarkable coincidence that the World Cup comes to South Africa in the year when we celebrate 20 years since Nelson Mandela was released from prison. We wish to congratulate the LOC and SAFA for the tremendous job done in preparation so far. However, we, do have some concerns. We note with

concern the large amounts of resources used for the FIFA World Cup and worry about the benefits for the poor of this and other countries, both now and in the long term. We call on government, municipal, regional and national, to stop harassing the poor in the name of 'cleaning up' for the World Cup. We have received reports of hawkers being harassed and removed from their stall near stadiums under the pretext of FIFA rules. We have also heard of buildings, including dwellings and church buildings, being destroyed – all in the name of 'cleaning up' for the FIFA World Cup. If the FIFA World Cup is meant to exclude the poor and marginalised from all its benefits, then it is a shame and an abomination. We therefore call on SAFA and the government to ensure that FIFA 2010 becomes an opportunity not only for the FIFA family and the rich, but becomes an opportunity for all. Furthermore, we urge that everything must be done to ensure that this event leaves a tangible legacy for the poor and the marginalised. We fear that the advent of the FIFA World Cup while bringing many tourists and visitors to the country, will also bring vulnerable people, such as the poor from other African countries, trafficked children and women as well as sex workers from all over the world. It is important that arrangements and systems are in place to deal with the influx of poor and vulnerable people during this time.

5. SACC, SACC Where Art Thou?

Before concluding, I must talk of the SACC and the challenges we face. It would not be fair to talk about everyone else except ourselves. Beeld newspaper recently published a column – written by a University of Pretoria missiologist – announcing this meeting of Central Committee in a riveting headline: **'SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES: SINCERELY NEEDED, BUT OUT OF STEAM'**

We do not agree with everything in the article, especially its assumptions about a glorious SACC past versus a miserable SACC present. Clearly, the author of this article and/or their church cannot have been a member of the SACC during the so-called glory days. Otherwise, they would know that no such golden age actually existed. It must be acknowledged that the witness of the SACC and that of sister ecumenical organizations has never been conducted in glory or power. The SACC has always been a marginalized and minority voice that rose against the grain, against the predominant church and state voice of the day. We must not allow hindsight to bewitch us here. This is not to say that the SACC is currently without the problems alleged in the article. But to posit the SACC merely as a once powerful organization that has since become weak is to misrepresent both history and the organization. When your workers are detained, poisoned and killed, your buildings bombed and your leaders harassed, you are anything but powerful. When your very members are afraid of publicly associating themselves with your statements and positions, that is hardly a sign of power. No, the SACC never lived through a golden age. Its successes, if it has any, have always come from the side of weakness and persecution. Only in hindsight has it ever felt like or been called a 'powerful' organization.

And yet, although the Beeld article makes painful reading, it is a genuine cry from the heart by someone lamenting rather than a sheer lambasting of the SACC. Nevertheless, I use this Beeld article not because it contains irrefutable truths and not because I agree with what it says. I use it as one would engage in a SWOT analysis exercise. Essentially, the Beeld columnist issues a charge sheet containing the following charges:

- I. The SACC has run out of steam.
- II. The SACC is either silent or hardly audible.
- III. Even when the SACC speaks, no one notices. Not the churches and not the powers that be.
- IV. The SACC has lost its ability to mobilize churches.
- V. The SACC has been outmaneuvered and overtaken by such organizations as NILC and the Turn-to-God Movement, both in terms of mobilizing Christians and of gaining the ear of government.
- VI. The SACC has not developed an identity suited for the current challenges.
- VII. Does the SACC have a future?

5.1 Out of Steam?

Let me start by saying the time to pretend is over. Indeed it was over three years ago when CORAT gave a report that seems to resonate with some of the charges listed above. Our house is not in order. In a recent piece on the challenges facing the ecumenical movement, I use the metaphor of the SACC or ecumenical movement as a sickly bird bequeathed to us by our predecessors. We take this bird back to our forerunners. Like the sisters of Lazarus, Mary and Martha we ask our predecessors to reassure us that though the bird is sick, this sickness is not unto death. 'Is the heart of your bird still beating and is your heart still in it?' is one of the questions our predecessors might ask us.

