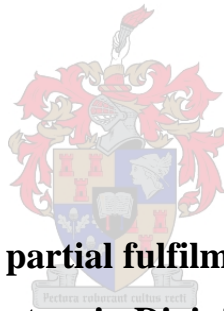


**Prophetic Preaching in a post-apartheid
South Africa: An URCSA perspective**

By

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment is my own work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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Signature

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Date

ABSTRACT

This study is about an investigation in the role of the prophetic voice of the church in a post-apartheid South Africa. In the first chapter I have given a brief description of the history of apartheid as well as a detailed description of the role the church played during these years in South Africa. I also looked at the impact that the Belhar Confession played during this time.

In chapter two I have tried to deal with the difficult challenges that faced the church now after democracy and how the voice of the church can be heard in society. I have looked at the different ways that ministers made use of prophetic preaching during the apartheid era. Due to the apartheid system, many people suffered tremendously in this country. During these years of oppression people were leaning heavily on guidance from the church. This was not just for spiritual guidance but people were dependent on the church leaders for emotional support during their hours of need. I have tried to look at the different prophetic voices in the church during these difficult times.

In chapter three I have tried to give possible recommendations to assist the church in regaining its prophetic voice in our society. I have looked at several ways in which our congregants could be challenged in terms of prophetic preaching. I have also looked at our understanding of the language of hope and lament. Finally, I have tried to give guidelines in terms of prophetic preaching in our context today.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie ondersoek die rol van die profetiese stem van die kerk in 'n post-apartheid Suid Afrika. In die eerste hoofstuk word 'n bondige oorsig gegee van die geskiedenis van apartheid sowel as 'n verduideliking oor die rol van die kerk tydens die apartheids jare in Suid Afrika. Daar word ook gekyk na die impak wat die Belhar belydenis gehad het in hierdie tyd.

In hoofstuk twee van die studie is die fokus op die moeilike uitdagings wat die kerk in die gesig staar na demokrasie en ook hoe die kerk se stem gehoor kan word in die gemeenskap. Daar is gekyk na die verskillende maniere waarop predikante gebruik gemaak het van profetiese prediking tydens die apartheids jare. As gevolg van die politieke stelsel het baie mense swaar gekry in hierdie land. Tydens hierdie jare van oppressie het mense staat gemaak op die kerk om vir hulle leiding te gee. Die mense was nie net afhanklik van die kerk vir geestelike leiding nie, maar ook vir emosionele ondersteuning.

In hoofstuk drie van die studie word moontlike aanbevelings gemaak om die kerk te ondersteun in haar soeke na haar profetiese stem in die gemeenskap. Daar word ook gekyk na maniere waarop gemeentelede kan uitgedaag word in terme van profetiese prediking. 'n Belangrike konsep waarna gekyk word is die *taal van hoop en weeklag*. Daar word ook gekyk na profetiese prediking in ons konteks vandag.

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Chapter 1

1.1 Background

In this research paper I would like to look at the prophetic voice of the URC¹ church in a post-apartheid² South Africa. When we look at our South African society today, it is not a very optimistic picture that we see. In our newspapers it is reported daily how the country is ravaged by crime, corruption, rape and violence against women and children, etc. It seems as if our democratic nation is in desperate need of a moral restoration.

In this chapter I will give a brief description of the history of apartheid as well as a detailed description of the role the church played during these years in South Africa. I will also look at the impact that the Belhar Confession played during this time.

During the rule of the Apartheid-government in South Africa, most churches in the country were challenged to speak with a firm voice against the crimes and atrocities committed against the people of this land. The voice of the church, against these injustices, was heard all over the country and the world at large. People took hands, literally, and stood firm for what they believed in. People died for their beliefs and convictions. People lived in exile, and still fought for the freedom of their country.

Today, when we see the crisis that our country finds itself in, one would expect to hear the church speak in a loud and clear voice. But this is not always the case. It seems as if the voice of the church has become weak, or even silent, since we received our independence in 1994. When we compare the “voice of the church” during the apartheid era to its voice in the post-apartheid era, we are forced to challenge the church on its role in our communities.

Now, after democracy, it would seem as if the voice of the church “*has long been silenced in the political arena*” (Villa-Vicencio, 1992:4). Suffice to say that people are asking questions about the

¹ Uniting Reformed Church

² In using the term, post-apartheid, I am in no way implying that we are living in a perfect society after the years of struggle for freedom. South Africa is still struggling in many ways to come to terms with the effects and decisions that were taken and enforced by the apartheid government. Even though our struggle for political freedom has been successful, we are still in a struggle for socio-economic liberation, etc. However, we are living in a post-apartheid country now because the structural system of apartheid has been abolished.

visibility and involvement of the church in political and socio-economic issues. Villa-Vicencio is of the opinion that the church needs to “*translate the values of the gospel into practice*” (Villa-Vicencio, 1992:4) and to talk in a voice that is understandable to the people. He believes that unless the church does this “*it may well have no significant role to play in the period of reconstruction*” (Villa-Vicencio, 1992:4).

Looking at the past and observing the present, it is clear that the challenges facing the church are different. South Africa is a country of diverse cultures and unique problems. The theology of reconstruction in this country therefore needs to breakdown the “*prejudices of race, class and sexism*” (Villa-Vicencio, 1992:7), to name but a few. This process of reconstruction lies beyond our political liberation.

1.2 The struggle of the church during apartheid

It would probably be correct to say that the history of the church as well as the church’s struggle was initiated with “*the arrival of the Dutch (1652), the French Huguenots (1668), and the early German settlers a little later*” (de Gruchy & de Gruchy, 2004:1).

From the outset, the Dutch settlers made sure that the identity of the Cape started to change into one with a Dutch character. The Dutch Reformed Church (known as the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk) was established and it was controlled by classis in Amsterdam. It was inevitable that the Dutch would have clashes with the inhabitants of the land. These inhabitants were labeled as “heathens” that desperately needed to be witnessed to. Different missionary organizations send missionaries to assist with this task. Unfortunately this was not an easy task. It would seem that class division amongst the people started to affect all spheres of their lives. White members of the Dutch Reformed Church refused to share the Holy Communion table with those who were not white. This conflict affected the church life to such an extent that this attitude of the white people became a law in this church at the synod of 1857.

Boesak commented on this issue in the foreword of the book *Apartheid is a heresy*. He stated that “*apartheid was taken from its political framework and placed in the centre of the life of the Church*” (de Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio, 1983:xi). He continues to point out that when you deal with apartheid

you “*deal with the very heart of the Gospel: the Table of the Lord*” (de Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio, 1983:xi). Although some might not agree, apartheid had its origin around the Table of the Lord. This struggle of the non-white people of the land was a struggle for freedom in their country of birth.

1.2.1 Sharpeville 1960

Sharpeville can be seen as a critical moment in the history of the church, and the country as a whole. On the 21st March 1960, between 3 000 to 10 000 people were participating in a peaceful protest. The Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) led this protest. It was targeted at the “*abolition of pass laws, and was specifically aimed at opposing white domination and emancipating blacks in South Africa*” (Hofmeyr & Pillay (eds), 1994:273). This protest was seen as an opposition act against the apartheid government and the police opened fire on the unarmed crowd, “*killing 67 people, and wounding 186*” (Tutu, 1982:65).

Ironically, the government put the blame for this massacre “*squarely on the blacks and their organizations while the police were excused of all blame*” (Hofmeyr & Pillay (eds), 1994:273). The confidence of the government was still intact regardless of the shockwaves that went through the country. Prime Minister Verwoerd categorically stated that “*the government sees no reason to depart from the policy of separate development because of the disturbances*” (Ryan, 2005:53). Due to these “disturbances”, the apartheid government declared a state of emergency throughout the country. The African National Congress and PAC were banned and thousands of blacks were imprisoned. The ANC went underground and came to the conclusion that armed struggle was the only way that freedom could be assured. The PAC, which was also banned, went underground and established its military wing. Due to this political unrest, a number of white people who felt threatened about the situation in the country, decided to leave. They took substantial amounts of money with them and this obviously had a negative effect on the economy of South Africa.

