

*Keynote address presented by Vasu Gounden, Founder and Executive Director, ACCORD, at the 2016 UKZN Graduation on 11 April 2016, on receiving his honorary Doctorate of Social Sciences.*

## THE HOUR HAS COME....

There comes a time in the life of every nation when its character, its soul, its moral fibre is tested...a time of struggle, of deep tension and division when hearts will dominate heads, when emotion will triumph over reason...a time when what unites us will matter less than what divides us, a time when hatred, bigotry, and intolerance will replace love, understanding and empathy; a time when the possibility of greatness will be replaced by the self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

Compatriots, this time, in our beloved country, has come...it is time for each of us to place a mirror before us...to look deep in our souls and to say...what have I done to place our country in this grave predicament...and to ask...what am I going to do to restore the greatness of our “miracle” nation.

Compatriots I stand before you today to receive this honour from my alma mater, the illustrious University of KwaZulu Natal, born like the new South Africa from the appendages of apartheid, knitted together to create the tapestry of a new nation.

I stand before you today because a simple housewife gave birth to me and instilled in me a spiritualism that gave me faith in myself;

I stand before you today because I saw my father, a shoe factory worker, being imprisoned for his ideals, and today on the eve of his ninetieth birthday he still stands as resolute as ever in defence of the principles he fought for;

I stand before you today because of a wife who lost her father when she was three and yet she was willing to share me with the public life I chose to lead;

I stand before you today because I have caring children, siblings, friends and colleagues that support me in my quest to change the world...and I thank them all.

Compatriots, I also stand here today because of Steve Biko and Robert Sobukwe who taught us to fight racism by being proud of our racial identity;

I stand before you today because of the thousands, including my father, who gathered 60 years ago in Kliptown, to sign the Freedom Charter laying the foundations for us to build a non-racial, non-sexist nation.

I stand before you today because Dulcie September and Ruth First, two of our liberation fighters who were assassinated, showed us the meaning of selflessness, sincerity and sacrifice.

Compatriots these were the influences that shaped my life...a life that teaches one to believe not in the power of privilege, and patronage but rather in the power of ideas and initiative!

Thirty years ago, in 1986 during the State of Emergency in apartheid South Africa, I stood here on this very University campus as the President of the Student Representative Council together with thousands of comrades waging a people's war...and our only weapon was the power of ideas and initiative.

Today, thirty years later as the memory of those dark days fades away, let me reflect compatriots on the freedom we so dearly fought for. In this late afternoon, as the sun sets to unveil our warm African sky, I see the towering iconic figure of Nelson Mandela, the father of our nation, high on the mountain-top...and his colossal figure casts an uncertain shadow over the multitudes of us South Africans, in all our colourful diversity...and he stands there as the proverbial biblical Moses leading his faithful flock.

And as he looks down at his flock he is not sure if they are in some kind of gold rush, bolting towards the edge of the steep precipice to hell; or if they still remember his words..."I have walked that long road to freedom...but I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibility, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended"...and so he is not sure if his people remember those words and if they still have the will, the patience, the

perseverance, the wisdom, and the integrity to follow him to the promised land.

Compatriots for the last twenty five years I have travelled many times to the steep precipice to hell. Somalia, Syria, and Sri Lanka...this is where the precipice to hell leads. Each country sculpted in its own physical beauty, its civilisation defined by its own splendour of antiquity, its culture a canvass of tribes, ethnicities, religions, and races...blended over centuries of cohabitation into a oneness of shared histories, victories and defeats.

And then...selfishness, greed, and narrow chauvinism rears its ugly head pitting neighbour against neighbour, brother against brother, parents against children, tearing families, communities and nations apart in a bloody battle for domination...giving birth to dead sons and dead daughters.

Compatriots, I am being honoured here today for my work in contributing, over the last twenty five years, to resolving the political conflicts that plague our world...I have worked in some of the most protracted violent civil wars in the world....Compatriots...I have seen hell. I have stared in the eyes of killers and in the eyes of those they have killed. I have seen orphaned children and helpless refugees by the hundreds of thousands...I have seen the remains of the eight hundred thousand people killed in Rwanda in only three months...imagine for a second what eight hundred thousand bodies look

like...then you will be able to imagine what the recklessness of bigotry, narrow chauvinism, and stereotyping can do.

I have travelled in 1997, over the sand dunes of Somalia, into a town controlled by warlords...who were the masters of thousands of young men turned into drug zombies, whose only claim to respect and dignity came from the barrel of the gun slung over their shoulders. Twenty years later...those young men have graduated into a regular army spreading terror on a daily basis in a land denied its greatness.

In 2013 my colleagues and I spent five days in Syria...a country whose natural beauty and antiquity is breath-taking...we met with protagonists on all sides of the conflict...then in 2013, the protesters were throwing stones, six months later they were firing bullets and three years later they are in a full scale armed civil war. A once pristine canvass has been stained with the blood of hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

Compatriots in my twenty five years I have seen too many countries whose people were blinded into an exceptionalism carved out of pride for their uniqueness, only to have had that destroyed by a few whose fears and emotions drove them to destruction.

