



JOHN WESELEY FEDERATION

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

THEME: LET THY KINGDOM COME: WE ARE IN NEED OF HIS KINGDOM

1. GREETINGS AND WELCOME

The Presiding Bishops, Presidents of Conference, the Council of Bishops, JWF Executive Committee, Provincial leaderships, delegates, distinguished guests, members of JWF, Deputy President of JWF, General Secretary of JWF. All people called Methodists present here today, our honoured guests and friends I greet you all in the wonderful name of our Lord, liberator and transformer Jesus Christ.

As I greet you my fellow pilgrims I welcome you with a deep sense of humility and respect. Your attendance is a sign of respect and loyalty to all that the JWF stands for. It is an honour to deliver this address on behalf of the entire members of JWF. We are acutely aware as this executive that there is nothing in us that is inherently deserving of this honour. It is simply through the power and providence of God that we are here. We know that our parents were correct when they taught us to Sing “Kungawo amandla Avel’nkosini, esoda sifke Phezulu”. As we are about to deliberate on our calling as a JWF we see the foot prints of the God who carried us throughout the year; and all we can say is “ Morena Thuso tsa gago fa ke li gopola tsotlhe o molemo le tsotlhego O ntsamaisitse sentle”. We know that it is this God that brought us here through your faith and prayers. We thank God for you.

2. INTRODUCTION AND SETTING THE SCENE

We are gathering in the next three days accompanied by the aspirations of our people who gathered in Umtata, not far from here thirty-five years Madiba’s home coming Rally next Umtata Dam to consider what it means to be a new nation born out of the struggle against white supremacy and racism. It is there when Eastern Cape was mentioned as home of Legend, when Wilton Mkwayi, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Walter Sisulu and many others were here together with the Great Nelson Mandela in Independent Stadium.

3. THE TIME TO CELEBRATE AND REFLECT

This Conference meets against the backdrop of the thirty-one years of democratic South Africa, but still people of this country still living in poverty particularly black people.

4. THE THEME

It is only those who are fools of history who in the moment of reflection remain in the glory of their past triumphs. Those who are committed to the radical transformation of their life situations are always pulled forward by the eschatological vision of God which is never satisfied with the present, no matter how majestic the victory moments may have been.

We can all climb the mountain. We can all see Jesus surrounded by Moses and Elijah in the glory of heavenly images, yet our work is never done on top of the mountain. It is always done at the foot of the mountain as we leave the euphoria of that mountain. Though we will be

inspired by what happens on the mountain, we must have the courage to confront the paradoxes and pains that surround the mountain. From that confrontation, we must design strategies and tactics to change our reality so as to reflect what God's vision is for his creation.

It is in this light that we have chosen the theme; LET THY KINGDOM COME: WE ARE IN NEED OF HIS KINGDOM. It is important to note that what informs this theme is the dream of John Wesley Federation which emerged from the first conference that met in Queenstown. Where we declared that God's dream for our churches in particular Methodist people **"Our aim is to empower, leadership capacity and reclaiming our Wesleyan heritage."** It must therefore, be the conviction of the JWF that our churches cannot pay lip service to that call. It must be the JWF that reminds our churches the church is not a mere epilogue in the chapters of our lives. It is a chief concern and it must inform and direct our activity. Church's pain and lament must find a way into the rituals and prayers of the people. Church's hopes and dreams must be infused into a future dreamt by the JWF. The weaknesses and failures of our churches must be confessed with a deep sense of sadness and contribution by the JWF, whilst anticipating the renewing work of forgiveness, reconciliation and transformation that comes from being in Christ. The commitment must be to hold hands with the marginalised and despised children of God; those Franz Fanon calls the wretched of the earth, as they shape a different future for Africa.

Our theme is drawn from the Lord's Prayer as recorded for us in the Gospel of Luke. This recording is based on Christ teaching his disciples how to be in conversation with God who is not only their parent but the author of life. This teaching clearly indicates that prayer is a living conversation between this God and those who believe and trust in the same God. This conversation is predicated on the understanding that there is a dream that this God has for his people and creation, and the need for his people to be open to that dream.

