

Homily at the Memorial Service for Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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We meet today in what we have called a memorial service. A memorial service can have the purpose of recalling and reminiscing on, and bringing to consciousness the life of one who has passed away. We shall be doing that today in the tributes we shall be giving on Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

It can have the tonic purpose of easing the pain of the loss, as people pray and talk about their loved one; we hope that this occasion will have something of a healing effect on us and our society. As we gather here, some do their memorialising for healing through what they post on social media; others go to the places that Tutu has touched like his home in Soweto, and the memorial wall outside the St George's Cathedral in Cape Town.

A memorial service can also serve the purpose of calling to the moment, the values and the things that the person stood for and which mattered in the person's life. This often goes with a form of commitment to take forward those special things that the person stood for and championed.

It is my hope that we shall indeed call to mind the life of Archbishop Tutu; that we shall reminisce to find healing for ourselves; but I would hope above all, that we shall find something in his life, witness and example, which we can commit to champion in his memory. My reflections this morning seek to point to a few areas that we can identify, on which to act.

In the Hebrew Scriptures read today, we heard the words of Prophet Jeremiah saying:

“If I say, ‘I will not mention his word or speak anymore in God's name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”

The life of Desmond Tutu was not unlike the life of Prophet Jeremiah, for like him he had an element that burns within him, to say and do things that assuage that burning sensation within him. Often the things that Tutu said and did would be counter-intuitive; the sort of things that you and I would consider unthinkable.

At the Rustenburg Conference in 1990, that brought together the SACC churches with the then government supporting Dutch Reformed Church, the then leader of the Dutch Reformed Church stood up and said he was apologising for the pain of apartheid. Archbishop Tutu instantly sprung to the podium to declare acceptance of the apology, and I rose to protest, that forgiveness could not be so simply given, with no commitment to processes of reparation.

Right there, he publicly “embarrassed” me by telling the conference what I had shared with him after my grueling torture by the white security police at Howick, I had told him that I prayed for God to take my life; and when that did not happen, I acknowledged that my torturers needed my humanity, and to live and help humanise them out of the wicked and gross inhumanity of the system whose vortex had swallowed them. He recalled that I had said to him “these are God’s children, and they have lost their humanity, they need us to recover their humanity.” Tutu said, this young man now wants to take issue with me for responding positively to an apology for apartheid, “Malusi, this is the process of humanising them that you recognised as needed even under torture!”

Jeremiah would say things that were unacceptable to his hearers; and he had this fire within him that he could not put out, without crying out what had to be said. And so Tutu would call on the ANC to call off or suspend the armed struggle; he would call on Prime Minister Vorster to release political prisoners, unban the liberation movements, abandon apartheid and open equal education for all.

The big difference between Jeremiah and Tutu is that, whereas Jeremiah preached the inevitability of the demise of Judah in its current existence at the time, Desmond preached the demise of that which militated against the restoration of humane living. It is a difference that is because Tutu was a disciple of Jesus Christ, the One who claimed the prophesy of Isaiah that says: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” (Luke 4:18)

And in the power of the agency of Christ he was able to say to the Eloff Commission that the apartheid government created to “investigate” the South African Council of Churches; that “By becoming a real human being through Jesus Christ, God showed that He took the whole human history and the whole of human life seriously. He demonstrated that He was the Lord of all life, spiritual and secular, sacred and profane, material and spiritual...Our God cares that children starve in resettlement camps, the dumping grounds for the pathetic victims of this vicious and evil system. The God we worship does care that people die mysteriously in detention. He is concerned that people are condemned to the twilight existence as non-persons by an arbitrary bureaucratic act of banning them without trial. I might add that if God did not care about these and similar matters, I would not worship Him for He would be a totally useless God. Mercifully He is not such a God. Consequently, I will demonstrate that apartheid is evil, totally and without remainder!”

And he went on to declare another source of his strength, the universality and collegiality of the Church. He said, the SACC and its member churches are not “a tupenny halfpenny fly by night organisation.”

“We belong to the Church of God, that is found universally spread out throughout the face of the whole inhabited universe... It transcends time and space, race, culture and sex, nationality and all the things people sometimes think are important”.

Describing the God of the faith of the church he said:

“The God we worship is a liberator God of the Exodus, who leads his people out of every bondage , spiritual, political, social and economic, and nothing will thwart him from achieving the goal of the liberation of all his people and the whole of his creation.”

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That is why the Archbishop is known to defend and stand up for God’s people in any form of social distress, in our present time this applies very much to women, refugees and migrants, the homeless and members of the LGBTIQ+ community, especially in the African continent.

