

CHAPTER ONE

THE DESECRATION OF GOD'S HOUSE

It was 7.30 a.m. on Sunday, 16 February 1986. Many of us were in St. John's Cathedral, Mutare (Zimbabwe), at the first of our Sunday morning Communion services. None of us had any knowledge of the stunning events that would follow two hours later. I had just read the Gospel for the day and was ready to preach. Yes, stranger than fiction perhaps, but at that moment I was led to change the theme I had earlier decided on, and spoke instead on the subject of 'violence only begets more violence'. With hindsight, I believe God used that time to speak to me more than anyone else... In addition, many listeners later drew comfort from this sermon when they received news of the desecration of the Cathedral.

In elaborating on the theme, I pointed out that Scripture would have us carefully note: "‘Vengeance is mine’, saith the Lord.' It was Jesus who gave us, His followers, a command that when anyone 'attacked' us, we were to turn the other cheek! I suggested that there was always such a temptation for us to want to defend 'our good name' and to want to hit back – verbally at least – against any who would lay false accusations against us, or any who hurt us by word or deed.

I reminded them that Jesus was our most perfect example. Deserted by all His friends, He found himself hanging on the Cross. Without any verbal expression of anger, or of the injustice of it all, He looked down on all those standing there mocking and jeering Him and said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' I pointed to the fact that the first Christian martyr, Stephen, followed his master's example when he himself was being stoned to death. He commended his murderers to God with the words, 'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.'

Those thoughts were still fresh in my mind when, two hours later, a vast mob stormed in and desecrated God's House during the next service. And because God had been so gracious in this way, we were ready with the right attitude of non-retaliation, and with a constant flow of prayer for forgiveness on the lips of all God's people kneeling there in the Cathedral at the time. Perhaps the best way of describing the events that surrounded that desecration, is to simply reproduce the report drawn up by myself as Dean of the Cathedral with the help

of the Cathedral Council. We did this ten days after the event, after meticulously checking all the facts. The report read as follows:

Tekere seizes Z\$1.25 million of Church property: Police forbidden to intervene: Law and Order non-existent in Mutare: constitutional right to freedom of worship abrogated.

1. 8.50 a.m. 500-strong mob move on to St. John's Cathedral property.
2. 8.55 a.m. Senior Officer of Central Intelligence warned leaders:
 - they had illegally invaded Church property,
 - they were causing a disturbance of the peace while Church services were taking place, and
 - he ordered them to leave the property.
3. 9.00 a.m. The mob ignored the CIO. He gave them 15 minutes to leave, or else! (An empty threat as police previously ordered by officials not to intervene.)
4. 9.15 a.m. Church Service commenced despite noise outside.
5. 9.20 a.m. Edgar Tekere (Chairman of Zanu PF Manicaland) entered the cathedral.
6. He talked to the Churchwardens while the service was in progress. He was asked to stop the noise outside and invited to attend the service. Tekere said he had no wish to listen, and that he was ordering his mob to take possession of the property and drive us out.
7. 9.25 a.m. Tekere gave a brief speech to the demonstrators and, with the service still in progress, the mob poured into the Cathedral, singing political songs, with many of them armed with sticks. The 500-strong mob:
 - rocked and turned pews over to get the congregation out;
 - danced on the altar, beating out the candles with newspapers;
 - knocked one priest over at the altar and dragged him down the full length of the Cathedral flat on his back; another priest also manhandled out of the Cathedral;
 - children being led to safety thrown in all directions by the mob;
 - one elderly lady, severely buffeted, carried out by parishioners in a state of shock.
8. 9.40-11.40 a.m. The Dean, assistant priest and about twenty parishioners stayed to try and discover what the crowd wanted. No clear picture emerged except false stories told to squatters at St.

- Augustine's Mission that the Bishop wanted the land for his own (mythical) cattle.
9. 11.40 a.m. Mob started process of selecting two parishioners 'to be beaten until the Bishop's whereabouts were revealed'. We walked through the mob and left as they fought over their choices.
 10. Police refused to act. Several times the police were asked to remove the illegal mob from the Cathedral, to protect parishioners, and to restore church property to the lawful owners. The police explained that strict orders 'from above' ruled out any action to protect lives and property, for this was 'Tekere business. Tekere obviously above the law. Permission was also refused for us to enter the Cathedral and lock up valuables, and permission refused us to switch off power to Z\$60,000 pipe organ.
 11. 12.30 p.m. Assistant Commissioner (Police) advised the Dean and his family to leave their home immediately as Tekere had given orders to invade their home. Although asked to do so, he regretted police were forbidden to intervene...
 12. 2.00 p.m. Two church members – the Bishop's caretaker and another young man – caught by the mob in Main Street outside Church Offices. While being held by his thugs, Edgar Tekere personally brutally assaulted them in public. When they failed to give the information required, they were bundled into Tekere's car and driven off. Police in full view of the incident took no action to intervene. The young men were later hospitalised in Mutare General Hospital. Police not only did nothing to intervene but further, have apparently done nothing to lay charges of assault, battery and forcible abduction against Tekere.
 13. 2.00 p.m. Mob rampages through assistant priest's garden throwing stones, banging on doors and windows demanding entry. Riot police removed the mob. (Not a designated house?)
 14. 2.00 p.m. Mob took possession of Bishop's House. (Ten days later we were still barred from entry. On Thursday, 20 February, the S.P.C.A. Inspector went to feed the dog, puppies and chicken – unattended since Sunday. The mob forcibly evicted her and said the animals were to be left to starve to death or die of thirst.)

