

A Tribute to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Africa's Moral Giant

This is the text of a podcast of December 27, 2021, Stocktonafterclass

Desmond Tutu died on December 26, 2021 at the age of 90. He was Anglican archbishop of Cape Town. He was one of the great men of his age, and one of the three men (Mandela, De Klerk, and Tutu) who engineered a non-violent transition to majority rule in South Africa. I for one did not think that was possible. I had anticipated, and feared, a violent uprising that would lead to mass death and hundreds of thousands of refugees. Those who want to understand my thinking could read Nadine Gordimer's wonderful novel *July's People*. I am so happy that Nadine and I were wrong.

During the long years when Nelson Mandela and the other Black leaders were locked up, seemingly forever, Tutu was a voice for the African people. He was like Mandela in that he included white people in his definition of the future South Africa. Somehow his charming manner, his infectious laugh, his self-deprecating humor, and his focus upon the values of love and reconciliation were able to win over many skeptics.

I have a friend who is a professor of theology at Stellenbosch, the quintessential Afrikaner university, just near Cape Town. He was one of the *verligte Afrikaanders*. That means they were progressive during the apartheid age when white domination seemed to be unstoppable. He taught a class on the Christian vision of South Africa. He would arrange for his students to meet with an African leader to hear from a Black person what Black people were thinking and what they wanted. He said he would quietly break his students into two groups. Those who were more open would go to hear a political activist. Those who were more resistant would go to hear Archbishop Tutu. He said Tutu could talk to such people in a way that they would listen. That was his unique talent, to be able to talk to people in a way that they would listen.

Somehow Tutu managed to avoid the fate that awaited others who challenged the apartheid regime. He was never silenced or restricted. Maybe it was his religious title that protected him, being an Archbishop. Or maybe it was his international stature. He was very smart in that he would meet any delegation of foreigners who wanted to talk to him. This gave him a vast body of allies around the world, especially in the United States.

He was also very good at affirming the innate human worth of even his strongest opponents. He said he had no bad feeling towards the Afrikaners, the white rulers of his homeland, because of what they had done.

In a very significant speech in 2002 in Boston, to a conference supporting an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, he was very firm in his statements. This was when Ariel Sharon was the Prime Minister of Israel. It was a time of terrible violence with suicide bombers blowing up restaurants and buses and Israeli soldiers inflicting terrible pain upon the Palestinian people. Tutu made several points in that speech

- The military action of recent days will not provide the security and peace Israelis want. It will only intensify the hatred.
- Injustice and oppression will never prevail. Those who are powerful have to remember the litmus test that God gives to the powerful: what is your treatment of the poor, the hungry, and voiceless? And on the basis of that, God passes judgment.
- Israel will never get true security and safety through oppressing another people. A true peace can ultimately be built only on justice. We condemn the violence of suicide bombers, and we condemn the corruption of young minds taught hatred; but we also condemn the violence of military incursions in the occupied lands, and the inhumanity that won't let ambulances reach the injured.

In that speech, Tutu noted that “people are scared in this country [the U. S.] to say wrong is wrong because the Jewish lobby is powerful – very powerful.” But he also called for the Jewish people to mobilize on behalf of justice for the Palestinians. After all, he said, in our struggle against apartheid, the great supporters were Jewish people. They instinctively turned to the side of the disenfranchised, the voiceless ones, fighting injustice, oppression and evil. What is not so understandable, not justified, is what they did to another people to guarantee their existence. I have been deeply distressed in my visit to the Holy Land; it reminded me so much of what happened to us black people in South Africa. I have seen the humiliation of the Palestinians at checkpoints and roadblocks, suffering like us when young white police officers prevented us from moving about.”

This comparison of the Israeli occupation with the apartheid regime is very painful for Jews to hear, and provoked a strong reaction. One right wing Jewish group picked a line from the speech and twisted it into an attack on Jews and Israel. Tutu said that all the powerful regimes of the past, Hitler, Mussolini Stalin, Pinchot, Milosevich, and Idi Amin, are now gone. They have “bit the dust.” As he put it. “This is God’s world. We live in a moral universe.”

According to his detractors these words showed that Tutu was an Anti-Semite and was calling Israel a Nazi state. But as tutu said about such vilification, “So what.”

Fortunately, this attack did not work, except among those who wanted to believe it. Tutu’s humanity was too profound to be diminished by such a low and unworthy attack.” Anyway, he held out hope. For if the Christian faith does not live in Hope, then where does it exist? (And that is not an original observation from me.) Here is what he said:

“We in South Africa had a relatively peaceful transition. If our madness could end as it did, it must be possible to do the same everywhere else in the world. If peace could come to South Africa, surely it can come to the Holy Land.” He ended his talk by saying that “it is God’s dream that the Israelis and Palestinians will live in peace as sisters and brothers.”

There was a famous incident in Tutu's life when the apartheid regime seemed unshakable. It was 1986 and a young activist had been killed by the police. There was a rally outside of the Episcopal Cathedral where he coined the phrase, "We are the Rainbow people. The new in Cape Town. 30,000 people were there. Almost all were young people. Most were Black but Tutu acknowledged the large number of white and other people who were there. It was here that he coined the phrase, "We are the Rainbow people, the New South Africa." There is a plaque on the site where he spoke. I wrote this down when I was there. Here is what he said:

"The souls of those killed cry out, 'How long O Lord is this going to continue?'"

