

## Welcoming address to the continental participants

*Karibuni* is a Swahili word which means 'welcome', in plural. As we are sitting here together, however, I can see that we have formed a unit of togetherness. It would, therefore, be more proper to use the singular form. In this case I would like to say to you all: *karibu* - welcome in our midst!

Nairobi, as a city which boasts the headquarters of the All Africa Conference of Churches, may not be a strange place for most of the participants from elsewhere in Africa, who have been attending other AACC activities, but certainly it is a new-found-land for our guests who have come all the way from the southern cockpit of Africa.

They form the largest contingent of this colloquium. They wished to join us here because they want to come out from the isolation of that cockpit; they want to know the horizons of their existential neighbourhood, and above all they want to establish fellowship with the unknown amongst the known in the community of God's mankind. We welcome you all: be among us, and have joy with us. In the mother continent there is always a manger in an inn. We are welcoming you all as sons and daughters of this continent of Africa, as *Wazalendo*, the born ones of this nation Africa, as Azanians in the front line of the struggle to bring reconciliation and justice, and as the people of God in our common efforts to serve him who has sent us forth to make good of his Kingdom on our entrusted earth. Ample time has been provided for our colloquium's programme, so that we can enjoy the serene beauty of this city and the context of her particularity in God's creation.

There are also some ugly spots in this secular city (to use the terminology of Harvey Cox), like in any other city in the world. But just as there is a particularity of beauty, so there is also particularity in the ugliness of our societies and communities in Africa, which is biblically summed up in one word: sin. The sinfulness of power and greed; the sinfulness of *apartheid*; the sinfulness of neo-colonialism; the sinfulness of debt crisis; and we can go on and on to state all that has spoiled the beauty of our cosmopolitan metropolises - Cape Town and Nairobi, Lagos and Lomé. Once, in the great city of Cairo, we were shown a large area which was a mass graveyard, where no living person was supposed to live and which the Arabs called *Makaabir* (the etymological origin of the French and English word 'macabre'); then we were told that due to population increase people were going to live there now, on the graveyards, and in the city of the dead. Life is more powerful than death, and life in general does not accept the Area Separation Code. Our cities and our villages and homes become really alive when we remove the barriers of separation. You see, once the Area Separation Code is gone, Nairobi becomes livelier and has the honour of receiving a delegation from South Africa, without the visa and other barriers.

Our Lord says: 'Behold, I make everything new'. The newness meant here is new in the sense of having been unutilized, something that has not been used or experienced before. The Psalmist describes the work of God in making new the image of the earth (Ps 104:30), and that is why we should sing for him a new song (Ps 33:2). But this requires a change of heart and spirit, and Ezekiel is very strong about this when he says 'get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit' (Ezk 18:32). For as his

contemporary, Jeremiah had realised that the Lord wanted to make a new covenant: 'Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand from (the wilderness of Europe and the desert of the Kalahari), my covenant which they broke' (Jer 31:31). No, God wants to give us another heart and a steadfast spirit, he will take away the stony heart and give us a heart of the flesh (Ezk 11:19), and we shall be God's people, and God will be our God.

We hear that Julius Caesar had once said: *ex Afrika semper aliquid novi* (there is always something new out of Africa). If that was true during the time of Caesar and Cleopatra, it is also very true in our times. We are going to witness tremendous changes in almost every sphere of our societies and communities, and all that will give a new description and a new testimony for the same old Africa.

For me, personally, the time factor of our meeting here is significant. There was every reason on earth for us to consider a later date to be more appropriate, taking into account the heavy schedule of AACC activities. However, we are here now contending with a loaded and perhaps a haphazard programme, *magnitatus fascinationis*. Nevertheless, the truth is that we are meeting in the time just after the period of Passion. The Lent is still alive in the minds of the people we wish to address ourselves to. They have heard many sermons during this time, which reminded them and us all about the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. They have been told by many of our ministers and lay-preachers that this feast is to be likened to the Passover feast in the Hebrew/Jewish tradition, and they could be asking themselves if it is really just a pass-over? Is it really a bygone thing? Is it past story without any further reference to His-story and all the consequences?

That is the reason why we are here, to enquire about ourselves, about our environment, about the things which are there and are going to come. We have been called together for a purpose. It is not an encounter in the sense of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's Me-You relationship, for although none of us assumes the vacuum in the other, or the non-entity of the otherness, we also have a common ground for our coming together. We are encountering each other on the ground of our salvific faithfulness, which is based on both the Gospel of Freedom and the Freedom of the Gospel; and on the ground of our pluralistic Africanness, which is based on both the Unity of Diversities and the Diversity of Unity. Our encounter, therefore, is a unique one and strictly to describe this colloquium as a dialogue in the sense of Martin Buber would be a non-starter, however good and aspiring that may be in their given contexts. In this case, therefore, we are not doing the arithmetic of our numeric participation. We are here as a Unit in our Diversities, and each person is welcome to make or to share his/her experiences as the new steadfast spirit leads us. *KARIBU!*

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