Churches were divided on the Sharpeville incident. Apart from the DRC, many English-speaking churches spoke out strongly against the actions of the apartheid government. During March 1960, nine leading members of the Transvaal, Free State and Cape moderates of the DRC issued a statement. They spoke against the condemning statements, which were made against the government by churches at home and abroad. They called on these church leaders to be more

responsible in their actions. The DRC acknowledged “*‘shortcomings’ on the part of the church and government, but reaffirmed its support for apartheid, or ‘independent distinctive development’, providing it was ‘carried in a just and honourable way’*” (Ryan, 2005:54).

The Archbishop of the Anglican Church, Joost de Blank, responded vehemently against this statement of the DRC. He made it clear that the “*entire Christendom was at stake since millions of blacks associated the government (of which most of its members belonged to the DRC) with Christianity*” (Hofmeyr & Pillay (eds), 1994:274). He subsequently urged the World Council of Churches (WCC) to expel the DRC from the council. The WCC did not expel the DRC but decided to call for “*the Cottesloe Consultation between the eight member churches in South Africa*” (Hofmeyr & Pillay (eds), 1994:274).

1.2.2 The Cottesloe Consultation (7-10 December 1960 in Johannesburg)

Representatives of the World Council of Churches, as well from the member churches in South Africa, had a meeting to try and discern the “*problems of human relationships*” in South Africa and to consult with each another on the common task and responsibility that they faced in “*the light of the Word of God*” (de Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio, 1983:149). The general theme was the Christian attitude towards race relations. The delegates made clear that they were against all unjust discrimination.

However, different views existed on the basic issues of apartheid. Two major ones were articulated, namely

- i) apartheid is “*unacceptable in principle because it was contrary to the Christian calling and unworkable in practice*” (de Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio, 1983:149);
- ii) “*a policy of differentiation can be defended from the Christian point of view*” (de Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio, 1983:149). The idea was that apartheid was the only realistic solution to the problems of race relations.

Even though the consultation had to work from these two different viewpoints, they were still able to draft a statement concerning human need and justice because this affects human relations amongst all the races of the country.

At the first Cottesloe planning meeting an agreement was reached on the following topics:

- i) *“the factual situation in South Africa;*
- ii) *the Christian understanding of the gospel for relationships among races;*
- iii) *an understanding of contemporary history from a Christian viewpoint, particularly with regard to rapid social change;*
- iv) *the meaning of the state of emergency in South Africa;*
- v) *and the witness of the church in respect of justice, mission and cooperation”* (Ryan, 2005:56).

The churches that were involved at this planning meeting agreed to compile a memorandum on the different topics. Beyers Naudé was deeply involved in the arrangements for the Cottesloe Consultation. He gradually came to realize the strong views these churchmen had on apartheid was not without foundation. He now realized that the Anglican Church and others had been studying the race issues in the country and they had come to different conclusions to that of the Afrikaans community. Beyers Naudé became an important historical figure out of these events.

As strange as it may seem, a spirit of unity existed amongst the delegates of this Consultation. Many described it as *“a gift of God by His Spirit”* (Ryan, 2005:59). This growing spirit of unity led to a *“spontaneous and widespread demand on the part of the delegates for a statement”* (Ryan, 2005:59). A drafting committee was appointed and the Cottesloe Consultation Statement was born.

The Cottesloe Consultation *statement* dealt with a variety of issues, namely

- rejection of all forms of racial discrimination
- equal rights
- duty and special responsibility of the church
- the lack of sufficient communication and consultation amongst different groups
- mixed marriages
- the importance of the integrity of the family
- the economic well-being of all South African citizens
- the right of all South African citizens to participate in political decision-making, etc.

It is important to note that the delegates from the Hervormde Kerk³ disapproved and opposed this emerging statement. They were supposedly out of step with happenings at this Consultation. The entire delegation withdrew from the proceedings and issued a separate statement in which they reaffirmed their commitment to the policy of “separate development”. They were also of the opinion that the Cottesloe Consultation statement contained ideas, which were so farfetched that it could not be supported.

1.3 Research Problem

The church struggle in South Africa is still continuing today. Even though I only mentioned the events at Sharpeville and the Cottesloe Consultation, I want to re-iterate again that these two incidents are by no means the only happenings in the history of our church.

Throughout the church’s history, people have been struggling for freedom. The church was seen as a beacon of hope, a place of refuge and a mouthpiece of the people. No other time in history has probably seen the prophetic role of the church at work as it was experienced during the time of apartheid.

The 1980’s could be seen as a “make or break” period in South Africa. It was a time of “state of emergencies” and sanctions. Theology mattered during this time. Theological debates emerged and the main question that theologians wrestled with was “what is the heart of the problem”. It would seem that it was a question of struggling with a false gospel as well as the notion that you can bring about justice, healing and reconciliation along the route of separate development. This was contrary to the true gospel. It is interesting to note that even during these trying times, people were already exploring reconciliation. The Black Theology Project emerged and they challenged the understanding of reconciliation within the anti-apartheid movement.

The general feeling at this point in time was that reconciliation does not mean that you have to lose your identity. Reconciliation meant the respect for other people who were different.

³ Reformed Church

During this era, the Belhar Confession came into being as well. The Dutch Reformed Church family was now in a “new” struggle. The NGSK (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sending Kerk) and the NGSKA (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sending Kerk in Africa), which were the mission churches, broke away from the DRC. Their name changed to the Uniting Reformed Church. The URC made it clear that it could only unite with the DRC if they would accept the Confession of Belhar unconditionally. Throughout the years several consultations, etc. took place and it would seem that the unity process is now strongly on its way again. The church is hopeful for unification within the next three years.

The church has come a long way and has fought many battles. However, the struggle of the church in South Africa is by no means over. Apartheid as a structural system might be something of the past, but it is quite evident that as a country we are still struggling with the baggage of the past. People are still living in the shadow of decisions, which were made in the apartheid era.

The prophetic voice of the church, which was so strong during the years of apartheid, seems to be weak now. It is as if we are busy with a “political dance”, both inside and outside of church. A “dance” in which nobody wants to take a firm stand for what they believe in; a “dance” in which people don’t want to be confrontational about their beliefs because we might come across as being offensive. It is as if the church is struggling with “vocal impotency”.

We need to address many social and ethical issues in our communities today. Crime is rife in South Africa today. We are still struggling with a lot of issues, some of which are related to decisions, which were made by the apartheid government. We can only hope and pray that as a church

- i) we will stay true to the Gospel and our witness in this country and in the world;
- ii) we will work together with all spheres of society to make South Africa a place where the ideals of unity, justice and reconciliation will be embodied in the country as a whole.

After touching upon the “vocal impotence” of the church, the basic research question that I will be struggling with is “does the church still have a message for its people in this post-apartheid era?” Does the church still have a prophetic voice? People are bombarded with so much violence on a daily basis. The media is full of reports of violence against women and children, corruption, etc. It has become clear that our country is facing a time of ethical challenges. People seem to have lost

hope that our society will ever be one of peace and tranquillity. It is against this background that I would like to look at the prophetic role of our church.

1.4 Hypotheses

The church needs a new approach in its dealings with the church community. People need a message of hope in our country. When you look at the different communities in our country, it is evident that the rich becomes richer while the poor seems to be in a never-ending cycle of poverty. Our political leaders seem only to be interested in the problems of the people and this country when it is election time. This is the time of promises of what they will do for the nation, if the people were to vote for them. Unfortunately, these promises never seem to materialize.

It has therefore become clear that our people don't just need a message of hope but they need to "*see a miracle happening in South Africa*". They need to see concrete changes in this country. People need to see that their lives are changing for the better. Many organizations are hard at work to try and uplift and develop communities of this country. However, people need to be uplifted spiritually as well.

The church can play a vital role in this upliftment process. It should be part of the change agents in this country. The gospel played a vital role during this country's struggle for freedom. It can once again play a vital role in guiding the people of this land in the challenges that they are facing today.

