

Centenary celebrations of the Msunduzi Museum, Pietermaritzburg – 16 December 2012

Overall celebrations theme: '*A hundred years on: – a reconciling museum'*

Sunday 16 December theme: '*Thanksgiving and Reconciliation'*

**Address by Prof H Russel Botman,
Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University**

Good evening, everyone! *Sanibona! Goeienaand!*

Distinguished guests:

- Mr Vusi Ndima, Deputy Director General of the national Department of Arts and Culture
- Mrs Sibongile Nzimande, HOD of the KZN Department of Arts and Culture
- Members and past members of the Msunduzi Museum Council
- Mr Mlungisi Ngubane, Museum Director, and past directors of the Museum
- Heritage Institutions personnel
- Museum personnel
- Ladies and gentlemen ...

It is a big honour for me to be here with you. This place and this day are of great significance in the history of our country. And this museum, specifically, is a very special institution ... because it symbolises the famous unity in diversity that South Africa is renowned for the world over.

It stands for our ability as a nation to stop fighting, to make peace and to strive for reconciliation. This our nation achieved in a very pragmatic way – by focusing on what we have in common rather than on what sets us apart. And it was done for the sake of future generations.

There is a passage from the Bible that speaks to this situation. Isaiah 43:18-19 (English Standard Version) reads:

(18) "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.

(19) "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

The public holiday that we are celebrating today – Reconciliation Day – came about after our first democratic elections in 1994. The intention with giving the day a new name was to foster reconciliation and national unity.

Before that, 16 December had different meanings for different sections of the population. For Afrikaners, it was the Day of the Vow, or the Day of the Covenant, commemorating the "Battle of Blood River" that took place on the banks of the Ncome in 1838.

A diametrically opposite meaning attached to the day came about in the struggle against apartheid. In 1961, the ANC chose 16 December for MK to take up arms against the regime.

In 1995, a year into the new SA, the day got a 3rd connotation. On 16 December that year, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission held its 1st sitting. The date was deliberately chosen to symbolise the desire to overcome the division of old. The choice was made not to hold on to "the former things", but to see things in a "new ... way" (Isaiah 43:18-19).

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to add a fourth connotation to 16 December. This is my personal association with the day. Allow me to share that story with you.

In 1990 I took part in a television debate. It was held on 12 December. The topic was whether the Day of the Covenant should still be a national public holiday in the new South Africa. Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi was also on the panel.

I argued that national holiday should express the national interest. They should be inclusive, not exclusive. They should promote unity, not division. I said it would be more fitting to change the holiday to a celebration of reconciliation.

This elicited a fierce response a few days later. On 16 December that year – today exactly 22 years ago – AWB leader Eugene Terre'Blanche, now deceased, addressed a public meeting. He used the opportunity to threaten me and my family.

He did so for what he interpreted as a statement by me during the TV debate that the Day of the Covenant should be abolished. But that was not what I had said. My point was that public holidays should promote national unity and not build on our divisive history of bloodshed.

Fortunately the threats of violence against me and my family were averted. I was also very pleased when our first democratic parliament in 1994 did, in fact, make 16 December the Day of Reconciliation.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, you will recall I started off by saying that this Museum symbolises South Africa's unity in diversity. It achieves this by incorporating the Voortrekker Complex and the Ncome Museum and also by including other displays and exhibitions depicting the heritage of various cultural groups in KwaZulu-Natal.

The Museum is effectively telling various sides of the story, not just one side. In this way a more rounded view of history lays the foundation for a more integrated future.

I also started off by saying that the Museum represents our ability as a nation to strive for reconciliation. I use the word "strive" deliberately, because I think of reconciliation not as an event but as an on-going process.

This begs the question, where are we in terms of reconciliation in South Africa? Last week, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation released its annual Reconciliation Barometer. Their study found that only a third of South Africans regularly interact across racial lines; and nearly half rarely/never speak to someone of another race. They also found that disapproval of interracial marriages and integrated schools is increasing again.

So the news is not good. But there is a glimmer of hope – more than 60% of South Africans believe national unity is desirable. That's significant. It means that at least we have the will to reach out across historical divides. That is something we can build on.

There is another important insight from the barometer. A quarter of those surveyed listed "economic inequality" as the greatest cause of division in the country.

Earlier this year, the National Planning Commission released its National Development Plan. The Commission said, "South Africa's principal challenge is to roll back poverty and inequality."

So, how bad is the situation? The international poverty line is 2 US dollars a day. That converts to R524 a month. The National Development Plan states that in 2008, 48% of South Africans earned less than that amount. And the situation has not improved much.

How does one survive on R524 a month? How do you feed and clothe and provide shelter for your family on R524 a month? How do you send your children to school? Or to a doctor when they get sick?

Interestingly, the National Development Plan states that "social cohesion needs to anchor the strategy" against poverty and inequality. That is because there is a huge chasm between

the haves and the haves not ... and this class divide does not necessarily coincide with the construct called “race”.

There is a divide between those with the power and resources on one side, and the dispossessed and downtrodden on the other. What makes things worse is that many people – leaders and followers alike – seem to be putting their own interests before the common good. That is why we are seeing self-enrichment through corruption, nepotism and tender fraud.

The service-delivery protests, the strikes, the tragic massacre at Marikana – these things are all warning signs. They tell us that citizens feel that their human dignity is not being respected; their human rights are being trampled underfoot. This causes a growing social anger, which we need to take note of.

Reconciliation requires that we bridge the divides between us. Race and class are well-known fault lines in our society. But there it is a new, emerging fault line that has me very worried – and that is the line of ethics and morality.

On the one hand you have the good people of our country, and on the other you have people who don’t care about others. They may say they do – on the platforms that they occupy as leaders – but their actions prove otherwise.

What makes this so dangerous is that people are losing hope. Poverty is one thing, but poverty coupled with despair is extremely dangerous. When people have nothing to lose, they will do anything. When they see no prospect of a better life, they stop caring about the future consequences of their actions.

If we continue along the path of selfishness, we run the risk outlined by William Yeats in his 1919 poem, “The Second Coming” – that “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”.

So, what can we do about it? The opposite of despair is hope. We have to combat poverty by giving people hope of socio-economic advancement. But this hope cannot be empty or false. It must be real. It must be based not just on commitments, but on actions.

If we are serious about reconciliation, let us show true leadership by acting responsibly. Let us act in the interest of the impoverished and the downtrodden and the marginalised. In this way we can give real substance to the idea that what Africa has to offer the world is Ubuntu – the notion that “a person is a person through other persons”.

Dames en here, ons lees in Jesaja 43:18-19 (die 1983-vertaling):

(18) “Maar moenie net aan die vroeëre dinge dink en by die verlede stilstaan nie.”

(19) “Kyk, Ek gaan iets nuuts doen, dit staan op die punt om te gebeur, julle kan dit al sien kom; Ek maak in die woestyn ‘n pad, Ek laat in die droë wêreld riviere ontspring.”

Die punt is dat jy jou so kan blindstaar teen die verlede, dat jy nie sien wat om jou aangaan nie; en die toekoms nog minder.

Today, this museum is celebrating its centenary. But if we get stuck in the past, remembering only “the former things”, considering only “the things of old” ... then we will never see the “new thing(s)”; we will never drink from the “rivers in the desert” (Isaiah 43:18-19).

If we want to taste the sweet waters of true reconciliation, we should lift everyone out of poverty – not just the elite, but everyone. That will lay a solid foundation for the next 100 years for us to be a nation united around the principle of justice for all.

Thank you. *Baie dankie. Ngiyabonga.*