If the passion is gone, then the *pathos* is gone. Without pathos all we do is ritual, rote and routine. Without pathos it is not possible to dream. Without pathos it is not possible to act. Without pathos it is not possible to be prophetic. If it is true that there is no passion and that we have run out of steam it means the employees of the SACC are no more than a life-support system installed to artificially keep alive something that has long died. If there is no more passion, then it means the NEC is no more than a bunch of functionaries in charge of a massive euthanasia project. They are no more than cemetery supervisors. If there is no passion, why on earth are SACC staff waking up every day? If the steam is gone, why have we employed and kept – at such costs – such a fat and costly staff complement? You see, without passion, there is no compassion. Without passion all we do is loot, loot from the decorated history of the SACC and from its resources – old and new. And so we must ask ourselves: Have we employed the right people both in management and in governance? Have we the right structures and processes? Have we a vision to generate and fire a passion?

There is a state that is nearly as bad as being without passion. It is the state of being full of passion, but without conviction, being passionate without substance, being passionate about nothing! The remedy to our situation cannot therefore merely be about becoming more enthusiastic and more passionate. Passionate about what? To what end? It seems to me therefore that what we have lost might be both the passion and the substance. Perhaps we have lost passion because we have lost substance. Passion is not a commodity to be sold, bought or conjured up. We cannot become artificially passionate anymore than we can be artificially compassionate. The challenge before us is one of seeking anew the mandate of God for us at this time and then to prayerfully craft a vision, aligned to God, about which we will be passionate. Surely there is no lack of issues. Surely! There is no lack of causes.

5.2 Out of Voice?

We thought we were speaking but we are told we are either silent or inaudible – at least the Beeld columnist says so. If we are not speaking, if we are not interpreting, if we are not acting, if we are not agitating, if we are not hassling, if we are not noisy, if we are not rouble-rousing what the hell have we been doing as a Council of Churches? The charge is that we are inaudible. We are invisible. We cannot be felt – neither warm nor cold. We cannot be tasted – like salt which has lost its saltiness. That is the charge. There is an organization called 'The Voice Clinic' where people are trained on voiced projection. But the assumption is that the clients have some voice. It seems to be that our challenge is at least two-fold: to develop voice and to learn how and when to project it. We issue many nice statements. Many of them issued into a void from a place of weakness. Are some of our statements half-hearted? Many of our statements are perhaps not really meant. Many of them are issued without conviction and our auditors can tell easily. Many of our statements are 'safe and reasonable'. Many of them are neither preceded nor followed by action. Many of them are mere words not related to who we are and what we do. Many of our statements are echoes of the words of others, including those we mean to speak against. Is this how we have run out of voice? I suspect.

But this situation can be corrected. It will be corrected when we rediscover our own unique perspective – our unique voice. Our own voice, not that of COSATU, ANC, PAC, TAC or NILC. To rediscover our unique voice we have to reconnect with our principals – God and the poor. We can correct this situation when we relinquish all fear or favour. We can correct this when we speak from deep within our calling.

We can remedy this when we speak not only with press statements and words but with actions. We have always had a voice. But we have often failed to find and use it.

5.3 Out of Dignity?

The charge is that if and when we talk, few take us seriously: not ordinary people, not the churches and not the government. This is a serious charge. If there was any truth in this, it would mean that we have either lost integrity or relevance. It could mean that we have lost our 'network connection with God' and God's people. Remember Saul, when he lost connection with God? How he was 'boycotted' by God so that God did not speak to him by day and by night? Do you remember how he was desolate, hapless and lost, until he consulted a witch? Is that the state we are in? Or are we worse than Saul in that we may have gone beyond the pain of agony into the bliss of meaningless routine? At least Saul was deeply troubled. So long as he was torn inside, God was knocking at the door of his heart. Are we troubled by the state we are in? Saul was all too aware of his tattered image and of his offended integrity.

God can restore us. Our dignity and integrity is not possible outside of the grace of God. We have no choice but to reconnect with that grace. Integrity cannot be crafted. Dignity cannot be bought. Nor can relevance be artificially conjured up. This is what Saul discovered soon enough. Once we realise that we derive our dignity and integrity from God then we will become both humble and bold. Humble because we are mere creatures, bold because we are created in the image of God. Humble because we are weak, bold because we have been given a powerful ministry to the poor. Therein lays our dignity. If we speak and act from that place, we will speak and act with dignity and those who ignore us will do so at their own peril.