In the words that we have chosen: "Let thy Kingdom Come", we encounter Jesus telling his disciples that no matter how beautiful or powerful the present is, God always has a much more beautiful and more powerful dream for his people. Theologically speaking, we are always in the meantime, anticipating the eschatological in-dwelling of God's reign in the world. The present, it does not matter how powerful it might be, always points to something more substantial than what it is right now. It is Paul who says; "For now we see in a mirror dimly but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part then; I will know fully even as I have been known fully." 1Cor 13:12

Yet in this instance the cry of this part of the Lord's Prayer is much more than simply seeking perfection. It is a fundamental dissatisfaction that Jesus finds in being human and what it is to be religious in his time. This prayer is Jesus's call for a critical reflection of every status quo. Jesus finds the status quo of his time falling short of God's vision. He meets religious leaders who, rather than lead people to God's love, stand in judgement and cold morality against God's people. He meets religious people who fleece God's ordinary people and derive their riches and their livelihoods on the back of God's people. No wonder he goes into the temple and turns the tables' upside-down. Jesus is dissatisfied with and rejects strongly the current state because when he goes around, he encounters a Lazarus who eats left-overs at the gate of the rich. It is whilst the hearts of the rich are so deaf to the cries and pains of Lazarus, their

eyes are blind and cannot see the wounds that occupy his body; yet dogs notice him and lick his wounds. Jesus is dissatisfied with the current state because he meets a Pontius Pilate who knows the truth and yet for career advancement and narrow self-interest decides to sell it at the altar of expediency. It is in this state that Jesus goes into Jerusalem and says; "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." Luke 4:18. All of this indicates that in a world where the little ones of God are wounded, the Church of God can never be satisfied and in her restlessness have to cry out; "Let thy Kingdom come." Whilst others are blinded by the glitter and opulence of the moment, the Church of Christ has to pray louder and say; "Nkosi sithembele wena! Let thy Kingdom come!"

This prayer to God is an act of faith rather than a sense of being overwhelmed, paralysed, cynical and feeling powerless when confronted by the tragic in life.

It is important for us to understand that the word "Thy" is an appeal to a Subject whose continued involvement in human history, on behalf of the weak and the vulnerable, is the foundation of our faith. It is a God who is an active agent because God speaks into chaos and says, let there be order and things come to being. It is the God who breathes and clay becomes human. It is the God who speaks and darkness gives way to light.

We believe in no God, except the one who comes down and says; "I have heard the cries of my people." We know no God except the one who says; "All flesh is like grass. It withers away like the flower of the forest but my word lasts forever." We know no God except the one who says to us; "Do not despair for I will be with you to the end of the ages." We know no God except the one who comes when the sea is roaring and the storms are raging and he seems to be asleep and we wake him up in desperation and we say; "You seem not to care" and he commands the sea to be quite. So when the prayer says;

"Let thy Kingdom come" we affirm our faith in that God who is a verb for he is always in action on behalf of his people. This prayer is a call for God to infuse his ultimate dream for the world into the present.

Any close study of the gospel of Luke reveals that God's salvation is never something for tomorrow. There is no postponement. There is a sense of immediacy and urgency. It always has an impact on the now. It is this Jesus who meets Zacchaeus and says to him; "Salvation has come to this your home." Not tomorrow but now. It is this Jesus who meets the one hanging on the cross and when he pleads to be remembered Jesus assures him: "Today, I will be with you....."

When Jesus speaks about God's Kingdom, he never leaves us with doubt of what this is about. Our scriptures are littered with what God wants us to be like. For Jesus, the centre of this Kingdom of God is where justice reigns and the rule of God is the overarching expression of life. It is the Kingdom of God when love embraces all, even in its woundedness, transforming all even with the same wounds. In this reign of God those who are outcasts are brought from the periphery into the centre, or as Koyama Kosuke (1998) would say; God

turns the periphery into the centre. In this reign of God the poor are called blessed. The mourning is called blessed. The meek are called blessed. The hungry are called blessed. The merciful are called blessed. The peacemakers are called blessed. Those persecuted for righteousness sake are called blessed.

In this Kingdom of God, when the spirit falls down we are not excited with speaking in tongues we ask the question; "Is the prisoner set free? Are the hungry fed? Are the sick healed?" In this Kingdom, as Micah reminds us; "The Lord requires of you to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God" Mic 6:8.

