

‘After 70 years are completed I will visit you and restore’ – Tshego Motaung



Sandton skyscrapers and Alexandra shacks (PHOTO: theconversation.com)

The history of our country is a complex one – and whenever we tell the story of South Africa, we often take out parts we don't like.

This makes us an interesting country where history lessons often depend on who is telling the story.

I was confronted by this reality once, while visiting Namibia, when I was accused as a South African of colonising Namibia.

I felt I could not be held responsible for that because it was the fault of the former apartheid government and not the new South African government.

After much argument and my attempts to explain that it was unfair to hold me and our current government responsible, it was the closing statement made that hit home.

My accuser said as long as the new South Africa benefited from the “spoils” of apartheid, we too were responsible.

I had never thought of myself or our government as colonisers. But as I got to understand the economic manipulations that continued in Namibia even after independence to the benefit of South African companies and our GDP, I understood the point and realised our hands are not entirely clean.

Today the issues of white privilege, racism and inequality are still major challenges to the progress of Namibia – all these are legacies of the past that continue to benefit South African businesses.

I later understood that perhaps the reason I couldn't comprehend the idea of our government being referred to as a coloniser is because we are in the same boat in our own country.

We managed to gain political freedom, but we are still not entirely free. We are still grappling with racism, white privilege and issues of economic freedom that have somehow eluded us since 1994.

And until the majority of South Africans have gained this liberty, it will be difficult to address the neocolonial tendencies of South African companies in the continent.

Reviewing my version of SA's history

This conversation helped me review what I believed to be South Africa's history. I realised that my version of South Africa's history was mostly through the eyes of my people group – the Black people of South Africa opposed to White rule and at times even not acknowledging the pain, struggles and contribution of the Coloured and Indian communities.

Our inability to acknowledge everything that has happened in this country as part of our shared history limits our ability to resolve the issues that confront us today.

One of the dates that caught my attention in the life of our nation was May 26 – last Saturday. This date marks exactly 70 years since apartheid was institutionalised in 1948.

Seventy years is an important milestone in the life of a person. Human development is often explained in seven-year cycles, with each stage flagging an important transition to the next level of maturity.

While many, like me, would want to think of South Africa as a 24-years old nation today – we cannot ignore the fact that this new government inherited a government with a history that predates 1994, and if we fail to acknowledge this we will miss valuable lessons.

The 70 years also caught my attention because it reminded of the story in the Bible when Israel was being taken captive to Babylon. Their leaders tried to resist in the beginning but were warned by the prophet Jeremiah that any effort to resist captivity or attempt to escape was doomed to fail until 70 years were completed.

It was at that time, as they were being dragged to captivity. that this great promise was made:

“When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” – Jeremiah 29:11.

While today we love quoting this Scripture, those who heard it couldn't believe it. It was unimaginable to reconcile this promise with the pain and destruction they were going through.

For most South Africans, the past 70 years can be likened to a period of captivity, like this story in the Bible. Many people hoped that 1994 would be their time of liberty, but today we know that the we have not been able to fully dismantle the power of the laws enacted in 1948.

What happened, unfortunately, in 1994 is that we began a nation-building project based on a framework designed by apartheid architects. As a result we have seen economic growth and high inequalities. It is also no surprise that the Afrikaner dream of creating wealth equivalent to that of English-speaking whites in 1948, has been realised, if not surpassed, in the new South Africa – this was the design of the economy.

This past May 26 went past like any other day – with nothing done to remind us of the beginning of what became a powerful oppressive regime because it brings up deep-seated pain to some and shame to others. Yes, I don't expect parties and celebration but rather that we use this 70th anniversary as an opportunity to reflect on – to understand – what made the apartheid idea more attractive to those in power than other ideas that were proposed at the time.

Time to learn lessons from past

This, I believe, will help us learn some lessons, especially as we are facing a process of reviewing the Constitution of South Africa to address the subject of land redistribution.

One of the reasons the National Party won elections in that era is because it capitalised on the fears and insecurities of White Afrikaners who were still suffering trauma as a result of the Anglo-Boer war. The fear of others ruling them again created an atmosphere in which the ruling elite was given power to use all forms of evil to fight this perceived threat.

In a position of brokenness, the Afrikaner people couldn't imagine a possibility of a good future shared with all others in the country.

Today it is no longer debatable whether South Africa is a society of broken and hurting people. President Cyril Ramaphosa acknowledged this at the funeral of Mama Winnie Mandela when he said: "We must also recognise our own wounds

as a nation. We must acknowledge that we are a society that is hurting, damaged by our past, numbed by our present and hesitant about our future. This may explain why we are easily prone to anger and violence.”

The brokenness of our society doesn't only affect the poor and marginalised, but also impacts those in positions of economic power. Most of them are driven by fear and anxiety about losing power that renders them incapable of imagining a possible good future if they shared their wealth.

We must therefore be careful of how the state of our brokenness could be manipulated at this time when we deal with the land issue.

As we marked the end of 70 years of apartheid, we find ourselves yet again at another defining moment in the history of country, where the choices we make today will affect generations to come. We need to rise above our past and lay a new foundation for our future that will give hope to everyone, one that all our children will be proud of 70 years from today.