

Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

Prof Musa W. Dube, Coordinator

Dept. of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Botswana

P. O. Box 70249

Gaborone, Botswana. Tel: [+267 355 2615](tel:+2673552615); Email: concernedwomentheo@gmail.com



From: Prof Musa W. Dube, Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Coordinator

To: Members and Friends of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

Date: 07/06/2020

Subject: “Mama, Mama... I Can’t Breathe!”

As members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, our hearts have been torn; our spirits have been deeply stirred; and our faces are drowned in tears, since the throttling of Mr George Floyd, a black man. In broad daylight, in Minneapolis, USA on May 25, 2020, Mr Floyd was handcuffed, pinned down to the hard concrete, while a white policeman pressed his knee on Floyd’s throat for eight minutes, 46 seconds, suffocating him. Floyd pleaded for his life to no avail until he finally succumbed to death.

Mr Floyd, a black man, has become one among numerous other black people who in recent times have died (physically, emotionally and economically) through police brutality in the USA. Mr Floyd has become the embodiment of, and a testament to, the terror that our black brothers and sisters face in their homes, streets and cities in a country they call their own. Enslaved for centuries, denied reparations after freedom, subjugated to structured poverty, marked as criminals, denied justice in courts, and shut up in prisons, African Americans’ lives have been looted and denied human dignity, as structured racism remains deeply engraved in the fabric of the USA’s institutions. Floyd’s cry calls attention to the plight of the entire African American community, which is suffocating and calling out, “I can’t breathe.” The community has been pleading, “Black Lives Matter.” This deep wound of racism is not only found in the USA; it is a worldwide structure of oppression. Since the days of colonialism when racism served as the instrument of white supremacy, it has remained inbuilt in global economics, politics and knowledge systems. Two-Thirds World countries continue to suffocate under the knee of racism that has relegated them to exploitation and poverty.

Like those who stood on the sidewalk as Mr Floyd was losing his life, we have become eyewitnesses of his death. Through the technological devices that recorded the event and sent it out to the world, we have seen his suffering, we have felt his pain, we have heard his cry until he lost his life. His cry has become our cry. His cry is the cry of all people of color everywhere, oppressed on the basis of their skin color. His cry has become the cry of all people everywhere who love justice and peace. His call has become the cry of all people who worship the God liberation (Exodus 3:7-9). His call for help is no longer the tragic eight-minute episode—it is rather an endless call of the past, present and future voices that

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have been denied justice. We are called to remain eternally attentive to his appeal to Mother: “Mama! Mama... I can’t breathe!” As Mercy A. Oduyoye has underlined, mothers of the womb, mothers of the heart and mothers of justice are co-creators with God in protecting all life, in the management of God’s resources and modelling what constitutes good governance (2004:57-68). And as the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, we are commanded by Mr Floyd’s appeal to mothers everywhere to embark on a journey for justice against murder, racism and all other forms of discrimination. We remain commanded by his haunting voice to uproot structural forces of racism and to birth justice for Mother Earth and all her children through our work in the academy and the communities that we serve. We remain called to the duty to protect the sanctity of all lives by exposing, opposing structures of discrimination and searching for a space of nurturing all life.

We appreciate the worldwide movement that has stood up in solidarity with Mr Floyd, with African Americans, and with all people of color who are subjected to structural racism and white supremacy everywhere. We celebrate this sign of hope in the horizons of our skies. We urge the whole Earth Community to remain restless until we have named and uprooted all traces of racism and all forms of oppression embedded in our histories, cultures, institutions, policies and structures. Until we have truly delivered dignity and freedom to every oppressed member of the Earth community, let us remain haunted by George Floyd’s call, “Mama! Mama.... I can’t breathe!”

Prof. Musa W. Dube is the General Coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

June 7, 2020, Gaborone, Botswana

References

Oduyoye, Mercy A. *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*. New York: Orbis Press, 2004.

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These are the last words of George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man who died as a US police officer pinned him to the ground, kneeling on his neck for more than eight minutes, until he suffocated:

"It's my face man
I didn't do nothing serious man
please
please
please I can't breathe
please man
please somebody
please man
I can't breathe
I can't breathe
please
(inaudible)
man can't breathe, my face
just get up
I can't breathe
please (inaudible)
I can't breathe sh*t
I will
I can't move
mama
mama
I can't
my knee
my nuts
I'm through

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I'm through
I'm claustrophobic
my stomach hurts
my neck hurts
everything hurts
some water or something
please
please
I can't breathe officer
don't kill me
they gon' kill me man
come on man
I cannot breathe
I cannot breathe
they gon' kill me
they gon' kill me
I can't breathe
I can't breathe
please sir
please
please
please I can't breathe"

Then his eyes shut and the police stop. George Floyd was pronounced dead shortly after.

Right now, we have a choice. This can be just one more tragic death at the hands of the US police — or the moment of change.