We should not underestimate the role and importance of preaching today. Through preaching, we can regenerate our moral values and uplift the "spiritual mood" in our country. This country has been ravished by violence and people desperately need to hear that things can change for the better. That was the core message that was preached during the apartheid-era, and things did get better. Preaching therefore has a vital role to play in our church today.

1.5 Methodology

During the apartheid era, our churches made use of prophetic preaching to give hope to the people in this country. Our people need this prophetic preaching again. However, we need to rediscover a new role for prophetic preaching. This new concept of prophetic preaching could break the silence we are currently experiencing from our pulpits.

It is not only the “silence” from our pulpits that need to be addressed. There is a spirit of tiredness and hopelessness amongst congregants that also need to be changed. People are so tired of the struggle against the moral decay of our societies that they have lost hope.

I have no doubt in my mind that the church can play a vital role in changing this negative energy in our societies into something constructive and positive. I believe that we sometimes underestimate the powerful influence that the gospel has on the lives of our people. Africa, as a continent, has always been seen as a place of religion. It is a place where some cultures still believe in the strong influence of their ancestors. However, these people also call themselves Christians and they do not doubt the might of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word *prophet* comes from the Greek noun *prophetes* and its primary meaning is “to foresee”. (Petersen, 2002:5). However, Petersen pointed out that we cannot just understand the task of prophets in this sense only. The gift of foreseeing the future was but one aspect of what the prophets were all about. Von Rad also pointed this out when he talked about the different kinds of prophets and prophecy that was present in the Ancient Near East (Von Rad, 1965:7). What is important to note is that the prophets of Israel did not just speak about the future. They addressed important issues that mattered in the present while referring to the past.

We find four titles for *prophet* in the Hebrew Bible, namely *seer*, *diviner*, *man of God* and *prophet*. Petersen pointed out that “*the most frequent term for prophet is nābî the term probably signifies someone called to a certain task*” (Petersen, 2002:6). He further pointed out that Israel’s prophets were writers and/or speakers. They received their messages in different ways. The Old Testament prophets were intermediaries between the human and the divine worlds. Petersen makes it clear that these prophets were “*boundary figures, standing between the world of the sacred and secular*”

(Petersen, 2002:7). It is also important to note that some of these prophets also acted as priests. It would seem that there was no clear distinction between a *prophet* and a *priest* in ancient times. Some prophets acted as priests and vice versa. Examples of these are Jeremiah, Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:3) and Joel (1:13-14), to name but a few. Petersen makes an important observation when he mentions the difficulty in establishing true and false prophecy. It is not a problem when only one prophet makes a claim. However, when two prophets are contradicting each other regarding the same issue, it becomes quite difficult to establish who is the real prophet.

When dealing with the issue of prophetic preaching in our country today, I will make use of a literature study. I will focus on the prophetic preaching that was done in the past and how that encouraged the people to be hopeful despite the dark times that our country experienced. The contributions that I hope to make through this study could serve as a guide to the Uniting Reformed Church, in particular, and to the religious community at large.

1.6 Possible Outline

The outline of this paper will be as follows: **Chapter Two** will deal with the difficult challenges that face the church now after democracy and how the churches voice can be heard in society. So in effect, this chapter will deal with the social dimension of our country at present. In **Chapter Three**, I will try and provide possible recommendations to assist the church in regaining its prophetic voice in our society.

Chapter 2

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have already mentioned that due to the political system of apartheid many people suffered tremendously in this country. During these years of oppression people were leaning heavily on guidance from the church. This was not just spiritual guidance but people were dependent on the church leaders for emotional support during their hours of need.

Church leaders like Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naudé, Allan Boesak and many others were the *voice* of the people. They were the ones who reminded the masses that their liberation is imminent. These church leaders were the prophetic voices in a country where people needed to hear that all is not lost. They had to console the people who had to stand at the graves of loved ones that they had lost during the political struggle. Their prophetic words of consolation had to empower people to continue with their lives, despite so many difficulties.

Many people were hopeful that things would change for the better in South Africa when we receive our hard-earned freedom. However, things were not so straightforward. Yes, we did receive our freedom and we are living in a democratic country now. Unfortunately we are faced with many challenges, challenges that we sometimes think we may never overcome. In 2000, Johan Cilliers wrote a book titled *Die genade van gehoorsaamheid*. In chapter 1 he mentions that this book was “born out of blood”⁴ (Cilliers, 2000:10). He continued to say that after six years of being a democratic society, South Africa was facing an increase in criminal activity like never before. Now, in 2007, it would seem that this picture that Cilliers painted in 2000 is even worse than before.

We are faced, on a daily basis, with news reports of murders, the rape and brutal killing of children and women, hi-jackings, corruption, drug abuse, drug related crimes, etc. The South African society is bleeding like never before. Communities are struggling to keep their children safe. Different organizations are working with the police to try and get some stability in our fragile communities. But our societies just do not seem to get better.

⁴ My own translation

Ministers are standing on the pulpit week after week trying to give a message of hope to a broken people. In this chapter I will deal with the difficult challenges that face the church now after democracy and how the voice of the church could be heard in society. Looking at the socio-economic challenges in South Africa today one can almost not believe that this is the same nation that struggled for political freedom for so many years. We have lost so many lives and this loss of lives is still continuing on a daily basis. The challenges we are experiencing today are in a free and democratic society. We may have obtained political freedom in 1994 but “*socio-economic liberation is still high on the list of priorities of the country*” (Pieterse, 2001:111)

In the past, the churches were at the forefront of fighting injustices in our communities. People believed and held onto the *prophetic words* that were spoken to them in their hour of need. In many instances the faith of the people was what got them through their trials and tribulations. These days it seems as if people have lost faith and hope in the abilities of the church, or should I rather say *in the abilities of God*. Our churches are becoming empty, especially where there are no ministers. And this scenario is becoming more evident in the rural areas. This is where churches are struggling financially and cannot afford to call a minister. Members of the church council are then forced to deal with issues, which are sometimes more than they can handle.

We must also remember that some of the *prophetic words*, which were spoken during the apartheid era, were not for the freedom and liberation of the majority of the South African people. The Bible was also used to justify the system of apartheid. It is not possible to look at the challenges of the church today without drawing a picture of what the church looked like in the apartheid era. It is quite evident that the influence of the church in the political struggle had far reaching consequences. Despite the strict rules that the apartheid government enforced, ministers were challenged to address the issues that touched the lives of their congregants. This inevitably placed them in dangerous positions. It is important to mention that this was not just true for black ministers but also for some white ministers who dared to go against the government of the day. This exercise will give us guidance on how not to interpret the Bible today.

2.2 Prophetic preaching then and now

Pieterse is of the opinion that prophetic preaching is “*but one form of preaching, pertaining to social comment and socio-economic and political critique of a society and its body politic*” (Pieterse, 2001:106). He further mentions that in order to preach prophetically you need to experience the context in which you preach, i.e. be in-tuned with the needs of the people. When we look at the people who were seen as prophets of freedom in the apartheid era, it becomes evident that they did not just preach about the difficulties that the communities were experiencing but that they were also living it.

Desmond Tutu was such a man. A man that “*became heavily embroiled in controversy as he spoke out against the injustice of the apartheid system*” (Pieterse, 2001:11). Tutu also experienced hardships during these trying years but these did not stop him to make a substantial contribution to the fight for freedom in this country. His efforts were recognized when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. Tutu did not just address people from the pulpit. He was also present at funerals and lead sermons when people who were victims of violence in the political struggle were buried. The liberation theology that he preached was a pillar of strength for the people. It gave them courage to continue with the struggle under very difficult conditions. Tutu was of the opinion that “*the church must align itself with the powerless, the marginalized and the voiceless. It must strive to become the voice of the voiceless to ensure that the cries of the poor are heard. It has the enormous responsibility of telling the truth, of identifying evil wherever it may be found and of insisting that the government, any government, must be honest*” (Pieterse, 2001:35). These words are still very true in our society today.

