

13 April 2011

Today marks the second planned day of protest by the Labor Unions of Swaziland, including Teachers and Nurses. The marches which are scheduled for three days have been preceded by extensive police and army activity – manning road blocks between Mbabane and Manzini, the two largest cities, and then at strategic junctions beyond Manzini with the south and the east. While mostly waved through, I was stopped twice on my travels, once while coming back from a church function. It is considered unusual for a bishop to be stopped at all. On the second occasion, I was with the Diocesan Social Development Director and his wife on our way home from dinner, and we were asked to leave the vehicle while it was closely searched.

April 12th was the first day of the protest march, and initially it was intended as a three pronged protest in Mbabane, Nhlangano and Manzini. In the end it was decided to center it on Manzini which has also made it relatively easy for the police and army to cordon off most approaches to the city and in fact turn back protesters in their bus loads to their points of origin. Nevertheless the march, though intended to be peaceful, provoked police and army violence in reaction to protesters throwing stones. Several leaders of the Unions, including the Nurses and Teachers Unions and the President of the Student Union were detained on the eve prior to the march. A water canon was dispensed on the marchers yesterday along with tear gas.

The Swaziland Council of Churches of which Bishop Mabuza is the Chair, has issued a statement affirming the rightful cause of the protests in terms of their call for a multi-party political system, and the need for change in leadership, but they affirm the principles of non-violent protest and a limited police response simply to protect businesses and bystanders. Further details are available online if you were to look up the Swazi Times, as I know several of our Swazi Companions do. So far it is estimated that sixty people have been detained in the action.

Where I am staying in Mbabane and the town was very quiet yesterday. Clearly people were lying low who had not tried to go to Manzini. Police and some Army are out in large numbers, on most street corners, and my residence is just up the street from the Police Headquarters. The protests have been joined by South African unionists who are blocking the main border post into South Africa, which is the one we usually cross when coming to Swaziland from Johannesburg. They are allowing transport to come and go but have handed in a petition to the King supporting the protesters' cause, and saying that they will begin a blockade if not receiving some positive response in fourteen days. As I selfishly count forward I realize I am intending to cross that border home on day 13!

What the Church does in a situation like this is difficult to say. One approach is to seek the King's ear and play a reconciling role while not underplaying the importance of the demands for a freer democratic process. I preached in the Anglican Church of St George in Manzini on Sunday to a full church, and we reflected on how the authorities – from that moment on, says John – planned to kill Jesus after he had raised Lazarus from the dead. What is it about good men and women that causes the authorities to be threatened and to react irrationally and excessively in violence?

My remaining schedule includes traveling through Manzini to Lomahasha for a huge confirmation on Sunday, but more directly to gather with lay leaders in Manzini on Saturday. I am also scheduled to take Holy Week service up to Easter Day at the University Chaplaincy outside Manzini. With the University having been ordered closed and the students told to go home (many seen on TV leaving with large suitcases, so perhaps not just for a few days), I am not sure what that does to our plans. I am told the Chaplaincy is a congregation which includes members beyond the University population, and so things may still go forward. .

Of course, the march is intended for three days which would end it on Thursday, but there was also mention of them refusing to move until their demands are met. With talks of new protests in September, however, it may be that idea will not be sustained, and the city might be open again by the weekend. Church leaders think that the protest is already beginning to wane on this its second day, mostly because of the successful cordoning of the city. So we are planning for a full and blessed Holy Week, including the Renewal of Ordination Vows on Maundy Thursday morning

It all adds texture to your prayers, as we remember our Companion Diocese and our sisters and brothers in Christ who have to make significant decisions in their social and civic ministries in the days ahead.

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