[Ok. Let's pause. For those who don't recognize it, that is a line from Psalms 13. Let me read the full passage. "How long O Lord will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?"

Now, back to the talk:

"The souls of those killed cry out, 'How long, O Lord, is this going to continue?'" The answer is the time is not right until some more of you, brothers and sisters, are killed. The price we have paid already is a heavy price. We are being called on to pay yet more in lives. But despite all that the powers of the world may do, we are going to be free."

And they marched to the city hall, 30,000 strong, and not a weapon in the crowd. I think we can say that this moment was the beginning of the end for the regime. Or at least it forced them to recognize that it was necessary to negotiate. After all, you can fight an army but how do you fight a people?

I think Tutu's greatest moment came later. It was not during those long years when he was the voice of justice for an oppressed people. Nor was it when his eloquence told a generation of young people that they were going to sacrifice blood but would ultimately produce a new society. It was when he and Nelson Mandela realized that they had a choice. Now that Black people were in power and controlled the reins of government, they could unleash the powers of prosecution against those who had committed atrocities. And many *people* wanted exactly that.

But there was a dilemma, a choice. What was more important, to prosecute the guilty or to build the nation?

I once had a young woman come into my office. She told me she was 20. She was a baby back in Iraq when her father, a young imam, had been caught up in a sweep by Saddam of young imams. A hundred, maybe two hundred, maybe three hundred, who knows, had been rounded up

by Saddam's thugs, taken into the desert and massacred. Now that Saddam was gone they had found a mass grave that almost certainly contained her father's body.

For me, this was a very powerful moment, as I suspect it was for her. Afterwards I thought to myself, what would give her some peace. Would it be better to determine who had committed those executions and see that person hanged, or perhaps to hear someone sobbing as he told how sorry he was that he and his fellow soldiers had followed their orders and executed those young men not much different from themselves in age or background. I suspected that hearing what happened would produce more healing seeing executioners hang.

This was the logic of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Tutu created and headed. They offered those who had committed atrocities a deal: You appear before the committee and tell exactly what you did and we will consider waving any prosecution. There were two details in this process that should be noted. The first was that this did not apply to criminal offenses. If you conducted an execution of someone you were told was a threat, that could be forgiven. If you killed someone because he had insulted your sister or because you wanted his land, that was a crime and was not covered.

The second point was that no one was required to say they were sorry. The committee knew that a guilty person could easily express fake grief if they thought that would help their case. Most people who appeared did say they were sorry. Often they were sobbing as they told what they had done. But that was not required.

When I was in South Africa I bought a book. It was called *Country of my Skull*. It was by an Afrikaaner journalist who attended all of the hearings. The book contains extensive passages from what was said, and how she and others reacted to those words. She said there were therapists available for members of the committee and for journalists and others in attendance. She said that within a week everyone, with one exception, had had to seek counseling. The stories were too powerful to handle. For myself, I had to read that book a chapter a day. No more.

Two cases almost derailed the process. One involved Winnie Mandela, the wife of Nelson Mandela and "Mother of the Nation." During the 28 years of Nelson's incarceration, she had been the voice of the people. She was under house detention but was often allowed to receive guests such as diplomats or visiting dignitaries. She also managed to smuggle out statements in support of her husband and of those who maintained resistance. Unfortunately, Winnie allowed her pride to overcome her judgment. She created what she called a football club that was in reality a gang of thugs who focused their violence on people not aligned with Winnie. At a certain point, they began "necklacing" their opponents, putting a tire around their neck and

lighting it as the person burned to death amidst cheers. Winnie had once praised these people, lighting a match during a speech. It was a brutal abuse of power.

When Winnie appeared before the committee, she was very resistant to acknowledging any of these offenses. But if lesser people, especially white people, were being called upon to acknowledge their offenses it would be a great betrayal if a person so prominent, whose offenses were well known did not also have to say in public what had gone down. Finally, Tutu looked at her and said the following: You are a great woman. When our leaders were locked up, you were the voice of the people. You inspired our youth and gave us courage. But you can be an even greater woman today if you will acknowledge what happened. Can you not just say, things went terribly wrong?

Winnie sat there in pain. This was an awful moment for her, perhaps the worst in her life. Finally, in a small voice, she said those words that Tutu had suggested: Things went terribly wrong.

Only a person with a powerful pastoral spirit could have brought forth those words.

The second crisis occurred with Nelson Mandel himself. It is easier for people to acknowledge that some in their ranks had committed atrocities as individuals than it is to admit that the group itself had set up a structure that had allowed those atrocities. Look at our own country how people will say, “My ancestors never owned slaves. What does racial injustice have to do with me?” It is very hard to say that the whole system is compromised.

The National Party had agreed to admit their own role in what had happened. Now it was time for the African National Congress, the ANC, to acknowledge its own offenses. And these demands were not coming from white critics. They were coming from within the African population.