According to a study that Pieterse and other colleagues did on the sermons of Tutu, they started to look at two main themes in particular, namely “*the political context of apartheid and the content of liberation theology*” (Pieterse, 2001:38). He continues to stress that the speeches that were delivered by Tutu was done in specific situations and Tutu actually refers to these circumstances in his speeches. In terms of liberation theology, it seems as if Tutu put special emphasis on the idea that “*God is on the side of the oppressed*” (Pieterse, 2001:39). This message obviously gave hope to the people. It illustrated to them that God did not forget about them in their hour of need and that they will be liberated and set free in the future.

Tutu did not just preach freedom for the oppressed but also for the oppressor. He made it clear that God is also a *God of reconciliation* and that He would forgive the sins of the oppressor as well. He was not afraid to name the injustices that the South African people suffered at the hands of the apartheid government. However, his ministry was grounded in the gospel and his message of hope was for all South Africans, black and white alike.

As I have mentioned earlier, black ministers were not the only ones speaking out against the apartheid government. A section of the Dutch Reformed Church, of which Beyers Naudé was a minister, “*justified apartheid theologically in the first decade of the apartheid era*” (Pieterse, 2001:27). Naudé was one of the white ministers who dared to go against the viewpoint of his church and the apartheid government. This he did while he was a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond. In the book *My land van hoop: die lewe van Beyers Naudé* he explained in detail how he started to wrestle with viewpoints and issues which did not make sense anymore. He even admitted that if he had given more attention as a theological student he might have started to question certain things at an earlier stage of his life.

On the 27th May 1962, he delivered a sermon in his congregation Aasvoëlkop, in which he clearly stated his beliefs. His sermon was based on 1 Corinthians 2:2. He told the congregation that he believed that “*a congregation has the right to know how their minister sees the issues of the day in the light of Gods word*”⁵ (Naudé, 1995:62). He also made it clear that he believed a minister owes it to God and to his congregation to be open and honest despite the consequences. He also stressed that it was not in line with the being of the church to deny anyone membership of the church because of their race and color. Needless to say, the reaction of the congregation on this sermon was threefold. A small number of people supported Naudé while a number of church council members made it very clear that they were not happy with his revelations. However, the majority of the congregation did not react immediately. Naudé was of the opinion that they might have been confused and unsure about this new approach to Scripture. People were so used to another type of message from the pulpit of the Dutch Reformed Church that it was obviously a shock for them to hear one of their own preach something totally different.

⁵ My own translation

Naudé continued with his work as minister at Aasvoëlkop but at the same time he was also involved in an ecumenical paper *Pro Veritate* as well as the *Christian Institute*. The break with his church came when he was asked to become director of the *Christian Institute*. Naudé wanted to know from his church if he would be able to keep his status as minister if he accepts this ecumenical position. Needless to say, the church did not grant him his request. They did so without forwarding him any reasons.

Naudé knew that there was no turning back for him now. On the 22nd September 1963 he gave his last sermon at the congregation of Aasvoëlkop. It was titled “*Gehoorzaam aan God*”⁶. His scripture reading was taken from Acts 5:29⁷. Naudé made it very clear that the “*choice he was given was not between congregation work and other Christian work, also not between the Church and Pro Veritate or the Church and the Christian Institute. The choice goes much deeper: it is between obeying what you believe in and submitting to the authority of the church*”⁸ (Naudé, 1995:68).

In this sermon Naudé introduced his congregation first to the history of the text. He explained the context in which this text was written. He asked question and did not necessarily gave answers. Then Naudé drew a sharp line to the context that he and his congregation found themselves in. He asked the question: “*what does this situation in Acts 5 have to do with us? With you, with me, with the situation in our Church, in our nation, in South Africa and in Africa?*”⁹ (Naudé, 1995:159). Naudé stayed true to the gospel under difficult circumstances. He did not shy away from uttering prophetic words knowing that it would mean the end of being a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. A church which he had known and loved his whole life. However, for Naudé it was more important to *obey God rather than men*.

2.2.1 Sermons in the apartheid era

It is important to note that the Bible that we are using today is the same Bible that was used during the apartheid era. However, the exegesis that was done during this time was very different. People understood certain parts of scripture differently, as is still the case today. The gospel was

⁶ Obeying God (own translation)

⁷ “We must obey God rather than men!” NIV

⁸ My own translation

⁹ My own translation

proclaimed, but God was not always pictured as a *God-for-us*. Cilliers made a selection of sermons and looked at the hermeneutical method that was used. These sermons are from the period 1960 to 1980, which reflect “*an era in the South African history that, on the one hand was still characterized by a post-war prosperity among a large part of the white population, and on the other hand, by growing relational problems and alienation among the various population groups*” (Cilliers, 2006:5). Cilliers stressed that this was a difficult time for the “white” church and ministers wanted to guide its members on a pastoral level as well as in their preaching (Cilliers, 2006). So in effect, ministers of the “white” church also wanted to reassure and console their members during *these troubled times*.

What comes out very strong in Cilliers writing is that we can only learn from history if the highlights as well as the sins of preaching are “*recognized and identified*” (Cilliers, 2006:2). This is vital if we do not want to repeat our mistakes from the past. The texts that Cilliers looked at were mainly from the Old Testament. These were texts in “*which times of crises were reflected ... in which the political and theological viewpoints of the Israelites were connected*” (Cilliers, 2006:7). However, the ministers did not just point out the difficulties that the Israelites were going through. They also made definite links between current and biblical times, i.e. “*what applied then, also applies now*” (Cilliers, 2006:15).

This analogous scheme is indicated by the expressions, which are used in the sermon. Examples of these expressions are “*Like the Jewish people, our people also ...; Our times and circumstances are not very different than in Noah’s time;...*” etc. (Cilliers, 2006:15). Cilliers also pointed out that the use of this analogous scheme is indicative of the search of the people in trying times. So in effect, in order to console people, sermons need to show clearly similarities to the current difficulties that people are going through. But we need to remember that the Bible is a historical document. This document shows the actions of God in a particular set-up. We cannot *force God’s hand* by superimposing what happened in the past to our present circumstances. However, we can hope that God will come to our rescue, through His Spirit, just as He did to the Israelites in the past.

Brueggemann also commented on the manner in which preaching, and in particular prophetic preaching, changed through the years. He specifically mentioned the period from 1978, the year in which *The Prophetic Imagination* was published, to 2001. He pointed out how the “*method and approach in critical study of the Bible*” have changed immensely (Brueggemann, 2001:ix). He

continues to point out that “*scripture study was completely defined by historical criticism, even though the first hints of new approaches were on the horizon*” (Brueggemann, 2001:ix). He specifically mentioned the study of prophetic texts. An understanding of the “*prophetic personalities in their presumed historical contexts*” was quite important. In order to practically use “*prophetic texts in prophetic ministry meant*” having a “*regular direct, confrontational encounter and established power*” in the preaching method (Brueggemann, 2001:ix).

An important comment that Brueggemann also made in the preface to this revised edition of his book is the development that took place from historical criticism to social-scientific criticism. He mentioned how Robert Wilson “*helped us to see that the prophets are not lonely voices against the establishment but are in fact representative voices that give social expression to what may be important and engaged social constituencies*” (Brueggemann, 2001:x). This statement still holds true today where some people are of the opinion that the church should not be involved in social or political matters but should only concentrate on winning souls for the kingdom of God. It is exactly in cases like these that “*a relatively powerless prophetic voice must find imaginative ways that are rooted in the text but that freely and daringly move from the text toward*” social issues that we are experiencing today (Brueggemann, 2001:xii). It is therefore important for us as a church to realize that prophetic preaching cannot just be about confrontation. However, if it is confrontational than it must be done in a manner that effect “*change in social perspective and social policy*” (Brueggemann, 2001:xii).

