

**A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry
at the 'Celebration of the Life of Nelson Mandela'
in Coventry Cathedral on
15th December 2013**

Introduction

'As I walked out of the door toward that gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison', so said Nelson Mandela about the day of his release from prison after 27 years in 1990

In the tributes that have poured out across the world to this remarkable figure of human history, I have been struck by how many of them have homed in not only on Mandela's commitment to reconciliation but also on his capacity for forgiveness.

That is why it is so right that Coventry Cathedral should mark his death and celebrate his life on this day – the day of his funeral. For Nelson Mandela was the embodiment of the truth that this Cathedral shared with a divided war-torn world in 1940 and continues to proclaim today.

Many of us know well the words of Dick Howard, the war-time Provost of the Cathedral, who watched it burn and collapse in on itself, but they are worthy of restatement on this day because they were the method of Mandela.

'What we need to tell the world is this: (preached Dick Howard from the ruins of the Cathedral during the live broadcast of BBC's Christmas Day Service) - what we need to tell the world is this, that with Christ born again in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge . . . We are going to try to make a kinder, simpler – a more Christ-Child-like sort of world'.

As Nelson Mandela walked away from his incarceration, conscious of all that he had missed during those years of captivity, aware of all that he and his people had suffered at the hands of a brutal regime, he chose not to seek revenge but to reach out for reconciliation, not to fight till the enemy was no more but to forgive the enemy so that the enemy could no longer treat him as a fiend but as friend. He chose the way of Jesus who commanded us not to hate our enemies but to love them; and all South Africa saw, indeed the world saw, that in the words of an Anglican theologian, 'love is the strongest instrument of power'.

'The truth will set you free'

In our reading, we hear Jesus say, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'.

Mandela's famous speech at his trial in 1964 at Rivonia, Mandela:

'I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

Nelson Mandela cherished a controlling ideal. He had found a fundamental principle. He had discovered a great and wonderful truth. Every human being is endowed with an inalienable, God-given dignity and each person deserves not only equal status in the law but the fullest of possibilities of opportunities to flourish as a human being.

Although he did not know it at the time – for the court could have sentenced him to death – Mandela was not called upon to lay his life down for this ideal. But it was a truth that he lived by during his years of imprisonment. It was a truth that would keep him freer than his captors even in the confines of his cell. And it was truth that he lived by when released from prison. Whoever met Nelson Mandela whether the poorest black child or the most powerful Afrikaner politician testified that he treated them with respect. He recognised their dignity. People who came to revere him found him revering them. Despite his years of struggle and suffering, his cherished ideal gave him the freedom to treat others well – it was the truth that set him free.

'Very truly I tell you, everyone who commits a sin is a slave to sin'.

Jesus went on to say, 'Very truly I tell you, everyone who commits a sin is a slave to sin'. His hearers did not like it. 'We are the children of Abraham; we are privileged people', they cried out... 'We have never been slaves to anyone!'

The lawyer who prosecuted Mandela; the judge who condemned him; the jailers who imprisoned him; the State that stood against him: all of them would have railed against Jesus. 'We have never been slaves to anyone. The black man on Robben Island is the slave to captivity and will never test freedom again'.

'This is where you will die!' taunted the prison guard as Mandela arrived on that infamous island from which escape was deemed impossible.

But apartheid closed its grip on the land of South Africa and held its proponents in a prison of propaganda, of fear, of hatred, of violence, of condemnation of conscience, of the wrath of God. Jesus was right, 'Everyone who commits a sin is a slave to sin', and sin is an unforgiving jailer. It will choke the life out of its victims.

That is a truth of personal life. If you steal from your employer, you begin to find yourself trapped in a descending spiral of deceit and debt that slowly but surely entraps you in a sticky web from which you cannot extract yourself.

It is a truth of interpersonal and family life. This week Nigella Lawson spoke of how her life with Charles Saatchi had become a gold cage. Despite the freedom of great wealth and celebratory status, her choices in life had led her into captivity.

That sinning makes you a slave to sin was very literally true for this country when its economy seemed to be dependent on slavery. It is true for North Korea as the glamour of power forces its leaders to deny the freedom of others and will lead each of them eventually into the death that is the wages of sin. Syria is descending into hell as its leaders turn on their people and as the rebels fight cruelty with cruelty.

It was true for South Africa during its years of apartheid as its denial of the dignity of other members of its society caused it to be cast out of civilized international society – ostracized in its lonely wilderness of injustice.

‘So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed’.

Jesus spoke convincingly about truth. I imagine that most people, believers in God or not, would agree with him. Truth is the basis of a good and just society.

Jesus also spoke convincingly about sin, I think. I imagine that most moral and religious people would agree with him. Ethical behaviour is fundamental to a good and just society.

But Jesus went further. He dared to root truth and freedom in himself. ‘So if the Son makes you free – If I make you free - you will be free indeed’. ‘Freedom is coming’, as we have just sung’, because ‘Jesus is coming’.

The tributes about Mandela that have poured out across the world have been about the way he treated people with dignity and the way he was able to forgive. They have seen in Mandela something of the sort of world we want to live in; something of the way to build a better world.

How do we shape and form, protect, nurture and sustain this sort of vision for human life?

That vision, those values and virtues are vulnerable. There are many powerful forces that seek to overcome them (forces that can be present, as we saw in the Dutch Reformed Church, even in the life of the Church itself).

The way to sustain that vision of the world is to be rooted in the vision of Jesus Christ and God’s way for the world: ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free’.

The dignity of all human beings is built upon the foundation of the faith that is proclaimed to the world at Christmas time. God, in the words of the carol, has come ‘to raise the sons of earth, to give them second birth’. God has not only created us in his image, he has taken our image into himself. By coming among us in Jesus Christ, God has raised us to the dignity of God’s own life. By inhabiting

our humanity in Jesus Christ God has given to humanity the immense worth and infinite value of his divinity.

If Mandela's commitment to the dignity of humanity has a direct connection to Christmas, his commitment to reconciliation and capacity for forgiveness have a direct relation to Easter.

For this is the work of Jesus on the cross. This is the work of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself. This is the work of Christ on the cross breaking down the walls that divide human beings. This is the work of Jesus praying from the cross, 'Father, forgive'. This is the world-transforming, world-saving work of Jesus Christ that inspired the ministry of reconciliation of Coventry when its Cathedral lay in ruins. This is the work that gave the Mandela the power to forgive and the conviction to build a better world in which all people could have dignity and freedom and live and love.

'So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'.

Conclusion

At the end of his autobiography, *The Long Road to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela, Tata Madiba, wrote: 'The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey . . . For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.'

That is true freedom.

That is the freedom of God's love.

That is the freedom of Christmas.

That is the freedom of Easter.

That sort of freedom – the freedom to set others free – is what we stand for and what we fight for.