I remember hearing the famous liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez say, “The oppressed are not always the good.” In the face of oppression, it is sometimes possible to commit terrible atrocities, and to become that which you hate. The ANC had done that. This was particularly true in their camps in Angola. There had been summary executions of people without trials, often on the whim of leaders. And there had been terrible abuses of women. Often they were raped, or forced to be mistresses of powerful people. Now it was time for the party to admit that these offenses were systematic and widespread, and not just committed by renegade individuals.

Nelson Mandela was resistant to such acknowledgements. He was willing to focus upon the individuals who had committed those offenses but he felt that confessing those offenses on

behalf of the ANC and its armies as a whole would undermine the credibility and integrity of the resistance.

Finally, Tutu said to him, if we cannot get the ANC to acknowledge its offenses then we are not going to be able to get the National Party to acknowledge its offense and the whole process will fall apart.

In the end, the greatest Black man of the 20th century, Nelson Mandela, finally yielded to the irresistible logic of Africa's greatest moral authority, Desmond Tutu, and agreed to acknowledge what had happened.

Years later, in 2008, Archbishop Tutu came to Ann Arbor to receive the Raul Wallenberg Award for his efforts on behalf of human rights. Jane and I were in the balcony as he spoke.

He told us that "each one of us is a god carrier" But he also mentioned a cartoon in which God says, "O dear. I think I've lost my copy of the Divine Plan."

Tutu mentioned all the awful things in the headlines: Darfur, Burma, Congo, Somalia, Zimbabwe, "and of course the Middle East." "We wish we could whisper in God's ear, We know you are in charge. Why don't you make it more obvious?"

But he repeated a point he had made more than once: "all of those who strutted around, who looked like they would never be defeated, are biting the dust." He mentioned Hitler, Saddam, Idi Amin,

Tutu spoke of how the Reagan administration had adopted a policy of constructive engagement. That was a happy-face code word. We supported continued investment in South Africa and managed to get arms to them via our Israeli allies. (One a side note, it was finally Howard Wolpe, a political science professor, someone I had studied under, someone then in Congress, who had organized the resistance to the covert Israeli connection. And, in case you are wondering, Wolpe was Jewish. He later ran for governor of Michigan but lost. He would have been a good governor).

Anyway, back to Reagan. Tutu met him in the Oval office and urged him to apply sanctions. He refused. "So we appealed over his head to the American people. It was fantastic!" I went to universities. Students were sitting in the baking sun urging their universities to divest. "We thought, people did that for us....The moral climate of this country changed...We are free today because of you."

Well, that was a bit of an exaggeration but it was really nice to hear, and we all clapped. Although, in one sense, he was right. There had been a vigorous anti-apartheid group on campus. I was myself involved in that movement. I once spoke to the Regents, urging them to

divest from companies that operated in South Africa. I knew they would not do that we in the movement believed that keeping up the pressure was a goal of its own. And I myself was an officer in the International Defense and Aid Fund, a group whose home organization in South Africa had been banned as a terrorist organization. (Let me note that we were not terrorists unless you define majority rule as terrorism, which the apartheid government of the day certainly did. And for those interested, I have a previous podcast entitled 'Thoughts of a Former Terrorist' in which I discuss those issues.

But back in Ann Arbor, Tutu spoke of what happened when majority rule came. "People expected the most awful orgy of revenge and retribution." But then came the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He described how that process had changed the dynamic of the country. He told of a powerful incident.

"A white woman appeared before the Commission. She had been blown up at a Christmas Eve party when the party was attacked. She was in hospital for a long time. Then she was released to her children and husband who had to care for her. When she goes through an airport, she goes off from the metal in her body. She appeared before the TRC. She said she wants to forgive the person who attacked her. She wants to meet him, to ask him to forgive her.

Tutu said to us: "I wanted to say, Shhh! Let us be quiet for we are in the presence of the holy. Take off your shoes from off your feet for you are standing on holy ground."

Then he told us the most amazing thing:

"None of us on the Commission could claim to be morally superior to those who came before us. 'There but for the grace of God go I.' The perpetrators were not demons. They didn't have horns. You and I have an extraordinary capacity for evil. None of us can say if we had been subjected to similar upbringing and conditions, we would have turned out differently. But we are also created for good."

This sounds like one of my Rules of Good Studenting, that as we read of atrocities we have to remember that "if you had been there you would have been there." We can be self-righteous from a distance, but not from within the life of another person.

Archbishop Tutu had been retired for some time so we have not heard from him recently. But he and Nelson Mandela were two indispensable people who changed the history of their country.

He had expressed many disappointments over the years about how South Africa has evolved, with the dream of the Rainbow Nation not becoming what he had hoped. And corruption among the leaders becoming a way of life.

In fact, at one point he even apologized for past statements that he felt were a bit more self-righteous than he had wished. But he always held forth a moral standard that the rest of us ignored at our peril.

God Bless you Archbishop Tutu. May you rest in peace.

Note that I have additional podcasts on Nelson Mandela, on “Thoughts of a Former Terrorist” and on Rules of Good Studenting.