2.2.2 Examples of sermons that was analyzed

2.2.2.1 Nehemiah 4:14

This sermon deals with the rebuilding of the wall and the opposition that Nehemiah experienced. Cilliers pointed out that the preacher tried to draw a parallel between “*the threat from the Samaritans to the Jews*” and he goes about it in different phases. The threat is firstly called “*the ‘church’, then ‘Christendom’, the ‘Christian religion’ and ultimately it is described as ‘the South African situation’ and the ‘pattern of life in our land’*” (Cilliers, 2006:18). Different keywords are used during the sermon to put the focus on the actions or rather the inaction of the church. Certain words are repeated several times, shortly after each other, i.e. “*must*”. It creates an atmosphere that

tells the people *this is the only path that the church can follow*. Conditional sentences are also used during the sermon. The preacher had a picture in his mind that he wanted to convey to his congregants, and with the use of analogy and specific sentence constructions he was painting this picture for his congregants.

The preacher further continued to point out that the isolation that the church will experience is the same isolation that Jesus Christ and his followers experienced. This he linked with the isolation that South Africa was currently experiencing due to the decisions that was taken. However, it is made very clear that this isolation is justified. The justification of the situation in South Africa is strengthened when the preacher links “*Nehemiah’s time and our own time*” (Cilliers, 2006:19). The congregants are bombarded with rhetorical questions in which the “*preacher intends to say: the attack against South Africa is nothing new; it has a negative parallel in the history of Israel*” (Cilliers, 2006:20). However, this parallelism brings about new questions for the preacher and the congregants. They now need to ask themselves questions like: “*if the current situation is precisely like that in ancient times, does this imply that God will act precisely as He did then? Will not only history, but also God repeat Himself?*” (Cilliers, 2006:20).

I am of the opinion that there is nothing wrong with trying to seek for similarities in the Bible with what we are currently experiencing as a people of God. However, I also believe that in our quest for these similarities, we sometimes *force* situations to seem alike. When we read a narrative, we need to ask ourselves “*what ‘story’ (history) is being told to whom and why*” (Cilliers, 2006:24). We need to understand that the narratives in the Bible do not necessarily give us answers to the challenges that we are facing today. However, it can surely give us guidelines in how to address these challenges. God is not a God that is a prisoner of time. He is “*the Lord of time and history*” and “*He is the eternal King (1 Tim 1:17)*” (Cilliers, 2006:21). We must therefore remember that “*preaching is never a mere repetition of biblical texts, but it always interprets the (present) time as a time of grace and judgment*” (Cilliers, 2006:22).

The message that comes across in this sermon is that people need to change in order for God to change their situation. So God’s action is in effect only possible if the people change. And when this change in people has taken place, it also implies that great things can happen to and for this world that we live in. This conditional statement therefore implies that God can only make a

difference once we have decided to change. And this ultimately questions the might of God (Cilliers, 2006:44).

2.2.2.2 Psalm 62

Another sermon that was analyzed was Psalm 62:6. This sermon was also used to say that *God is for us*. This sermon specifically talked to the Afrikaner people and pointed out “*national historical events as divine revelation*” (Cilliers, 2006:34). What is interesting is that “*in eschatological terms, the sermon refers to ‘the liberated’, who ‘one day, from every race, and language and people and nation will sing the new song in the kingdom of glory,’ but this reference is not only out of place with the rest of the sermon, but also is the often used rhetorical technique of blurring the issue, of softening the real argument*” (Cilliers, 2006:34).

It would appear that the preacher placed more emphasis on the nationalist ideals of the people than on Scripture itself. Conditional sentences and repetition of words (like *must*) are used to place great emphasis on these nationalistic ideals. The Afrikaner people are put in stark contrast to the *barbarians* of the land.

It is quite clear the preacher uses the myth of national history of the people as *Scripture* instead of staying with the gospel text. I am therefore in agreement with Cilliers when he said that “*if I have understood it correctly, this sermon does not so much interpret the Bible text (Ps 62:6) and respectively proclaim the Gospel to the congregation, but proclaims the national history as legend and ideal to the people. This forms the actual text, and actual gospel of the sermon*” (Cilliers, 2006:38). He continues to point out that this “*is not something that started yesterday or the day before, but grew in the South African theological tradition and way of preaching*” (Cilliers, 2006:38). This use of Scripture obviously hampers the true gospel to come to the fore and it also does not allow for a prophetic approach. It would appear that the line between God’s actions in history and people’s actions in history becomes blurred. People are seen to be the initiators in certain circumstances in order to *force Gods hand* to act in a certain way. Through this behavior “*theological declarations become moralistic appeals*” (Cilliers, 2006:41). It becomes clear that God is not present in these sermons. The preacher informed the congregants about what happened in biblical times and what they need to do to make the same things happen again.

2.3 Conclusion

It is quite evident that as preachers we walk a thin line between *preaching the gospel* and just *giving a Word* to the people that seems appropriate for a specific context. This *word* that we sometimes give is not necessarily the Gospel! Upon investigation of these sermons, it becomes clear that God is not present in these sermons. The preachers did a good job of informing the congregants about what happened in biblical times and what they need to do to make the same things happen again. However, the congregants are now the initiators of God's actions. They now have the power to *move the hand of God* in a direction that they see fit. The preachers made use of different techniques to influence the thinking of the people. Keywords and conditional statements are used to put emphasis on certain issues, i.e. to move people into action. In some of these instances it would also seem as if the work of the Holy Spirit is underplayed and if all the power is in the hands of the congregants.

The sermons which were analyzed showed that the preachers suffered "*under a type of national theodicy and question God's presence and involvement with the nation in its hour of crisis, and they tried to solve this question moralistically ... instead of theologically*" (Cilliers, 2006:77). The preachers attached great importance to the national history of the Afrikaner people and it seemed to have a "*radiance of holiness*" and in effect became a "*salvific history*" (Cilliers, 2006:77). Cilliers is quite right when he pointed out that the sermons did not have a "*renewing and transforming effect on society. On the contrary, the irony is this: the sermons want to unlock the Gospel for the situation; instead the Gospel is locked up in the situation*" (Cilliers, 2006:78).

As ministers, we can never forget that preaching is not an easy task. In fact, in some instances it can be quite dangerous. We always need to have a hermeneutics of suspicion when we work with the texts. We need to be careful in our interpretation of texts and always need to ask the history of the text and what it tried to say to the people that were in that specific situation. It does not help to superimpose our situation on the text just to make it relevant for our context today.

As a church we need to realize that we cannot read the Bible in isolation anymore. We need to get out of our comfort zones and remove the "*pattern of separation*" that was established during the

apartheid years (Cilliers, 2006:81). Reading and interpreting the Bible should not be an individualistic act. We should be open to the idea of interpreting and discussing the Bible narratives with our fellow brothers and sisters. These discussions should take place cross-culturally, in an ecumenical setting. This in itself will also bring new challenges because we will be a people, from different belief systems, who will be reading and interpreting the Word of God.

Chapter 3

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will look at possible recommendations to assist the church in regaining its prophetic voice in our society. This is obviously the viewpoint of just one individual and it does not necessarily mean that it is the only way forward. I believe that many of our congregants might have other ideas on how we can make positive changes in our church. I also need to stress that this is a situation that need the input of all believers. We need to pray and dialogue about this issue and really pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us and give us wisdom to put our ideas into practice.

I am of the opinion that as a multi-racial church, we still have a long road ahead of us in terms of satisfying the needs of most of our congregants, especially regarding the way that we worship and minister to them. The Dutch Reformed Church family has been struggling for quite some time now to unite. However, when I look at the Uniting Reformed Church, I see many challenges ahead of us in terms of our unity amongst each other, i.e. Afrikaans-speaking and Xhosa-speaking ministries. We have difficult issues to address, like inculturation, language issues, the way in which we worship, etc. These are not issues that we will be able to solve overnight but I am convinced that if we work together as believers we could find a workable solution to all of these challenges.