What is unique about us that we should think that this fate of a Somalia, Syria or Sri Lanka cannot befall us? I remember here in KwaZulu-Natal only thirty years ago we witnessed the killing fields of Mpumalanga Township. I remember going with my law Principal, Mr Archie Gumede, on the morning of 22 January 1987 to the township of KwaMakhutha where we saw the bodies of women and children butchered in a massacre that was politically motivated. That picture and the pain and tears on the face of Baba Gumede when we saw those innocent bodies will remain with me forever...a permanent reminder that we should never go there again.

Compatriots, we have also been to hell and like my father and I, there are many of you, mainly parents, sitting here today who have seen that same hell...and I know that none of us want to go back to that place. For the young people graduating here today you should know that thousands have died so that you can graduate here today...so that you can build from the ashes of apartheid a free country. This is your historical responsibility!

Compatriots, our nation, like all the nations of the world, face a dangerous time. For the first time in the history of humanity we face the convergence of a number of factors that threaten our very existence. Exponential population growth, rapid urbanisation, climate change, and a global financial crisis, are all converging at the same time...a phenomenon unprecedented in the history of

humanity, presenting us with huge complexity. For developing countries like ours this will exacerbate poverty, unemployment and inequality the triple challenges that were the cornerstone of our liberation struggle.

Compatriots, this is not the challenge of tomorrow...this is the challenge of today...we are in a race against time...the time has come...when this nation of ours stands at the cross-roads to the proverbial hell or the Promised Land. It is a time when each of us must search inside our souls for the reasons for our current predicament...and answer the question... what have I done to place this beloved country in this grave predicament?...and...what am I going to do to restore the greatness of our nation?

Let us ask why some of our teachers continue to deny our children their right to a quality education...and let us admit that those teachers are our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers, and we fail our nation when we look the other way.

Let us ask why those who staff our municipalities do not care about providing us with a quality service...and then let us admit that those too are our brothers and sisters and our mothers and fathers, and we fail our nation when we look the other way

Let us ask why our business people pay bribes to government officials and why ordinary citizens bribe law enforcement officials...and let us admit that those business people, government officials, law enforcement officials, and ordinary citizens are our brothers and sisters and our mothers and fathers, and we fail our nation when we look the other way.

Now that we have looked at ourselves and taken responsibility for our own roles in this predicament...let us turn our heads and ask those who have built their fortunes on the suffering of the masses of our people...those who have benefitted from the engineering of skills, capital and opportunity under apartheid...let us ask them to admit their privileges and share their good fortune...and let us remember that those too are the mothers and fathers of some among us and when we look the other way we too fail our nation.

Let us also turn to all those who lead us today and who benefit by denying the masses of our people access to the resources they rightfully claim as their birth-right and let us ask them why they claim to lead us and yet deny us. Let them know that to be denied in this democracy is as painful, if not more painful, than being denied in apartheid...and let us admit that those who deny us are also our mothers and our fathers and let us not fail our nation by looking the other way.



Compatriots, despite all these challenges that we face, and for which we must take collective responsibility, let us also celebrate this great nation we have built. There are over one hundred and ninety nations in this world...of these one hundred and ninety nations we are the 27<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world, in terms of auditing and reporting standards we rank number one in the world according to the World Economic Forum, and Capitec Bank, a wholly South African bank, was rated the best bank in the world.

In terms of infrastructure we are ranked 39<sup>th</sup> in the world and we have the 10<sup>th</sup> longest road network and 14th longest railway network in the world. Of the 550 airports ranked worldwide Cape Town was ranked at number 22, Johannesburg at number 30 and Durban at number 35.

We are in the top ten countries in the world harnessing renewal energy from the sun; in a world where forests are threatened affecting climate change we have the highest level of international certification of our tree plantations in the world; we were the first African country to host the FIFA World cup and we have hosted the rugby and cricket world cups.

Unisa is the largest distance learning University in the world. In terms of think tanks in the world our institution ACCORD was ranked by Pennsylvania University in 2015 at number 63 out of 6800 think tanks. South Africa was also

the reigning world champions of the International Supercomputing Conference Student Cluster Competition for 2013 and 2014.

These achievements, among the many others we have, as well as our unrivalled natural beauty stretching from the majestic Table Mountain, to the rolling hills of the Drakensberg, the spectacular Blyde River Canyon and the panoramic view through God's Window, should make us all proud of the nation we are and the nation we can become.

Compatriots, the time has come in the life of our nation when our character, our soul, our moral fibre, is being tested...it is a time of struggle, of deep tension and division...but compatriots it is time when our heads must dominate our hearts, when reason must triumph over emotion...a time when what unites us MUST matter more than what divides us, a time when love, understanding and empathy must replace hatred, bigotry, and intolerance, a time when the possibility of failure must be replaced by a self-fulfilling prophecy of greatness.

Compatriots, it is time for our political leaders to rise above their political party interests and embrace their national responsibility...It is time for all of us to build bridges...let us build bridges that create equality, employment, and prosperity...let us build a bridge from Sandton to Alexandra township...from Khayelitsha to Constantia and from Umhlanga to KwaMashu...let us build

bridges that stretch across the wide open plains of the Karoo, across our vast scenic coastlines, and over the grasslands of our great mountains...let us compatriots build a great nation...Compatriots it is a time for us to fly one flag...the flag of the Republic of South Africa, to pay allegiance to one manifesto...the Constitution of South Africa, and to sing from one hymn sheet, Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika!

God bless South Africa!

I thank you.