This Kingdom subverts the dominant values of our society. In a world that worships Number One, this Kingdom says: The last shall be first. In a world where we bow our knees to the mighty and powerful, this Kingdom says the lowly shall be lifted up high and the mighty will be brought low. In a world where leadership is about position and power this Kingdom says that the greatest amongst you is the servant who is willing to wash the feet of the other. In a world where the mighty rides chariots of war, this Kingdom says that your king comes riding on a donkey. In a world where we get noticed by the company of the powerful this Kingdom says we will be noticed by being born in a stable and walk among the wounded and despised. This Kingdom says power is best when it is in the service of love. Leadership is at its best in the service of justice. Lordship is at its best in the service of compassion and solidarity. These are God's values and this is God's Kingdom.

It is with this kingdom in mind that we encounter our current African reality. There is no doubting that we are a people of great courage and hope. I dare say it that this continent of ours is one of the best hopes for the salvation of the human Soul in the rampant domination of the material over the soul and the destruction of creation in the altar of greed and soulless civilisation. I believe that Steve Biko is correct, when he echoed our forebears like Pixley ka Seme and Albert Luthuli, when he said; "We reject the power based society of the westerner that seems to be ever concerned with perfecting their technological know-how while losing out on the spiritual dimension. We believe that in the long run, the special contribution to the world by Africa is the field of human relationships giving the world a more human face."

Linked to this, we also know that Africa has had many a dream which were to be our guiding lights as we envisioned a great future. These dreams had advocates and proponents that paid a high price in the attempts to bring them into reality. The voices of Kwame Nkruma disturbed the powerful voices of colonialism and told us of a dream of an Africa which can only be free when all her peoples are free. Patrice Lumumba, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda and many more echoed the sweet melodies of this dream to carry us all into the dawn of a liberated Africa.

We all know the euphoria that came with the promise of a new birth for our continent. This euphoria was best expressed in the birth of a new South Africa with the ascension of the iconic Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. Who can forget the moments when the world fixed its collective eye on the southern tip of the continent with renewed optimism and awe? We all stood a little bit taller

When Thabo Mbeki stood in Parliament, where bigotry reigned supreme in the past, and said “I know that none dare challenge me when I say- I am an African.” In this dawn we pinned our hopes as we anticipated the 21st century to be an African century.

As we (as this conference) today gather, we know that we have fallen short of that glorious promise of the birth. We soon lost our innocence. We soon produced our own Idi Amins, Mabutho Seseko’s, Sanni Abbatcha’s. In South Africa, buying of arms became more important than investing in the fundamental transformation of the lives of the poor (to say nothing of the issues around corruption), we lost our innocence. The country is in a grip of leaders who do not serve our people but use the public purse as their private banks to feed themselves to obesity whilst our people starve to death.

Many people risk their lives and limb to cross the Atlantic Ocean as they turn their backs to the continent of their birth and approach a continent that does not want them, a continent that sometimes allows them to drown in the hundreds. This they do simply because they have lost hope in the continent of their birth and choose a life of quasy slavery as the only chance they have for a life worth living.

We lost our innocence. Dare we say it; even religion has become a curse for the continent. Many Africans have lost their lives simply because they are Christian or Moslem, indeed we have lost our innocence. Too many women and young girls are raped and killed in our homes, streets and war zones. This cannot be our dream! This cannot be God’s Kingdom.

So the JWF must encouraging us, we have to call on our people to go to the top of every valley, hill and mountain and ultimately Mount Kilimanjaro and pray “Let thy kingdom Come!!” This must be Africa’s urgent call. We make this call knowing that prayer is also a call to action for those who are on their knees. We, who pray must have the faith that makes us stand up and act. God is waiting for us, at the end of our words, to engage us in concrete steps in bringing his kingdom to life.

We will do this because we know our God, in the midst of darkness, raises stars that point the way forward. Africa is still a continent that blessed with wonderful resources, courageous leaders, and brilliant minds, young people who are energised to rekindle and work for a dream of a better Africa.

Deeply rooted in the dreams of our people, aware of the crisis of our time, knowing the trustworthiness of our God we will pray this prayer in fervent hope. It is also with this prayer in mind that we have to engage seriously and critically the new commitments that emerge in this continent. If **“Our aim is to empower, leadership capacity and reclaiming our Wesleyan heritage.”** is our guiding vision, the JWF has to say to the church please take time to engage critically what the AU has put before all of us recently in what is called Agenda 2063. The AU describes it in the following way; “Agenda 2063 is both a Vision and an Action Plan. It is a call for action to all segments of African society to work together to build a prosperous and united Africa based on shared values and a common destiny”. As people of the kingdom of God we will need to engage Agenda 2063 with God’s demands in mind.