As a community of believers I am of the opinion that we need to look anew at prophetic preaching in our South African context. We are all aware of the impact it had in our past but we also need to realize that we are faced with different challenges today. Our fight is not for political freedom anymore but for the regeneration of our society's moral values as well as for socio-economic liberation. I agree with Brueggemann when he stated that “*God can ‘raise up prophets’ and authorize prophetic voices and deeds in the fullness of God’s own freedom, anywhere, anytime, in any circumstance*” (Brueggemann, 2001:xvi). Brueggemann also made it clear that “*prophets understood the possibility of change as linked to emotional extremities of life. They understood strange incongruence between public conviction and personal yearning. Most of all, they understood the distinctive power of language, the capacity to speak in ways that evoke newness ‘fresh from the word’*” (Brueggemann, 2001:xxiii).

Is this “*evoking newness from the word*” not what is lacking in our ministries today where prophetic preaching is concerned? Is the church not too comfortable in its comfort zones that we are not challenged to reach out and make a difference in our communities today? Are we really committed to make changes in our societies that will be of benefit to the whole community and not just to our congregants?

3.2 Challenging our congregants

In a presentation of Pieterse in 1996, he quoted Glock, Ringer and Babble that were of the opinion that “*the church had two social roles in particular with regard to its members and society, namely ‘to comfort’ and ‘to challenge’*” (Pieterse, 1996:2). Pieterse continued to stress that “*church members are comforted by the church in their sorrow, pain and suffering, which is part of human existence. But the church also has a social role in the sense of changing and transforming social structures so that the cause of poverty and suffering resulting from unjust structures, can be changed for the better*” (Pieterse, 1996:2). It is surprising that some congregants still have the opinion that the church should not get involved in certain social structures. They firmly believe that this is the task of government. But can we really leave this important issue to government alone? Should the church not challenge its members to social action? And could it not do this through its prophetic preaching?

I would like to make it clear that I am in no way implying that all our church members are not actively involved in challenging social structures. There are many people out there who are working very hard to make a difference for our communities. And we recognize all their efforts. But the question remains: are we as a church involved enough? Or are we too afraid to *get our hands dirty*? If we are going to make a substantial difference in all the social challenges that we are experiencing as a country, we need to work across social, racial and faith barriers. We need to put our personal feelings aside about *the other* and work together as a community that has the same goals in mind.

The analysis of Tutu’s prophetic preaching that Pieterse and the rest of the investigation team did clearly indicated that Tutu’s prophetic preaching took place on unique occasions. The same was true for the sermons of Beyers Naudé. It would therefore seem that prophetic preaching needs specific circumstances to take place. In the apartheid era, the political tension and unjust circumstances that

people were experiencing gave rise to the prophetic preaching of the day. However, today, we have other circumstances¹⁰ that would compel us to make use of prophetic preaching more often. Just as the prophets of Israel in the Old Testament took their social contexts into consideration, we as a church today need to take our contemporary situation into account in every sphere of our ministries.

Justo González and Catherine González pointed out that “*the proper context of preaching is the sacramental life of the church. Preaching, as part of the worship of the church ... is addressed to the people of God*” (J. González & C. González, 1988:30). They also indicated how in the early times, the church members gathered to hear the reading of Scripture and to partake in the Holy Communion. Unfortunately, this has now changed where for most Protestant churches, preaching is the central act of worship and Holy Communion is celebrated only once every quarter. In some of our congregations, the Eucharist is even celebrated fewer times per year due to the fact that many of our churches are unable to afford a full-time minister. They would therefore have to wait until such time that a minister from the region could serve them. As the church we believe that the Eucharist is a sign of the unity of the church. If this is the case than the fact that we are celebrating this sacrament on such few occasions could have serious consequences for the community and unity of the church.

3.3 A language of Lament

In a paper, titled *Preaching as a language of hope in a context of HIV and AIDS*, that Cilliers presented at the 7th International Conference of the Societas Homiletica in August 2006, he grappled with the effects of HIV and AIDS in our society today. A very bleak picture was painted on the effects of this pandemic in South Africa, Africa and the rest of the world. What struck me in this paper was what Cilliers called “*reclaiming the language of lament*” (Cilliers, 2006:4).

According to Denise Ackermann lament is “*a form of mourning but it is more than that. It is somehow more purposeful and more instinctive than mourning. Lamenting is both an individual and a communal act that signals that relationships have gone awry. While lamenting is about past events, it also has present and future dimensions. It acknowledges the brokenness of the present because of injustice and our role in contributing to the troubles of the world. It instinctively creates*

¹⁰ Poverty, crime, socio-economic injustices, abuse of all members of our society, etc.

a link between healing and mourning that makes new just relationships possible in future.” (Ackermann, 2001:32). Lament is the way in which we deal with the unthinkable. It is our way as individuals and communities to deal with the hardships of life.

I have been wrestling with this idea of lament and hope for a while now. It was quite obvious to me that in our church people did not like it when emotions were expressed too openly. Many would complain that this is too charismatic. People who dared to cry during a service because they were touched deeply were eyed very negatively. It would seem that people could get very uncomfortable when they were faced with tears of sorrow and hopelessness. As children of God we have always been reminded that we should stay hopeful despite our situation. We must remember that Christ became weak so that we can be strong. So in effect, we are not suppose to show any signs of weakness because this would be a betrayal of what Christ did for us on the cross.

This is so contrasting to the experience that Leonora Tisdale shared in the book *Making room at the table*. She tells of a congregation in her community that she worshiped with. This community was broken because of the addiction of drugs and alcohol that was prevalent in the community. The congregation goes through a liturgical ritual of lighting candles at the beginning of each service and also reading out loud those people who have requested prayer. But what struck her was *“that in each of the pews of this church are packages of tissues, and it is clear that they are not simply intended for children with runny noses! It is the expectation here that people will mourn as well as rejoice when they come to worship, and that tears will be shed as they are brought face to face both with their own shortcomings and with the hope that God alone offers them”* (Tisdale, 2001:184).

Is this not what our churches need today? Pews with tissues where each member can feel free to empty himself or herself before God? A God that understands our emotions, our fears, our shortcomings and our dependence on Him? Should we as ministers not allow our congregants this opportunity during the service without rushing through the liturgy because we need to finish in an hour? We have become so time conscious that when the service is longer than an hour we start to loose interest. Is it not part of our responsibility as ministers to assist in creating a safe space in church where people can feel free to express their deepest desires before God?

The paper of Cilliers stresses the fact that ministers should supply a language to the people that would give them a voice in their suffering. This language allows us to *“protest against the absurdity*

of suffering". This language is the language of lament. Cilliers is of the opinion that this "*is a language that we need to reclaim for it has to a large extent been negated in Christian faith and worship. If we contend that preaching is a language of hope, we will have to re-learn the language of lament. There can be no language of hope without language of lament...*" (Cilliers, 2006:4). I could not agree more with these statements of Cilliers. Although this paper was written specifically with the effects of HIV and AIDS in mind, I am of the opinion that the ideas expressed in this paper can also assist us in other challenges we are facing today in our country.

Our communities have become so success-driven that the idea of lamenting is probably the furthest from their minds. However, when we look at the Old Testament, we find many instances where the people of God lamented because of their situation. They cried to the Lord to change their circumstances, and the Lord heard their cries. They were lamenting because of the circumstances that they found themselves in, and at the same time they were hoping for a better future. This language of lament was part of the relationship the people had with God. Through this language they could remind God of his covenantal promises. Through this act, the people could envisage and hope for a new future. We can therefore also see this language of lament as a language of hope. But today, we are so quick to see lamenting as a sign of weakness. We need to realize that lamenting before the Lord is not a sign of weakness but a sign that we are utterly dependent on God and the mercies that He bestows on us.

Lamenting is a way in which the structures of power can be addressed. Ackermann pointed out that lamenting "*calls for justice, it pushes the boundaries of our relationships with one another and with God beyond the limits of acceptability. It is a refusal to settle for the way things are. It is reminding God that the human situation is not as it should be and that God as the partner in the covenant must act*" (Ackermann, 2001:33). If I look at the difficulties that we are facing as a society, than I can think of no better way to address these issues than to start with a process of lament. Ackermann is also of the opinion that the language of lament "*is important for the political and social witness of the churches and the impact of their message; can enrich our liturgies and our pastoral care ... and finally, the practice of lament can contribute to the more intimate and authentic relationship with God*" (Ackermann, 2001:34). This means in effect that through the process of lament we can challenge the power structures and really focus attention on the problem areas in our societies. We can challenge ourselves in terms of how we can change our liturgies to incorporate the language of lament. And what better place to do this then from the pulpit!