5.4 Can we Mobilize Churches?

If the churches are needed now more than ever before, as the Beeld columnist says; if the churches are crying out for leadership why and how is the SACC not succeeding in providing that mobilization and that leadership? The question is not so much whether we can fill a stadium as it is whether we can kindle spirits and enliven hearts. It is not so much whether we can ordain the President into priesthood as to whether we can make the people of God realise their royal priesthood. If, as the Beeld columnist alleges, the Council of Churches cannot mobilize churches, the Council of Churches is like a football club that cannot play football! If we cannot mobilize churches, what on earth are we doing at Khotso House? If we cannot mobilize the churches, what on earth are we doing in our provincial offices? What white elephant structures have we created? If we cannot mobilize churches, why do we bother calling ourselves a Council of Churches? If all we are is a bunch of conceited individuals drawing salary and other forms of glory from a fictitious entity named after the churches that we cannot mobilise, then we are to be pitied! The churches are both our clients and our principals. If we can neither mobilize nor be mobilized by them then we must seek a different identity and mandate.

While the charge may be slightly exaggerated, it is nevertheless not entirely untrue. Complacency seems to have crept into relations with the churches. Like all relationships, our relationship with the churches is a matter of hard work. I am not convinced that our officials, at all levels, are working hard enough at this, the most crucial of all our relationships. For every summit we have with politicians we should have four with the churches, individual and collective. Indeed the churches have themselves been crying out for this connection. More than any of the charges listed above this is the one with the potential to literally out the SACC out of 'business' if it is not attended to, earnestly and urgently.

5.5 What of the NILC?

Our Beeld columnist alleges that we may have been outmanoeuvred by McCauley, the NILC, the Turn-to-God brigade and by extension also by EFSA, NSRAD, NERSA and the EFSA Church Leaders Forum and many others. We must be careful not to confuse symptoms with the diagnosis here. We must also not conflate victims with perpetrators, or allies with enemies. But the point is well made. President Zuma has shown his hand. He works with and prefers NILC. In his speeches he speaks of NILC and NILC alone –

as if NILC was more than a year old! It is also true that whenever we have attempted to approach him, he has shut the door in our face. In this he is different from former President Mbeki. Mbeki would always meet with us – even though in such meetings he would do most of the talking. Zuma does not consider us worth meeting!

But we must clarify the differences between us and the NILC. For one thing, the NILC is supposed to be an interfaith council and we a Council of Churches. For this reason we reckon that the NILC is more akin to the NRLF. But even there are significant differences. Whereas the NRLF was formed at the initiative of the Mandela government, the NILC was formed at the initiation of the ruling party. That is no secret. Indeed, the NILC acts more like an affiliate of the Commission for Religious Affairs of the ANC. Indeed, without any founding documents or constitution that we have been able to obtain (despite our repeated requests for the same) the NILC seems to exist in the heart and mind of the chairperson of the ANC's Commission for Religious Affairs (CRA), Dr Mathole Motshekga. Both times when we met with the NILC he was the NILC's most articulate spokesperson. He is also the ANC Chief Whip in Parliament. For all intents and purposes, in our experience, he is the real General Secretary and President of the NILC.

Unlike the NRLF which was a forum, we are told that the NILC is going to be a service delivery partner of the ruling party. In my view, the NILC should be the least of our worries. If we should worry at all, let it be about how we engage with CRA – the real power behind the NILC. Besides, if the trend continues, the next President will create his own NILC – and that might be in less than five years. We should be worried, though, about the apparent party political abduction of an interfaith platform and instrument. It is bad enough when this is done by government. But for this to be done by a political party might be worse. We say this not because the ANC is a bad political party. By no means! Many of our members vote for the ANC. Indeed, the ANC is one of the few institutions into which the dreams of millions of the South African poor are invested. Our objection is one of principle rather than sentiment. The principle is that it is always ominous for a political party to take it upon itself to organize and reconfigure the religious landscape. Consider what the role of these party aligned religious bodies will be during the elections. Consider the potential for corruption!

We should not be too concerned about being outmanoeuvred by Ray McCauley, NILC or Angus Buchan. We are not in a popularity contest. All indications are that we have different missions. And there is room for all under God's sun. Even the fallout with the Zuma presidency is not the worst thing that could happen to us. The question is how we shall use the freedom that comes with presidential rejection. Only the SACC can be the SACC. Even if the SACC was to close shop today, none of the other organizations can become the SACC. They may raise more money than the SACC. Fill more stadiums than the SACC. Have more dinner parties with the President than the SACC. But they will not and cannot be the SACC. But the SACC can be less than the SACC. That is the challenge we face.

6. Reclaiming Our Future

Given the above reflections, we have to think of the future – of country and of SACC in particular. Here is a warning: God can achieve God's purposes without the SACC like God often achieved God's purposes without the cooperation and instrumentality of Israel. The SACC has never been weaker than it is at this time. Its structures are weak. Its processes, its image, its vision are all characterized by weakness. This is where I turn to Paul, in his second letter to Corinthians:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. **9** But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. **10** That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Could this moment, this phase, and these circumstances be just the ideal conditions for us to appreciate the grace of the Lord as well as the power of the Lord which is perfected and fulfilled not in glory and triumph, but in weakness and disadvantage? What does the Lord mean when he says 'my power is perfected in weakness'? What do we need to do to turn this weakness into strength for the sake of the Lord and for the sake of witness?

