

Press Statement edited

Gempuru Besai Gerija Anglika Jaku Iban – 29th March, 3014

Today, we are gathered here in Bandar Sri Aman, a town whose very name means peace. This is indeed an historic assembly. History will surely judge us by what we say and do from today henceforth. We are on a prophetic threshold as children of God.

The Bible reminds us in Ecclesiastes 3:8 that there is a time for war and a time for peace. It seems a paradox that we are called to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) yet at the same time we are also to brace ourselves for war. Herein lies the mystery of living out our faith in obedience to our calling as Christians and to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The Archbishop of Canterbury declares, “Because by the grace of God we are defined as family with a call to action in reconciliation, then we have to find not only the **call** but also the **means** of being reconcilers, when our instincts and passions often lead us in the opposite direction.”

“If the Church is not a place both of conflict and of reconciliation, ...it is a failing or failed church. It has ceased to be the miracle of diversity in unity, of the grace of God breaking down walls.”

With its multi-ethno-religious makeup, Malaysia can present itself as a model to be a miracle of unity in diversity. Unfortunately, the scourge of ethno-religious strife is fast approaching its flashpoint with extremist elements of political Islam relentlessly stoking the fire of hatred and bigotry.

How then do we live? Some among those who mean well have suggested that when slapped on one cheek we are to offer the other. This is half-baked theology if turning the other cheek tantamount to sending a message to the provocateurs and extremists in political Islam that we are willing to abandon our calling to being peacemakers and reconcilers.

These are, in fact, a tyranny by a minority while the rest of us including peace-loving Muslims and non-Muslims, are being sucked into a spiral of silence only to become a suffering majority. The ultimate responsibility is for all Malaysians of goodwill to ensure that our beloved Malaysia is not hijacked and betrayed by the deluded minority.

To turn the other cheek in these circumstances is indeed to bear false witness to the Gospel of reconciliation itself. This we will not do.

The insanity that we are facing has become so systemic that even the judiciary has seen it fit to abandon sound principles of jurisprudence and taken an unprecedented extra-judicial position that the use of the word ‘Allah’ to refer to God is not an integral part of the faith and practice of Christianity. This is an uncalled for, unnecessarily excessive and a gross insensitive provocation.

This is a travesty of our constitutional and human right. It is the Church’s sole prerogative to manage its own affairs including translation of our Holy Scriptures into Bahasa Malaysia and

our native languages. This is the exclusive ecclesiastical authority of the Church which neither the state nor the judiciary should trespass in accordance to settled international convention and law.

The continuing prohibition on the use of the word “Allah” has far reaching consequences affecting the profession and practice of the Christian faith amongst the Bahasa Malaysia and other indigenous language speaking Christians of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak who constitute 64 % of the Christians in Malaysia or 1.6 million of the population.

The word “Allah” as referring to God has always, continuously and consistently been used by these Bumiputera Christians in all aspects of the Christian faith including all forms of religious services, prayers, worship, liturgy, and religious education and there is irrefutable historical evidence in support of this.

The finding of the Court of Appeal has emboldened certain extremist Muslim religious authorities to seize copies of the ALKITAB BERITA BAIK and the BUP KUDUS the Bible in the Iban language (in which the word “Allah” is used) which were specifically imported into Malaysia for the use of our Bumiputera Christians thereby violating their inalienable rights to complete religious freedom as guaranteed under the Malaysia Agreement and the Federal Constitution.

We must be reminded of our cultural heritage as Christians that it is neither accident nor coincidence that Sarawak is the only Christian majority state in the country. Our status is one of divine appointment. It is not surprising then that Sarawak is known as the Bible belt of Malaysia.

The fact that the Church in Sarawak has not for once demanded that the post of the Chief Minister or that of the Governor be picked from among Christians bears testimony to the extent the Church is willing to go for the sake of reconciliation and peacemaking.

We have and are doing our part in reconciliation. At this Gathering we are affirming the call our cultural heritage and our constitutional rights to practise our faith without undue interference and intervention.

We, therefore, urge the Federal government to revert to the status quo by entering into consent judgments for the three cases still before the courts related to the use of the prohibited word.

It has not been easy for us. But because by the grace of God we are defined as family with a call to action in reconciliation, it is our sacred responsibility to find not only the **call** but also the **means** of being reconcilers, when our instincts and passions often lead us in the opposite direction. We have gone the extra mile for the sake of reconciliation.

May God bless Malaysia.

Archbishop Datuk Bolly Lapok