This does not mean that we must abuse the pulpit. However, as preachers, we need to revisit the way in which we move from the text to the context. We do not find quick fixes in the Bible for the social issues that we are dealing with today. Congregants are looking for guidance and answers to questions on HIV and AIDS, socio-economic issues, gay and lesbian marriages, etc. These issues are not easy to address. But I am of the opinion that we do find guidance in the Bible on how to address them appropriately. Our views may not be the same and therefore we need to go into discussion with different faith-based organizations and scientific disciplines to try and answer these questions. We should not shy away from these discussions because they are too *secular* in our opinion. God works in mysterious ways and we might just find the answers to our questions in areas that we believed would not be possible.

3.4 Prophetic preaching in our context today

When we look at the history of our country, it is quite evident that ministers preached the gospel, as they understood it in their specific contexts. However, because people were separated and did not read and interpret the Bible together, it obviously led to many different understandings of Scripture and ultimately to great disparity. However, reading the Bible together as a group does also not imply that people will have the same interpretation of a specific text. It will however challenge people to look at Scripture from different social, political and economic contexts and this could provide us with different perspectives from a diverse group (J. González & C. González, 1988:37).

Pieterse insists that a *“prophetic preacher should not be afraid to name the injustices, the oppression and the sources of the oppression in the context within which he/she preaches”* (Pieterse, 2001:96). He further continues by quoting De Gruchy who said that *“it is vitally important that prophetic ministry is guided by the interests of the gospel and grounded in the gospel to prevent this ministry from serving self-interest, a sectarian ideology and a particular social or racial programme”* (Pieterse, 2001:96).

The preacher obviously plays a vital role in prophetic preaching in a specific context. Edwina Hunter pointed out the importance of telling our stories – *“to know where we have been in order to project where we want to go”*. She continues to say that *“if we claim our own histories, if we know who we are and why we are, and if we know how to reflect on those influences that have shaped us,*

then we may be able to initiate change. We may even be able to transform ourselves and our immediate concrete situations" (Hunter, 1988:95). This story telling is not an easy task for South Africans, given our history of apartheid. Some people are of the opinion that we should forget about our past and rather focus on our future in this country. I am reluctant to agree that we should forget our past. If we do "*forget*" our past, will we not be tempted sometime in the future to repeat our mistakes of the past? Is it not better to remember our past so that we will never repeat it again? I believe that the vast majority of the South African people are unable to put the past behind them because of the atrocities that they have suffered during this era of oppression. People need to tell their stories so that they can remember the past in a different way. They need to remember in a way that would assist them to build a better South Africa for all our people.

Some of the socio-economic problems that we are experiencing today have their roots in the history of our country. We still have the majority of black people living in informal settlements after thirteen years of democracy. The poverty in the country also gives rise to other crimes, which are committed on a daily basis. Preachers who are committed to growth in this country will have to do self-reflection in order to understand their own social consciousness. They would need to get involved with social and political concerns in order to address issues that affect the lives of their congregants. It is easy to become insensitive to the needs of those who are less fortunate than ourselves when we do not have to experience what they go through on a daily basis. We need to "*develop eyes to see and a heart to feel when and where situations and systems of injustice have arisen and exist and to work toward the deconstruction of such situations and systems*" (Resner, 2003:xxi).

We can now ask the question: "do we still need prophetic preaching in our country today?" I believe that we still do!! We may have political freedom and liberation in our country today, but millions of people still need liberation from poverty, socio-economic circumstances, joblessness, etc. Our communities are still wrestling with the abuse of women and children, our children are raped and killed at a frightening pace, people are being high jacked and even killed after handing over their car-keys, etc.

We need to reconstruct and develop our communities in this country. I believe that the church can make an important contribution through the process of prophetic preaching. However, we need to realize that ministers would need to be "*extensively informed of the social, economic and political*

situation of his/her listeners” (Pieterse, 2001:107). In other words, we need to be relevant in our preaching. Boesak explained this *relevant preaching* in South Africa during the apartheid years by saying that it is like “*walking blindfolded through a mining field*” (Boesak, 1979:5).

In addition to this relevancy, the minister also needs to have a pastoral approach to these issues. We must remember that we preach in a congregation where people probably live in the same community. So they are, in most cases, experiencing the same challenges on a daily basis. The minister shares these challenges with the community and need to address these issues by referring to concrete situations. The “*root cause of the situation of suffering*” should be exposed (Pieterse, 2001:107). Boesak quite strongly pointed out that people need “*a word that tells them that God is still closely involved in their lives, a word that shows them a way out of the dark place of oppression, poverty and misery*”¹¹ (Boesak, 1979:2). These words might have been written during the dark hours of apartheid, but they are still very relevant in our context today.

When we preach, we ultimately bring a message of hope to the people. We re-iterate that despite our bleak circumstances we are hopeful that things will change because we believe in the power of God (Romans 1:16). As Christians we believe that God is at work in this world through His Son and the Holy Spirit. We have faith that this God that led us out of the oppression of apartheid can once again lead us out of the oppression of poverty, crime, socio-economic oppression and many other challenges that we are facing.

The socio-economic circumstances that we are challenged with on a daily basis are enough to make anyone go into a mode of despair. I agree with Brueggemann when he pointed out that prophetic ministry should “*cut through the despair*” that we are experiencing as a people (Brueggemann, 2001:63). He continues to say that it is difficult for a prophet to do his/her work in an atmosphere of hopelessness. He proposed three actions that might assist in penetrating the despair that congregants are facing, namely:

i) Symbols

The symbols that are used should contradict the atmosphere of hopelessness that is experienced by the community. The prophet should be able to paint a picture of hope that no one can even imagine. It is important that the symbols of hope for the community should not be general. Brueggemann

¹¹ My own translation.

pointed out that it is the task of the prophet to “*move back into the deepest memories of this community to activate those very symbols that have always been the basis for contradicting the regnant consciousness*” (Brueggemann, 2001:64). The symbols of hope will be different for each congregation. Brueggemann also mentioned that the prophet will need to remind the people of their past and to educate them in using the tools of hope. The prophet also needs to realize that language can shape and define the reality of people. So in effect this means that each congregation will have to think seriously what their symbols of hope will be.

ii) Hope and yearning

Through prophetic imagination, the hopes and desires that have been covered up for so long, can be brought to the fore. People who are without hope are a people without zest for life. Communities have been struggling for so long with social issues that in some instances it has become difficult to even imagine what it would be like to live in a society that is free from all the difficulties that we are faced with on a daily basis. Brueggemann is of the opinion that the language of hope should touch the person that is hopeless. More importantly, any language of hope should have a theological slant. This means that it should point out the covenant between God and a community (Brueggemann, 2001:65).

iii) Newness that redefines

Prophetic imagination is the ability to see better circumstances from within a position of hopelessness. Even though the prophet might be speaking metaphorically about hope, it is important that he/she should speak “*concretely about the real newness that comes to us and redefines our situation*” (Brueggemann, 2001:67).

3.5 Conclusion

I am of the opinion that our ministers are rarely seen as prophets by their congregants. Most congregants probably associate prophets only with what they read in the Bible and it is a bit far fetched for them to think of their own minister as a prophet. In our more conservative congregations, ministers are viewed negatively if they dare to speak against political injustices. Congregants would normally comment after the service and say “*this morning he/she only preached politics again! When are we going to hear about the gospel?*”.

Ministers are expected to bring the gospel and only the gospel. Could it be that in these instances ministers are not skillful enough to make the transition from the text to the social circumstances of their congregants? Are they too focused on either the *social circumstances* or just *the gospel*? Is it not time that we looked again at how we present the gospel to our people?