Monday 17 February to Wednesday 26 February:

Daily many have failed to gain entry to Church property. Many requests made to the police to intervene. They consistently refused because of

‘orders from above’. Only three have gained access to the Cathedral during the period – a lawyer who described the Cathedral as being in ‘a filthy and disgusting state’, and a person who revealed himself to be a member of the British House of Lords (together with his wife) who insisted on entering the Church to pray. One parishioner was assaulted on entering the Cathedral to pray – believing the mob had left – and laid charges at the Police Station. A message was relayed from Police Headquarters in Harare saying he had no right to enter (his own!) Cathedral without prior police permission!

On Tuesday, 25 February, the Church re-possessed the Parish Office for four hours. The police refused to drive off the mob that tried to attack the offices. The mob leader said he had instructions from Tekere to break the door down if the staff did not get out, and threatened the women with rape. The staff left peaceably.

A PLEA. Every responsible citizen in Mutare is appalled at this outrage. The people are crying out to our Government to come to our aid as a city and ensure that justice is seen to be done. Many policemen have told us of their horror at what is going on, and of the evil system of ‘orders from above’ that make them powerless to act. Some policemen who have wanted to help have been threatened with arrest if they do so. If those who perpetrate such lawless acts believe we are guilty of any crime, let them bring us to court, and let mob rule (when you can’t get what you want legally) cease for ever in our beautiful new Zimbabwe.

As at midday, Friday 28 February, the church had still not regained any of its properties.

Report prepared by Dean and Church Council of St John’s Cathedral, Mutare, Zimbabwe. END OF STATEMENT.

A ‘Stop Press’ was added a few days later:

Police finally ordered to drive out those illegally holding our property late Saturday, early Sunday, 1 – 2 March, 1986. The Dean and his family returned to their home on Sunday 2 March – fifteen days after leaving with little more than they stood up in. The Bishop and his family hope to return soon. Thanks to thousands who supported St. John’s and the Diocese with their love, prayer and messages. ‘They’ can take our property – but they cannot stop the *living* Church.

People will be heartened to know that all church services continued ‘as usual’ underground.

Tuesday 4 March: Mutare Ministers’ Fraternal came out in total support of our cry for an end to the obvious breakdown of law and order, and the threat to freedom of worship in this country, and called on Government to urgently remedy the situation.

The desecration of the Cathedral, with the eviction of clergy and people from all Church property for fifteen days, was staged to threaten the life of the Bishop – or, at the very least, to intimidate him to such an extent that he would resign as Bishop. Although the reason given for the invasion was the support of the leadership of a school in rebellion against the Diocese, the main reason appeared to be a local political one. The principal character behind this was Edgar Tekere. He had been a Cabinet Minister in Robert Mugabe’s first government after Independence was declared in April, 1980. Tekere was later charged with first-degree murder after he personally led a gang of his thugs, heavily armed with automatic weapons, against a farmer in the Goromonzi area near the Capital. It was a commando-style affair with a farmer being chased across his farm, into his house, and gunned down in cold blood at point blank range. The judge and his two assessors were unable to reach an unanimous decision (the assessors being in fear of their lives if they voted for a guilty verdict) on the murder charge, but such was the revulsion in the country against such a cold-blooded and calculated murder, and at the blatant way Tekere took the law into his own hands to obtain what he could not get legally (the possession of the farm), Robert Mugabe removed him from the cabinet.

It was not very long before the party in power appointed Tekere to a powerful position as chairman of the party for the whole of the Manicaland Province, covering the eastern border area of the country. Soon afterwards he used a large threatening mob – in weeklong demonstrations that closed down the Civic Centre of Mutare – to bring about the enforced resignations of all the duly elected city councillors. As a consequence, our city was left in limbo without an executive arm until Tekere put forward his list of ‘approved’ candidates to be voted for several months later. This was the man who led the demonstrating thugs into the Cathedral, ostensibly backing the cause of the rebellious school leadership he had befriended, but really for his own ends – to try and remove the Bishop from his duly elected position.

In order to understand how we saw God’s hand in preparing us for these days

and in discerning his protection over us, I need to go back in time.