

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu

Voice of the Voiceless

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"A just and democratic society without racial divisions" was Desmond Mpilo Tutu's life goal. The 90-year-old Anglican archbishop emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa, was called to the Father's house on December 26, 2021. A noted historical figure and church leader of deep Christian principles, biblical doctrine was something to be lived and "faith without action is dead". He was an apostle of peace and unity, a warm man who spoke out ardently for liberation and reconciliation, a true "defender of human rights".

Desmond Mpilo Tutu was born into a family of modest means on October 7, 1931, in Klerksdorp, a rural town about 160 kilometers southwest of Johannesburg. During his childhood, he would finish his after-school homework in the large kitchen of the Institute for the Blind, where his mother worked as a cook. Reverend Trevor Huddleston, a white Anglican priest, often entered through the back door and respectfully tipped his hat, saying: "Good evening, Mrs. Tutu!" The gesture sculpted the soul of young Desmond who was already accustomed to the fact that whites rarely treated blacks with respect or kindness. Huddleston, in fact, would play a decisive role in his life, transmitting to the young Desmond his passion for justice as well as the Benedictine contemplative spirituality.

In 1948, the *apartheid* system was established. Even in this climate, Desmond managed to become a teacher and, in 1955, married his colleague, Nomalizo Leah Shenxane. However, both abandoned the professions because of the new laws regarding segregation of black schools and their severe underfunding of needed educational resources.

A Unifying figure

Tutu was ordained an Anglican priest in 1960. Two years later, Huddleston's Resurrection Community helped him travel to the United Kingdom for further theological studies before returning to South Africa in 1966. From there, Tutu began a prodigious career teaching theology and ministering. His ways were marked by a departure from any and all traces of racial inferiority. He was known for his contagious enthusiasm and sense of humor, combined with a deep respect for the humanity of all those with whom he dialogued.

In 1983, Tutu served as secretary of the National Council of South African Churches and on October 16, 1984, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role as "a unifying figure in the campaign to solve the problem of apartheid in South Africa". In 1985 he became the first black bishop of Johannesburg and the first black archbishop of Cape Town a year later. This latter role coincided with the office of primate of the Anglican Church of South Africa.

From 1996 to 1999, Tutu chaired South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one of the greatest experiments in non-punitive justice to date. And among other recognitions, he was a recipient of the *Pacem in Terris* Peace and Freedom Award, the Lincoln Prize and the Gandhi Peace Leadership Award. The many honors never dented his humility nor did harsh criticisms of partisanship ever diminish his humor.

A Christian Witness

Desmond was deeply committed to the ecumenical movement. He worked persistently to bring the churches closer together in order to more effectively narrow political, economic and societal divides that threatened to further fragment people and groups. His life was one of Christianity embodied in his time. One can categorize his words around five concepts which were emblematic of his lived experience and which are highly relevant today.

The Gospel's Revolutionary Power

"If you want to oppress people, the last thing you should give them is the Bible. It is more revolutionary, more subversive than any political manifesto or ideology. Why? Because the Bible states that each of us without exception is created in the image of God. Whether rich or poor, black or white, educated or illiterate, male or female, each of us is created in the image of God. This is wonderful and exciting."

Our common humanity

"Differences are not meant to separate, to alienate, we are different precisely to realize our need for one another." "We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family." "If we could but recognize our common humanity, that we do belong together, that our destinies are bound up in one another's, that we can be free only together, that we can be human only together, then a glorious world would come into being where all of us lived harmoniously together as members of one family, the human family."

Justice and peace

"When situations of injustice arise regardless of the government, black or white, neutrality is unacceptable." "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." "I think people are beginning to realize this, that you can't have pockets of prosperity in one part of the world and huge deserts of poverty and deprivation, and think you can have a stable, secure world." "If you want peace, don't talk to your friends. Talk to your enemies." "It is through weakness and vulnerability that most of us learn empathy and compassion and discover our soul."

No place in God's house for hatred

"When we see others as enemies, we risk becoming what we hate. When we oppress others, we end up oppressing ourselves. [...] No one should be excluded from our love, our

compassion or our concern because of race or gender, faith or ethnicity – or because of their sexual orientation. Instead of separation and division, all distinctions make for a rich diversity to be celebrated for the sake of the unity that underlies them. We are different so that we can know our need of one another." "We can carry the burden of hurt throughout our lives. We can make the hurt that we have experienced the defining aspect of our stories of ourselves. That means that somebody else gets to say who we are, somebody else gets to decide how we feel, and somebody else gets to decide how we see the world. Forgiveness not only frees us from the burden of someone else's opinion of us, but it allows us the opportunity to really write a story of ourselves that we can love, enjoy, relish, and live into."

The Power of "Little Bits of Good"

"Too frequently, we think we must do spectacular things. Yet if we remember that the sea is actually made up of drops of water and each drop counts, each one of us can do our little bit where we are. It's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world. Each one of us can be an oasis of peace."

Words of tribute flowed in after Tutu's death from across the globe, in remembrance of this man who had witnessed and adhered with such zeal and dedication to the figure of Christ, the 'peace and the liberator of all who are oppressed.'

Sources:

1. G. Albanese, *Il lutto. Tutu, the man of faith and peace who brought down apartheid*, www.avvenire.it (28.12.2021)
2. G. Gugliermetto, *Pace, è rimasto impegnato per la giustizia globale fino alla morte*. www.mulino.it (1.2.2022)
3. Citations of Tutu collected by the magazine «New City» (March 2022). See also: <https://www.startupacks.com/quotes/desmond-tutu-quotes/#ixzz7XctrUCm2>