5. READING THE SIGNS OF OUR TIME AND LISTENING TO OUR CONTEXT OF THE JWF

As we gather in this 2nd conference of the JWF, we must commit ourselves to a deep reflection of what our particular historical challenge is as the JWF in our churches. We have to grasp the opportunities that our past victories have given us in order for us to shape new terrains of struggle and transformation. Through our gains there is no leadership position in the JWF that doesn't take into account black people as viable options for those responsibilities.

When ethos is gone, vision gets poorer, and when vision is poor imagination stagnates and therefore leadership becomes a contestation of characters rather than a contestation of visions. We get more interested in personalities, the ability to make the loudest noise without substance and we end up appealing to our selfish interests and small identities. In these contestations there is no place for vision or alternative visions contesting against each other. The most important thing is: What can you give me? Or, do we speak the same language? Are we from the same ethnic group? Or the latest phenomenon; is the candidate in our church?

If the ethos of the church is to be inclusive and deep, the JWF must help the church to fight and defeat the scourge of ethnicity. In our midst we must be very intolerant of any attempt to elevate others because of their ethnicity. Our identity is not founded on the places or languages of our birth, those are contexts of birth. Our identity is founded in our common humanity derived from the image of God. The JWF, is our common home. The JWF must lead the charge, to declare any claim of ethnic superiority a heresy and a sin.

If the ethos of the JWF is going to be all encompassing and deep enough, it has to take seriously the struggles, emancipation and gifting of all people. We have to move beyond occasional and ceremonial activities around people. Their agenda must be the Church's agenda.

6. RESTRUCTURING THE JWF FOR PURPOSE

The struggle for ethos is one that is not won in a simplistic pursuit of numbers, but it is won in contestation of thought leadership – which is about ideas, thinking and theoretical development. This counsel we have received from our forebears, such as Frantz Fanon in his book, *Black Skin White Mask*. Steve Biko diagnosed it aptly when he says; “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed”. This calls for total liberation is summed up in Ngugi wa Thiong'o' calls for the decolonisation of the mind. Our task is to free ourselves of borrowed notions of God and being Church and rediscover our own narratives and metaphors about God and church, and declare with the Latin American Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez that we are; “Drinking from Our Own wells.” We drink in these wells not only to get water but to learn how to dig up our new wells in our time. This must be our most urgent task as the JWF.

This urgent assignment informs our life as this JWF. We gathered here in Umtata to consider

what our black theoretical handles should be for our times. What constitute good leadership and accountability? What is our response to the continued oppression of women in church and society? What are the areas of influence in the decision making processes of the church?

This conference's programme is structured to engage this fundamental challenge. We, black people, do not want to be the furniture that has been moved in the house nor do we want to be the chief security guard. In truth we want to own the house in order to transform it from being a house into a homestead. For this agenda to be successfully pursued, we must re-vision a structurally relevant JWF. We no more can afford to have a JWF that is geared towards only two meetings in a year as a definition of its life. We cannot afford a JWF which has members who come to conference simply to spend most of their time outside the hall when we are in session and pursue their private agendas at the cost of the image and integrity of our federation. We have to commit into finding smaller and consistently engaging pockets of our federation that lead our thinking, strategizing, implementation and evaluation. Provinces that only exist to organise themselves for coming to the Conference are going to impoverish our progress and contribution. We have to spend time to strengthen the leadership at provincial, regional level, instil discipline, accountability and coordination. We must have focused and well run provinces, regions that are inspired to act consistently in pursuit of the dreams and values of the JWF in the life of the church.

