

Outlook on the Month

ARE WE BLIND?

It is astonishing that the Message for 1977 from the Ministers' Fraternal in Guguletu, Nyanga and Langa should have been banned. What is said in it is already in the hearts and minds and on the lips of very many people, both black and white.

If ministers of some of the Churches in the African townships in Cape Town are conveying the truth to us about the deeply felt grievances of their people, we should be prepared to pay attention to what they say and try to put right what is wrong. The urgently needed changes in our society cannot come about in a healthy and orderly way if we will not even allow those most affected to speak frankly to us about what seems to them to be oppressive. Because this is the situation in our country, many black people have concluded that the only language white people will hear is that of burning, rioting, killing and being killed. Nobody can want the continuation of this state of affairs.

If we cannot perceive that young black people, with their lives before them, are saying by the present unrest that they will no longer accept the apartheid future designed for them by others in education or elsewhere, we, the Christian people of our land must be blind.

If this nation cannot hear and respond to the repeated call for an end to the migrant labour system, which puts impossible obstacles in the way of normal family life in the locality where men find employment, and arrest wives and sends them away when they come to live with their husbands, we must be suffering from some kind of moral paralysis.

If we cannot understand the black people are at a grave disadvantage economically in apartheid society and that there is an urgent need for a more just distribution of land and wealth, we must be both blind and deaf.

The black people who are saying these things to us in word and action are, many of them, our brothers and sisters in Christ. We cannot be indifferent to their aspirations and to what happens to them when they dare to seek a society in which a fuller life is possible for them.

Everybody, from street cleaners to Cabinet Ministers, must surely be deeply disturbed, moreover, by the reports of the death of numerous persons in detention. During recent weeks, for example, we have read in the Press a medical report on the death in detention of Mr Joseph Mdluli. The police, it would seem, reported he had died as a result of falling over a chair. Medical evidence, however, revealed a variety of injuries which seem to indicate that it is unlikely that his death can be accounted for in so simple a fashion. And more recently we have learned of the death of Mr Matthew Marwala Mabelana, whom we are informed slipped and fell when he tried to escape from a top floor at John Vorster Square. How very foolish, or how desperate, to try to escape from the top floor at John Vorster Square.

If prisoners die as a result of injuries received during interrogation that is, at best, manslaughter. If they commit suicide there must be reasons for their ending their lives in so desperate a fashion. This also is wholly unacceptable. Imprisoning and interrogating people until they die, banning people and what they say, cannot produce a society which is worth living in. Many white South Africans find it increasingly intolerable that so high a price should be paid in this and other ways by black people for the political and economic advantages we enjoy.

I believe the society we have created for ourselves is morally indefensible. This is very serious at a time when we are being asked to defend it.

✠ BILL CAPE TOWN*