I have taken some time to lay out the fundamentals of Archbishop Tutu’s conviction and maybe the essence of his theological foundation. The reason why this is important is that, because today we are such a secular society where anything goes, we may not appreciate why it was important for Tutu to lay out in stark theological terms the religious anchors of the work of the SACC. For, the Apartheid State claimed to be a specifically Christian State, with a constitution that opened with the words that said:

“IN HUMBLE SUBMISSION to Almighty God,
Who controls the destinies of peoples and nations,
Who gathered our forebears together from many lands and gave them this their own,
Who has guided them from generation to generation,
Who has wondrously delivered them from the dangers that beset them,
WE DECLARE that we
ARE CONSCIOUS of our responsibility towards God and man;

This constitution for white South Africans was premised on the non-person status of all black people – Coloured, Indian and African.

What were the driving factors in Tutu’s ministry? I suggest that there were three cardinal factors:

First, was a deep sense of vocation, similar to that of Jeremiah to whom God said:

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.” (Jer. 1:9b-10)

Tutu had a deep sense of vocation.

Secondly, he had an acute consciousness of the One who had called him – the source of his vocation. This consciousness of the One who called him gave him also a good sense of the values he identified with God, and over which he had no doubt or hesitation. That is why he would say, “I do not doubt the existence of God, this is God’s world, and God is in charge, I just want to say, ‘God we know you’re in charge, but why don’t you make it slightly more obvious?’”

Thirdly, Tutu was alive to the relationship with the One who called him; and this informed his social justice spirituality – the framework of his relationship with God who called him. He lived in a spiritual bubble with God, in a spiritual rhythm or relational dance with his God. At the core of this spirituality were two penchants: a meditative listening; and a eucharistic life – a life of worshipful thanksgiving, which gave him a rather pointed spirituality of social justice.

These gave him the sure-footedness that characterised his conviction — what appeared to be fearlessness and the absolute confidence that injustice and evil cannot have the last word! A spirituality of social justice! It is out of this that after the tragic massacre of Boipatong in 1992, he would say:

“God has a plan. But when we frustrate it, he does not give up his plan. He adjusts it to accommodate our stupidity, our resistance, our evil, in an incredible way. Perhaps something horrendous and evil can in God’s purpose be transformed and bring good.”

But friends, Boipatong today is a squalid health hazard that remains a source of discontent; we must pursue to change that, in the confidence of Desmond Tutu.

It is this social justice spirituality that gave Tutu in April 1986, the courage to risk treason charges by calling for sanctions against apartheid South Africa. He said, “our children are dying, our land is burning and bleeding. I call the international community to apply punitive sanctions against this government to help us establish a new South Africa: non-racial, democratic, participatory and just,”

Likewise, from the same spirituality of social justice he was to exclaim at the treatment of Palestinians in 2014 upon visiting Israel – Palestine, and said,

"The humiliation of the Palestinians is familiar to all black South Africans who were corralled and harassed and insulted and assaulted by the security forces of the apartheid government."

"In South Africa, we could not have achieved our democracy without the help of people around the world, who through the use of non-violent means, such as boycotts and divestment, encouraged their governments and other corporate actors to reverse decades-long support for the apartheid regime,"

"The same issues of inequality and injustice today motivate the divestment movement trying to end Israel's decades-long occupation of Palestinian territory and the unfair and prejudicial treatment of the Palestinian people by the Israeli government ruling over them."

"Those who turn a blind eye to injustice actually perpetuate injustice. If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor,"

It is the same social justice spirituality that had him fuming with froth on his mouth against the democratic government that refused to let the Dalai Lama come to South Africa, instead seemed to appease the Chinese Government rather than uphold a human rights foreign policy. "You do not represent me!", he exclaimed; and like the apartheid regime, "you will bite the dust!" He angrily quipped.

I have made parallels between Desmond Tutu and Prophet Jeremiah who said:

"If I say, 'I will not mention his word or speak anymore in God's name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot."

I have also traced his sense of vocation to his discipleship of Jesus of Nazareth, God becoming human as we celebrated at Christmas on the eve of the Archbishop's transition to the hereafter. I have suggested that his social justice energy against all injustices anywhere in the world, stemmed from a rhythm of spirituality that accounts for his consistency and almost absolute predictability over that to which he would object.

Before I began this message I had played that beautiful clip where the Archbishop gives an imaginary account of his arrival in heaven, and St Peter says no he must go to "the other place", meaning hell. Two weeks later there is a frantic knock at the gates of heaven, and St Peter is surprised to see the Devil in a state of distress: "And now, what are you doing here?" Satan responds, "You sent Archbishop Tutu to my outfit and he is causing so much trouble there I have had to come to ask for political asylum!" Truly funny, just like Tutu to say things like that.

But, what are those things that we should do and that are within our capacity to fulfill, which will lend a hand to the storm of trouble that Desmond Tutu will kick up in hell this week, to send the devil packing for asylum in heaven?