It is quite evident that the social position of people has an influence on their interpretation of Scripture. This is not just true for the preacher but also for the congregants. It is therefore difficult to discern whether a message is shaped and rooted in Scripture and not just by the current view of our reality today. Van Seters also pointed out that “*every biblical text seemed to yield a strangely similar message and that message appeared to be shaped not so much by the text as by a certain ‘sensible’ interpretation of culture*” (Van Seters, 1988:14).

When we speak of *prophetic preaching* today, we do not speak of a preacher who is standing on the pulpit with a condemning tone of voice, thundering away at all the evils of the society that we live in (Van Seters, 1988:249). No, we are referring to a person that cares for the community that he or she lives in and in which they want to make a concrete difference. We are referring to people who will stand up and address issues when all other avenues have been exhausted. Van Seters pointed out that “*prophets arise at certain historical, social moments*” (Van Seters, 1988:251). We need prophetic preaching in our church today because our society forms an integral part of our church life and little will change in our society if attention is not given to specific issues and challenges that we are facing as a community. We should not see prophetic preaching as predicting the future, but we should see its connectedness with the redeeming work of God. We need to “*connect our preaching, liturgy – especially the celebration of sacraments – and the corporate life of the church*” (Van Seters, 1988:253). Prophetic preaching provides our people with hope for the future. So in effect, we should not just strive to have prophetic preaching as a reality in our church on a Sunday but we need to become a prophetic community.

Patrick Miller, Jr is of the opinion that there are three things that belong to any prophetic ministry. These are criticism, imagination and announcement. He clearly stated that through prophetic critique people are informed of what God seeks in our societies. So when and if God’s justice was ignored, prophets like Moses, Amos, Jeremiah, Elijah, etc. had to do four things, namely:

1. *“They announced God’s judgment on a society that could not live by righteousness and justice and trust in the Lord alone.*
2. *They sought repentance and a mending of the ways: “Amend your ways and your doings,” preached Jeremiah in the temple (7:3).*
3. *They appealed to the faith and conscience of their people in simple but clear ways, calling on them to hate evil and love good, to render in their courts judgments that are true and make for peace.*
4. *They confronted the people in power, whether by intention or by outcome, and called for them to change direction or face God’s judgment” (Miller, 2003:79).*

Miller stressed that if you take the above into consideration you should not be worried about when you address the issues or rather from where you address them. You don’t necessarily have to wait to be on a pulpit on a Sunday morning to tackle these issues. It is a process that must be going on continuously, whether you are in private or in public in preaching or in pastoral care. Suffice to say this is not an easy task. Ministers who are working in this manner soon find themselves on the brink of burnout. Standing in the service of the Lord is not an easy task.

If we take the context of our church into consideration, this can even be more difficult. In most of our congregations, people still have the opinion that the minister should play a leading role in all the different ministries of the church. They believe that they are paying the minister and therefore they need to get *value for their money*. However, it has become clear over the years that this way of ministering does not work. A minister cannot be at the forefront of every organization of the church. They need to focus their attention and also allow the rest of the congregants to become involve in the activities of the different ministries of the church.

In terms of imagination, through prophetic ministry, preachers should be *“charged with imagining a different way, with envisioning and announcing the new possibility of God’s way in the world”* (Miller, 2003:80). We need to become a people who are living according to God’s ways and who trust in the Lord for our existence. We need to be able to see a better future for our children and ourselves. We need to be able and willing to proclaim what might seem impossible in this world that we are living in today. Brueggemann also pointed out the issue of imagination in prophetic preaching. He clearly stated that *“a prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for*

questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation” (Brueggemann, 2001:40).

Although we are living in a world that is far from perfect, through our prophetic ministry, preachers should be bold enough to dare and proclaim the good news of God’s power and presence. These announcements are a sign of where our hope lies. It shows the world that despite the broken communities that we are living in we still have faith in the redeeming and salvific work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Brueggemann sees prophetic preaching as *an alternative*. He is of the opinion that through prophetic preaching we could “*nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us*” (Brueggemann, 2001:3). It forces us to look anew at the situations that we find ourselves in. But how radical should our *alternative* methods be? And will our *alternative* not just become part of the community again once we have solved a specific issue? Are our congregants ready for this *alternative*? Brueggemann is of the opinion that “*every act of a minister who would be prophetic is part of a way of evoking, forming, and reforming an alternative community*” (Brueggemann, 2001:4). Our various acts of ministry, i.e. counseling, administration, liturgy, etc. should clearly show this forming and reforming of an alternative community.

Another important factor of prophetic imagination in prophetic ministry is that it should be critical but at the same time be able to energize (Brueggemann, 2001:4). People do not like it when they are criticized. And when we are criticized it is difficult for us to be energized to the new promises of God. If indeed we are energized, we are well aware that this will ask something of us. And many of us are not ready to give. We can thus see that there is a fine line between criticism and being energized in the prophetic ministry. Both these elements are needed because they keep us in line with the promises of God for His people. Brueggemann is of the opinion that to be energized is to be closely linked to hope. He further elaborates by saying that “*we are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given*” (Brueggemann, 2001:14).

This energizing element, or hopefulness, is exactly what our communities need. We need to be able to see a better future for our communities and our country as a whole. We need to be able to see past the crime that has infected our communities. It is so easy for people to become stuck in one way of

thinking and even one way of looking at the realities around them. I suppose that if you are bombarded with the same negative pictures on a daily basis then it obviously becomes difficult to be energized and to see a better future. However, this is why our prophetic ministry cannot just be active on a Sunday from the pulpit. This is why we need to practice this ministry on a daily basis, in the public and private spheres of our lives.

This whole process of prophetic preaching is obviously not possible if we do not realize that we are utterly dependent on God's grace. As a church we cannot just keep ourselves busy with processes to try and make changes in our communities. We are believers, and as such we need to realize that we cannot and should not underestimate the power of prayer in these processes. I grew up in a house where our family had a prayer meeting every morning before we started with our day. We worshipped together as a family. However, other families have not been so blessed. We live in a country where broken families are seen as being *normal*. These broken families are also part of the congregants to which we minister to in church.

Cilliers is also of the opinion that without prayer you cannot preach. He makes it very clear that prayer cannot be seen as something that is apart from theology. It could even be seen as "*the secret of preaching*" (Cilliers, 2004:187). Prayer is the *tool* that we have to discern the will of God. Without prayer our personal relationship with God will become none existent. If we want to look at prophetic preaching anew in our ministries, I believe that we also need to look at our prayer life as individuals, as ministers and as congregations.

Besides the fact that people have to struggle with socio-economic problems, they also have to deal with the brokenness in their homes. Through all of this, I sometimes get the idea that we underestimate the power of prayer in our lives. We have been so disillusioned by what we are experiencing in our personal lives and in our country that we have given up hope that God will hear us when we pray. As believers, we will have to realize that without the help of God and without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whatever plans we have for the regeneration of our communities might not be successful. The plans that we might have to initiate prophetic ministries in our congregations might just stay in the planning phase if we do not from the outset understand that without the help of God all our plans will come to nothing.

In conclusion, we need to realize that prophetic ministry is about creating an *alternative* in our way of doing and seeing things. It is about anticipating the future in the present. It is about giving hope to the people from within a context of hopelessness. Moltmann pointed out that as Christians, our basis of hope “*does not lie in the ups and downs of the moods of the time, but in the promise of the coming God*” (Moltmann, 1975:45). It is about rediscovering the relevancy of the Bible in our contexts. As a diverse faith community we are well aware of the long road ahead of us in terms of how we need to address our differences, etc. I am of the opinion that prophetic preaching can assist us on this long road. Prophetic preaching will enable us to speak a language of hope to the people. It will force us to look anew at the liturgies and symbols that we use in our worship services. It will force us to look again at how we move from the text to the context while we stay true to the Word of God. Prophetic preaching will *force* ministers to be in tune to the promises of God for His people today.

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