



Monday, 29 March 2021

Dear Fellow South African,

Over the course of the next few days and weeks, many South Africans of faith will join others across the world in important religious observances. Members of the Jewish faith are celebrating Pesach, Christians will observe Easter and Muslims will soon start the holy month of Ramadan.

For the second year, they will mark these occasions in the midst of a devastating global pandemic that has cost the lives of more than 2.5 million people across the world.

At this moment, it is worth recalling the writings of the eminent reformer and clergyman Martin Luther nearly 500 years ago, when the bubonic plague was cutting a devastating swathe across much of Europe.

In a letter dated 1527, Luther writes about the responsibilities of members of the clergy and of all people of faith during a deadly plague.

Much of the letter is about religious duty towards the sick and the dying. But he also offers practical advice similar to the public health advice we have today on social distancing, sanitising and quarantining.

“All of us have the responsibility of warding off this poison to the best of our ability,” Luther writes.

“Use medicines, take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard and street; shun persons

and places wherever your neighbour does not need your presence or has recovered; and act like one who wants to help put out the burning city.”

While upholding the view that people of faith should not neglect their duty to care for the sick, he cautions against endangering the lives of others.

In many ways, the views expressed by Martin Luther five centuries ago echo the position of religious leaders in South Africa in the midst of the current epidemic.

Faith-based organisations have been vital to our national response to the disease, not only providing spiritual comfort and guidance, but also by caring for those most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, including through the provision of food, shelter and other social services.

Religion plays an important role in the lives of millions of South Africans, and congregational worship forms a vital part of their religious practice.

Being able to gather for religious services is also a welcome respite from a period of great hardship for individuals, families and communities.

It is understandable that after more than a year of labouring under restrictions on religious gatherings that the faith community are keen for a return to a semblance of normality.

In recognition of the importance of congregational worship to the lives of our people, government has been engaging with the faith community.

I recently had an extremely constructive virtual meeting with leaders of the faith community. These leaders understand and appreciate the very real danger of a new wave of COVID-19 infections. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, religious organisations have taken proactive and positive measures to limit the spread of the disease among worshippers.

In the light of these precautionary measures, a number of religious organisations have asked that some of the existing restrictions on the size of congregations be eased, especially as we prepare for Easter and Ramadan observances. Government is currently deliberating on these and other issues, and will make an announcement in the coming days.

Another important factor is that during the various alert levels, religious organisations have incurred

substantial financial losses that threaten their sustainability. As government we remain committed to working with the faith community to find workable solutions.

At the same time, public health and safety must be our paramount consideration.

The religious community has shown innovation and initiative in the holding of worship at a time when there was a great deal of uncertainty over the trajectory of the pandemic.

Congregational services were held online and worshippers were encouraged to pray in their homes instead of attending services. This greatly aided the national effort to contain the spread of the disease.

Religious leaders played a pivotal role in encouraging public adherence to health measures around important customary and cultural rituals like burials.

By equal measure, our people have demonstrated their commitment to adhering to public health protocols and to social distancing. And they correctly appreciate that they must continue to avoid large gatherings .

We are now at a time where precaution is needed above all. The coronavirus pandemic has not been eliminated, either in our own country or around the world. The threat of a third wave is real and ever-present.

International experience has taught us that we should not tempt fate. Many countries have eased restrictions, only for there to be resurgences, necessitating the imposition of even harsher restrictions.

Faced with this reality, faith communities are encouraged to innovate in the holding of congregational worship over the upcoming Easter, Passover and Ramadan as they did last year.

Large gatherings, whether religious or otherwise, have the potential to spread the virus, despite the application of measures around social distancing and sanitising.

Over this coming weekend, millions of South Africans will be observing an important tenet of their faith. In a country that enshrines the right to religious freedom, all effort must be made to support our

people in the exercise of this right. And in exercising this right, we need to make sure that we do not place the rights or the lives of others at risk.

This is a principle that the religious leaders I met with fully support and appreciate. Like Martin Luther, they understand the responsibility of all people of faith – indeed of all South Africans – to observe the practical measures put in place to protect people's health and save lives.

For more than a year, we have worked together as a society to contain this pandemic. Now as we work to overcome it, we need to reaffirm our shared determination to act responsibly and cautiously.

In doing so, we will be giving practical effect to the universal messages of hope, salvation, freedom and solidarity that will be spoken of in the churches, synagogues, mosques and homes of our land in the days and weeks ahead.

With best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cyril Ramaphosa". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.