Speech Delivered by:

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30th Anniversary Reflection of the Release of Nelson Mandela

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Theme: Africa’s Prison
This is another great day the Lord has made and I will rejoice and be glad in it.

Your Excellency President Cyril Ramaphosa, Members of Parliaments, Members of the Judiciary, Diplomats, Religious leaders, student groups, the media, women of South Africa, distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

I am honored to have been selected to speak at this very distinguished occasion. I don’t take this task lightly and I remain grateful.

“I cherish my own freedom dearly but I care even more for your freedom” - Nelson Mandela

Growing up as a little girl in Liberia, my first recollection of peace and justice at a global level was on first Sundays at the St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, where prayers were said for South Africa and Nelson Mandela’s release. Offerings were collected to send to the All Africa Council of Churches aid and relief to the people of South Africa. In our church, the kids always wanted to use their offering coins for soda pop, but my mother was watching us with an eagle’s eye making sure we dropped in the coins. I had many questions in my young mind about the issues that were being prayed for: people were suffering, people were being suppressed, freedoms were restricted, life was hard, students were violated and young people were beaten, women were mourning their young ones. We were mandated to pray for an end to the sufferings.

As I reflect on those years in preparation for my talk today, I realized that several gifts were given to us in the forms of values.

1. Sacrifice
2. Compassion
3. Service
4. Our collective humanity

This in my opinion also captures the life and legacy of Nelson Mandela. Today, we gather to remember the sacrifice that this great man made during his imprisonment. He had powerfully declared during his trial that he would gladly give up his life for his ideals of a society based on equality, democracy and freedom. He dedicated his life in service to African independence and in his
quest to reconcile and reunite South Africa, he showed deep compassion and understanding. Nelson Mandela provides us with a powerful example of the ethic of Ubuntu, that we are all connected and even though we are all complicated and flawed beings, each and every one of us has a role to play in building the legacy of our collective humanity. What we must ask ourselves as Africans in general and South Africans in particular is, are these values of sacrifice, compassion, service and collective humanity still key features of our everyday existence?

Can we say all of these remain prominent in our politics, religious expression, social justice activism, educational systems and structures and our daily interactions?

I have been asked to speak on the theme “The prisons of Africa.”

The term prison points to the restriction of movement, confinement, the denial of a variety of freedoms, a form of punishment. It can be used as a tool of political repression.

On our continent today, there are many prisons and many prisoners in the formal sense of the word. Those who steal, rapists, drug addicts, murderers, and many of those individuals who go against the laws of our land. We put them away and often refer to them as social deviants and individuals whose intentions are solely to destroy the peace and tranquility of our land. By isolating those who wish the society ill, the theory goes, our communities should be functional and every individual will enjoy the provision of the basic human security needs.

Unfortunately, that is not the case. Our continent is riddled with so many vices that you would think the sustainable development goals were designed and instituted only for Africa. We are blessed with wealth and natural resources and a youthful population, but this has failed to give us the necessary tools for a better life. In many countries on the continent our natural resources are more of a “curse” than a “blessing”. Our youthful population have been described as the “powder keg” - the barrel of gun powder that can or will eventually be used for our destruction. Corruption, mismanagement and lack of vision is the hall mark of many of our institutions, communities and nations, leaving the most vulnerable especially the youth dreaming of crossing the ocean willingly this time to be enslaved and imprisoned.

Our political systems and democratic institutions are structured to turn the “the masses into “asses” and our politicians into “emperors”. Sadly, many of the
current day “emperors” - those who claim to lead our peoples - are sadly lacking in leadership qualities. Where is the vision for our continent and our peoples? Where is the faith that African cultures and innovations offer the solutions to our collective ills when properly invested in. Rather, too many in leadership roles seem more content with prolonging their stay in power and filling their Swiss accounts with funds that could be used to educate, heal, feed and train the vast majority of their population. Sadly, politics and governance has become the fastest way to gaining wealth on our continent.

I submit distinguished ladies and gentlemen, that African’s prison is the condition or current state of life of the vast majority of our people. Africa’s prison is the mindset of our people, Africa prison is the insensitive attitude of our leaders. Africa’s prison is the hopelessness in the eyes of our young people due to the lack of opportunities. Africa’s prison is the repeated rape, abuse and marginalization of the women of the continent. Africa’s prison is the existence of conditions that makes it easy for our young people to take up arms and kill their own people all in the name of revolution. Africa prison is the division of our communities on the basis of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation. Africa’s prison is the poor health infrastructure that has normalized maternal death and infant mortality. Africa’s prison is the millions of individuals who are graduates of universities but cannot afford one square meal a day. Africa’s prison is the justice system represents the needs of primarily the rich and famous.

Mandela was confined, his movement was restricted, but his physical prison cell was not reflected in an imprisonment of his mind or spirit. In prison his values for life and the betterment of life for his people guided him. His principled stance to protect collective humanity guided his thoughts and plans, which became more expansive and more clearly articulated. Whilst locked away, he could write and dream of a rainbow nation. He came out and was able to speak peace and reconciliation. Being locked away did not take away his humanity. He didn’t come out bitter and with machete to kill those who restricted his movement. He came out with a message of hope, peace and the greater good of all. Service, Sacrifice, Compassion and our Collective humanity.

Can we say that the current state of our continent and our African nations fulfills the vision he had when he spent 27 years in prison? For us to truly honor the legacy of this great father of Africa we, leaders on this continent must make a conscious effort to realign our individual and collective priorities so that it reflects the interests, needs and aspiration of the people. There must be a transformation in the mindset of the political leadership in Africa. Africa is not a
plantation. Africa is not your farm. Our shared resources must be governed with integrity, with development in mind and not to steal.

We as leaders must work assiduously to bring along a generation of young people who will step into our shoes and carry out the vision of an educated population of youth, an empowered, recognized and valued population of women. We must ensure that the natural resources benefit communities that they are extracted from.

The values I see in Nelson Mandela’s life present a roadmap to peace and development. If Africa’s leaders and citizens can adopt an ethic of sacrifice, compassion, service and collective humanity, we can create the conditions necessary for each and every human on the continent to live a dignified life.

As a peace activist, people often ask me what it means to live in peace. My friends, peace is not passive. Peace is not defined by being the opposite of war. No, peace is love, peace is justice. Peace is the existence of an environment where people thrive and have their needs met. It looks like a population of satisfied people, educated children, functioning health systems, responsive justice structures, an empowered, recognized appreciated and fully compensated community of women, food on the table of every home, and a lot more. It is the full expression of human dignity.

Your Excellency, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, what is the essence of today’s gathering? Is the essence of the 30th anniversary of Madiba’s release just to chant slogans to make us feel good? Is the essence just to come and hear political and activists’ speeches like mine? If we are only celebrating his release from prison, we miss the mark.

The opening of those prison doors was much more than a man walking out. It was about the rebirth of a nation and a continent. It is about laying a path for generations unborn, it is about a continent taking full control of her resources, her politics and her history.

Madiba’s walk out of prison was to ensure Africa’s release from the prison of our minds. We no longer have to be held hostage to greed, poverty, and corruption.

I thank you!