My suggestion is that we must do everything necessary to let the Lord use our current weakness to perfect and demonstrate His strength. Among the things we need to do we must include the disciplines of Lent: *prayer*, *penitence*, *almsgiving* and *self-denial*. We must be courageous. We must look at each of the charges I laid out above and ask ourselves what we need to do in relation to our structures, our human resources, our leadership and management structures, our processes and our vision. Let us be bold enough to do what must be done, not what we can afford to do. Let us do what is necessary, not what is nice.

There is a Michael Jackson song that comes to mind. It is titled 'Man in the mirror'ⁱⁱ. In the song, Jackson suggests that in order to change the world, one must start with the man in the mirror. Maybe Jackson spent too much time in front of the mirror, but he sure touched many people with his music. For the SACC to have impact, we have to start by looking at ourselves in the mirror. This is what I have attempted to do in this presentation. This is what the CORAT SACC evaluation process has been about. It is both crucial and necessary. We have to take an honest look at who we are, what we are, what we are about, our capacity and our mission. That is what the mirror will help us to do.

But I want us to switch and move from the mirror metaphor to another metaphor, the metaphor of the window. If we see ourselves in the mirror, we see others through the window. If we see our own in the mirror, we see the world through the window. The mirror reflects our own selves back to us, but the window reveals a much wider and inviting world. I am not suggesting that the SACC has no need for the mirror, but I am asking whether it is not time we moved to the window, too. Through the window we may discover just as much, if not more, about who and what we ought to be. Through the window we shall see the children of the world – the children under siege of violence, the children growing up in a moral vacuum filled with television and drugs. Through the window we shall see the poor struggling to make ends meet, loving one another and loving God. Through the window we shall see a dying earth crying out for help. Through the window, we shall be moved to action. In action we shall discover not only who we are but who our neighbour is.

My plea to the South African churches is simple: Take back your Council of Churches. Take back the SACC. Take it not back-ward, but take it forward. Take it back from the brink of financial and theological disaster. Take it back from complacency. Take it back from the bliss of meaningless routine. Take it back from the clutches of donors who wish the Council to be and do what they will. Take it back from a bureaucratic class which sees it as a company and an employment agency. Take it back from voicelessness. Take it back. Take it back from the clutches of political parties. Take it back from the control of government. Take back from fear. But don't just take it back. Give it back to God and let God reshape and re-form it, through weakness to strength.

God is able and willing to lift the SACC out of the valley of despair to the top of the hill of witness. I have no doubt in my mind that God has work for the SACC in this country at this time. We will not fail God for God cannot fail us.

i **If**

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or, being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with triumph and disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with wornout tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breath a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on";

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings - nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run -
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man my son

ii **Man In The Mirror**

I'm Gonna Make A Change,
For Once In My Life
It's Gonna Feel Real Good,
Gonna Make A Difference
Gonna Make It Right . . .

As I, Turn Up The Collar On My
Favourite Winter Coat
This Wind Is Blowin' My Mind
I See The Kids In The Street,
With Not Enough To Eat
Who Am I, To Be Blind?
Pretending Not To See
Their Needs
A Summer's Disregard,

A Broken Bottle Top
And A One Man's Soul
They Follow Each Other On
The Wind Ya' Know
'Cause They Got Nowhere
To Go
That's Why I Want You To
Know

I'm Starting With The Man In
The Mirror
I'm Asking Him To Change
His Ways
And No Message Could Have
Been Any Clearer
If You Wanna Make The World
A Better Place
(If You Wanna Make The
World A Better Place)
Take A Look At Yourself, And
Then Make A Change
(Take A Look At Yourself, And
Then Make A Change)
(Na Na Na, Na Na Na, Na Na,
Na Nah)

I've Been A Victim Of A Selfish
Kind Of Love
It's Time That I Realize
That There Are Some With No
Home, Not A Nickel To Loan
Could It Be Really Me,
Pretending That They're Not
Alone?

A Willow Deeply Scarred,
Somebody's Broken Heart
And A Washed-Out Dream
(Washed-Out Dream)
They Follow The Pattern Of
The Wind, Ya' See
Cause They Got No Place
To Be
That's Why I'm Starting With
Me
(Starting With Me!)

Refrain