

# Signs of Hope in South Africa

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The fundamental reason for our hope is *God*. What we rely upon basically is the goodness of God and the power of God, or, more specifically the promises of God and especially the promise of his emerging kingdom that he has guaranteed in Jesus Christ.

But in any particular concrete situation our hope will need to be sustained by *signs*: signs that here and there goodness is beginning to triumph, signs that God is at work conquering evil or building the conditions that will eventually lead to liberation and justice. These are the events and situations we call the signs of the times, the signs of hope or 'the sacraments of hope'.

But what are they in South Africa today? What are the signs of hope? They are not always easy to see because sometimes they are *signs of contradiction*. For example, the present *state of repression* in South Africa that is called a 'state of emergency' can be seen, paradoxically, as a sign of hope. In itself it is clearly a bad thing. Thousands upon thousands of people are in detention, accused and punished without any trial at all. Some are being kept in solitary confinement, interrogated, tortured or just beaten up. People in the townships are being shot, maimed for life, beaten, prevented from going to funerals, harassed at school and evicted for not paying rent. Organisations are being harassed and prevented from operating; and there is an almost complete black-out on news about the townships.

This we call repression. It is very painful, and for some it makes the whole situation seem to be absolutely hopeless. Why then is it a sign of hope? Because it is counter-productive. It will produce the very opposite of what the government intends. The more they repress people, the more the people will resist and find new ways of resisting. The more the people resist the more the government will repress them and further repression will simply involve more people in the struggle against repression. The government will continue to lose credibility and control, until eventually it is forced to sit down and negotiate.

Repression is a show of strength that hides the reality of weakness. A government that can only govern at the point of a gun has already lost power and credibility. Repression is a sign of weakness and therefore, for us, it is a sign of hope.

This is a very, very painful road to liberation. But it is not the road that has been chosen by the oppressed people; it is the road that the present government has chosen. If our hopes are to be realistic we have to recognise that this is the road we shall have to travel even when we wish it could somehow be different. It is a classical case of God drawing good out of evil or, as St. Augustine says, God writing straight with crooked lines. It is a sign of hope.

Another contradictory and ambiguous sign of hope is *sanctions*. The economic pressure that is now being put upon South Africa will be seen by some people as a good reason for us to despair. But again this is not so. It will certainly be another painful road and at first people will try sanctions-busting and other ways of coping with it but in the end the pressure will be too great and we will all have to sit down and negotiate our future.

That so much pressure is coming from almost the whole world to force South Africa to change is indeed a sign of hope. God works in strange ways, writing straight with crooked lines.

And finally, I would like to mention what I would regard as the greatest sign of hope in our country today. It is the way the people are organising themselves from grassroots. Democracy is being constructed in South Africa from the bottom up.

There have been student organisations, youth organisations, women's organisations, workers' organisations and community or civic organisations for a number of years. But now we have a new phenomenon: street committees. Ordinary people in the townships, old and young, men and women, are coming together street by street to deal with all the problems in their own street—and to deal with them democratically and together. Today there is simply no other way of surviving in a township with the chaos that is being created by the troops in the townships, the deaths, injuries and detentions, the education crisis and the rent crisis—not to mention unemployment, crime and the excesses of those who necklace people.

In other words, the people are taking responsibility for their own lives, together and democratically. Democracy and responsibility are being built from the bottom up. Democracy is the opposite of apartheid. Democracy unites, apartheid divides. But what the people want is not just a democracy that involves one person, one vote every three or four years, but a process of democratic decision-making every day from the level of the street, from the level of grassroots up to the highest levels of government. The fact that this is happening today and happening surprisingly fast in very many townships is a tremendous sign of hope for future democracy in South Africa. No other African country went through an experience like this. Whites have not been through an experience like this. We have a great future ahead of us in South Africa.