I propose a few:

1. I begin with the one that seems the most intractable – the peace of the Holy Land. The Devil wouldn't want to see the peace of Jerusalem. This generation has to shame the Devil, and address this matter, and resolve it for the peace and security of the people of Israel and Palestine. Desmond Tutu's South African Council of Churches says that the Holy Land is holy for the people of faith, not for the politicians and big corporates that determine and support the murderous policies that hold sway in both Israel and Palestine. Together with the leaders of African American churches, following a fact-finding delegation in Israel-Palestine, the SACC resolved to work with the Vatican and

the World Council of Churches, to engage both leading Muslim leaders and Jewish leaders in seeking solutions that make sense to the people of faith for a lasting peace and security for all.

This might be through some way of salvaging the two-state option, which is under serious threat with the new Basic Law that says self-determination shall be the preserve of Jewish people; and the legislation providing for the annexation of occupied Palestinian territories. Or, the other option might be to work for a single non-racial, non-ethnic democratic state with equal value for all. This looks common sense but it is difficult in that historical environment.

But, as Pope Francis has said, Jerusalem is the common patrimony of the three Abrahamic faiths, and there has to be a faith-led solution for the peace of Jerusalem.

We commit to continue to champion this in the name of Desmond Tutu who said:
“We are opposed to the injustice of the illegal occupation of Palestine. We are opposed to the indiscriminate killing in Gaza. We are opposed to the indignity meted out to Palestinians at checkpoints and roadblocks. We are opposed to violence perpetrated by all parties. But we are not opposed to Jews.”

This is very important because Tutu and the Church’s stand against unjust practices and policies in Israel-Palestine does not translate to anti-Semitism. For the peace and security we promote is for both Israelis and Palestinians.

2. In 1996, Archbishop Tutu, President Nelson Mandela, former President F.W. De Klerk, then the living South African Nobel Peace laureates, together with the family of Chief Albert Luthuli, the first South African to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961, committed to the establishment of the South African Nobel Peace Park at Wilgespruit in Roodepoort. They each presented tokens of their commitment to this project. Mandela gave a rock of lime stone from the Robben Island quarry. De Klerk gave a piece of the Berlin Wall, which fell at the time he became President, and sought to break down the political “Berlin Wall of South Africa’s separatism. The Luthuli Family gave a container with the ashes of the “dompass”, the apartheid pass book that Luthuli burned in the anti-pass protests of 1960. It has been preserved. Tutu gave the nail cross of the Coventry Cathedral that had been bombed by the Nazis, and nails from the pews of that cathedral were used to make significant crosses, symbolising the reconciling power of the cross of Christ.

That property of Wilgespruit is now threatened with commercial housing, and the SACC is duty-bound to see out the noble dream of the Nobel Laureates, now all late, and Tutu being the last to go.

3. Corruption has soured the taste of South African democracy; with the stench of this evil overcoming even the effort to save lives in the onslaught of the coronavirus pandemic. The South African Council of Churches, through the support of the Foundation for Human Rights, has created a WhatsApp platform whose launch will now be in the New Year, having been delayed by the necessary bureaucratic processes with the justice system and the legal entities that will be a part of this execution. But

anyone will be able to blow the whistle on corruption anywhere in South Africa, and each such act will shame the devil and with Tutu, send him seeking asylum in heaven!

4. Above all, and to make the other matters work, South Africa needs a reconciled politics such as Tutu would have us pursue. We now live in a political environment where there is nothing but nothing that is not negatively politicised; with points-scoring and counter points-scoring on everything. There has to be a sacred space of things that are so nationally critical for the united identity of the nation as to be free of political wrangling. Tutu's idea of a rainbow nation was aspirational, something to strive for and work towards.

The SACC leaders have said that, part of working for "the South Africa we pray for", is to work for the promise of the post-apartheid South Africa that has not yet been achieved – requiring healing and reconciliation. It is to address the woundedness of our society that makes us a violent society, with a scarcity mentality that makes me seek to grab, monopolise and maim and kill. It speaks to the boorishness that manifests in violent crime, corruption, gender based violence and senseless femicide. All this calls for a serious effort at an initiative for nation-building towards Tutu's Rainbow vision.

Then there is the poverty and inequality that cries out for the transformation of the economic architecture of this country, to seriously address the inclusion of what we refer to as the excluded majority – Coloureds, Africans, people in the rural Bantustan areas and the small country towns for whom not much has changed; those who flee rural poverty for urban squalor in pursuit of elusive opportunities.

Then there is the need to recognise that the development of Johannesburg was the underdevelopment of Maseru, Xaixai and Lilongwe; and therefore a need for a regional economic integration that also takes account of South Africa's historical colonization of Namibia, for it was not just the Germans.

All these require a government with integrity, for Desmond to be able to say "Ah! Now you represent me!" And the SACC believes this requires a serious relook at the electoral system for necessary reforms.

Jeremiah and Tutu say together: "If I say, 'I will not mention his word or speak anymore in God's name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot."

In our response let us commit to join Desmond as he causes good trouble in hell, to send the Devil seeking asylum in heaven. Amen