7. TAKING STEPS IN SHAPING OUR FUTURE

The JWF has, in my view, to make the following few steps in its movement forward in praying this prayer with concrete actions:

- It is high time that that the JWF commits to leadership investment and development through an annual leadership Seminar and symposium. This should endeavour to gather all members of JWF in order to engage on an annual basis the understanding of leadership for our time, find new and working models of leadership, expose and train people on emerging trends of leadership and seek to inculcate a culture of spiritual leadership that is founded on love and service.
- The JWF has to find ways that are authentic, safe yet open and frank so as to be able to engage those in our ranks who occupy roles of responsibility in the broader church. In an age where it is possible to find black leaders without black consciousness and connection to a Federation it becomes imperative for the JWF to continue the process of contestation and consciountisation of these leaders. We have to work against the notion of self-made leaders, black leaders especially, who are accountable to no one except to themselves and perhaps their campaign managers.
- The JWF must encourage the church and its leaders to develop a courageous and consistent prophetic stance that speaks truth to power whatever the consequences. It is with this stance that the church must engage all sectors of society and be in forefront of a social movement that harnesses the energies of our people in the fight against rampant corruption, arrogance of power and the lack of accountability from those in power. This must include a campaign of consistent public solidarity in word and action with those

who choose the path of truth and justice against all odds. It cannot be enough, for example to issue public statements when the Judicial is under attack. We must find a way of saying to judicial, when you choose truth and justice you are not alone we are with you. To publicly say to those who abuse them when they choose truth and justice; know this when you rebuke them you touch us. We as the church we stand with those who stand for social justice and truth.

8. CONCLUSION

As I conclude my dear friends I know that the journey ahead will not be easy nor straight forward. I have no doubt that our minds will be stretched, our spirits might tire along the way, our resources might seem inadequate and the mountain too steep to climb.

I further know we will be criticised, ridiculed as day dreamers who are guided by wishful thinking. We will be told we have become irrelevant and obstructionist. There will be voices that tell us we have lost our way and need to shut up. I know there will be many who say we are trapped in the past, the world has moved on, we are fighting past battles. We will even be told we are not led by the holy spirit. I say to you my brothers and sisters; this is not the time to allow the dream to die; as you here these voices remember the dream of our people as given to us by Langston Hughes who says:

I dream a world where man No
other man will scorn.
Where love will bless the earth And peace
its paths adorn
I dream of a world where all
Will know sweet freedoms way, Where greed
no longer saps the soul No avarice blights our
day.
A world I dream where black or white

Whatever race you may be,
Will share the bounties of the earth And every
man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head And joy
like a pearl,
Attends the needs of all mankind- Of such
I dream, my world!

Let these dream give strength to you tiring soul. Let your mind, when dreams fade be touched by a place where man no other will scorn, where love will bless the earth and peace adorn its path, where all will know sweet freedom way, a place where greed no longer saps the soul nor avarice blight our soul, a place where every person is free, all share the bounties of the earth and joy attends the need of all mankind. Be touched by that dream and just walk a little longer.

When you are tempted to give up because the road is long and winding, the voices that criticize us are too loud and strong remember what Ben Okri says in his epic poem called the Africa Elegy, he says:

We are the miracle that God made To taste
the bitter fruit of time.

We are precious.

And one day our suffering

Will turn into the wonders of the earth. There are
things that burn me now Which turn golden
when I am happy.

Do you see the mystery of our pain? That we
bear poverty

And we are able to sing and dream sweet things We bless
things even in our pain.

We bless them in silence.

That is why our music is so sweet. It
makes the air to remember.

There are secret miracles at work That
only time will bring forth.

I too have heard the dead singing. The sky
is not an enemy.

Destiny is our friend.

So do not give up for you are a miracle from God, you do taste the bitter fruits of time yet one day, there are things that burn you now but will be golden soon, you accompanied by sweet music that the air remembers, accompanied by the singing of the dead marching forward because destiny is our friend.

This is not the time to give up no matter how dark and treacherous the road may be; remember no matter how dark the moment one candle's light dispels the night.

This is not the time to give up. Remember, there is a God who knows you, who knows the loneliness and darkness of the path of the cross and the hope of resurrection. It is that same Jesus Christ who said to you do not be afraid for I am with you till the end of time. So when it seems like all effort is meaningless and ineffective, the criticism rises like a crescendo and muzzles your inner voice just go to a quiet place and let your soul cry out "Let Thy Kingdom Come" "Let thy Kingdom Come!" "Let thy Kingdom Come!!" as you rise up and act for that kingdom; for that is Africa's urgent call. Hold my hands as I hold your hands; let our action as the JWF be our concrete prayer for the sake of Africa and her healing. Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika, maluphakanyisw' uphondo lwayo, yiva imithandazo yethu. Nkosi sikelela thina Lusapho lwayo. God Bless you all.

Thank you.

Rev. T. Gqwaka
JWK President