

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 2nd January 2022
11.00am Rev Peter Cornick

Archbishop Desmond Tutu died on 26th December 2021

'Ubuntu'

Desmond Tutu, often used a Bantu word, 'ubuntu.' He wrote:

'Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human.' It means someone is 'generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. They share what they have. It also means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life.'¹

The covenant of self-sacrifice

Thinking about the Covenant Prayer in the light of Desmond Tutu's death on Boxing Day, it seems to embrace 'ubuntu'. The prayer speaks of 'services to be done'; it acknowledges that some services are easy, others difficult; perhaps they will suit our own needs – perhaps not. To self-consciously offer oneself 'freely and wholeheartedly' in service to others, requires something of the generosity, the compassion of 'ubuntu'. To allow God to 'appoint us our place and work', seeking no reward other than serving God, is to share what we have – without restriction – with others.

**Let me be full,
let me be empty.**

This is the very essence of being human; being prepared to give up everything, that someone else might benefit. Self-giving: self-sacrificing. Sharing what I have: 'ubuntu.'

**Let me have all things,
let me have nothing.**

Tutu's struggle – his self-sacrifice – was for the Black people in South Africa, subjected to a regime of oppression Tutu termed 'evil' and 'especially repugnant' because it was 'upheld in the name of the Christian faith.'² In 1989, less than a year before Mandela's release, he preached, with a sense of desperation, about the very essence of being human.

'Help me, help me create the kind of universe where my children of all races and colours can live harmoniously together as members of one family, the human family, my family.'³

¹ Tutu, Desmond, *No Future without Forgiveness*, London, 1999 p34-35

² Resolution of the Lambeth Conference 1988, in Tutu, Desmond, *Crying in the Wilderness*, London 1990 p118

³ Ibid 1990, p123

It was his Christian faith – his covenant – that was the bedrock of all his struggles. For Tutu, freedom was not a political doctrine; it was Christian Gospel – and struggling for freedom, the obvious conclusion – the unavoidable working out – of making a covenant with God. Tutu wrote:

The Christian's ultimate loyalty and obedience are to God, not with movement or a cause, or a political system. If certain laws are not in line with the imperatives of the Gospel, then the Christian must agitate for their repeal by all peaceful means.⁴

**I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.**

So, service, sharing, self-sacrifice, are an essential part of 'ubuntu'. And they are central to the covenant. More, says Tutu, they help us to understand what it means to be human. Tutu's struggle for freedom helps us understand what it means to be human. So, encountering God in the covenant prayer, being willing to be laid aside or employed for God, is the very self-giving we associate with Christ which helps us to know what it is to be more human.

Do you remember, that on Christmas day, I quoted Mark Oakley, who said that the visitors to the stable, went there, not to become more religious, but to become more human – by encountering God as a helpless human baby.⁵ Who would have thought, God was like that!

The covenant prayer, which sounds terribly religious ... Tutu's life – a Bishop – which sounds terribly religious – yet he lived the covenant prayer ... is teaching us what it is to be Christ like – God like – teaching us the very essence of being human.

I am no longer my own but yours.

An inclusive covenant.

But 'ubuntu' captures something else about the covenant prayer which takes us back to the early days of the covenants with the people of Israel. You remember Tutu's definition of 'ubuntu' – 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in the humanity of other people.' ... 'We belong in a bundle of life.'

Critical to the covenant described in Deuteronomy, is its inclusiveness. Who does God make this covenant with? Well, everyone in the community. There can be no outsiders – no exceptions:

the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp, both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water. (Deuteronomy 29: 10-11)

⁴ Ibid, 1990 p9

⁵ Oakley, Mark, *By Way of the Heart*, London 2019 p16

I take this passage to mean that until each member of the community has learnt that they are bound to one another, there can be no harmony.

The Church Council spent some time last year, reflecting theologically on what it would mean for people to form same sex covenants of marriage. The conclusion was the church wanting to visibly express a view that God's covenant is for everyone – if one is left out, everyone is left out. 'Ubuntu.'

I was thankful to God to receive my third vaccine a few weeks ago – I hope you have been too. But my humanity is inextricably bound up to people who have yet to receive one dose – not because they refuse but because of vaccine poverty – 'ubuntu.'

Tutu, living with the segregation which granted privilege to a few by subjugating the many, realised that all people, of whatever colour, were bound to one another – if one suffered, so did the other – even the oppressor, he said, who became a victim of the system too – a bundle of life – 'ubuntu.'

A person with *ubuntu* ... belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.⁶

You stand assembled today, all of you, before the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 29: 10)

But Deuteronomy goes further: the covenant applies to those yet to come. This covenant, made with God, will be for our children, and their children. And of course, the Deuteronomic writer is standing on the shoulders of 'covenant' giants who have gone before: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And by the time we reach Jeremiah, be-wailing the breaking of the covenant by the people of Israel, we are promised a 'new' covenant. A covenant written on the heart. The heart tends to be seen today as the place of emotion – but for Jeremiah's theology and Hebrew thought, the heart represented just that – thought; theological reflection; an expression of the will. Emotion was to be found in the bowels.

**Beloved in Christ,
let us again claim for ourselves
this covenant which God has made with his people,
and take upon us the yoke of Christ.**

The inclusiveness of the covenant made with the community, extends to those yet to come – a perpetual covenant. 'Ubuntu' describes being bound together, perfectly.

**Come, let us use the grace divine,
and all, with one accord,
in a perpetual covenant join
ourselves to Christ the Lord.**

A covenant of forgiveness

⁶ Ibid, 1999 p35

Tutu was always challenged about his attitude to his oppressors. Could he forgive them.

One of the guest editors on the Radio 4 Today Programme yesterday, was Mina Smallman.

Two of her daughters, Nicole and Bibaa, were murdered last June in Brent in a random attack on two young women. Mina Smallman, a retired Anglican Priest, was interviewed about her experience in a powerful and inspirational piece of radio. She spoke of forgiving the murderer, in order that she might be able to move on – so that he had no hold over her. I began to wonder, listening to Ms Smallman whether forgiveness seemed to be helping the victim – almost a psychological self-defence process – more than an offering affecting the culprit.

Fortunately, I was reading Tutu the same day. He writes: 'to forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest.' So, in his struggle against violent oppressors, Tutu cautions against revenge and bitterness, which only allows the perpetrators to maintain control. 'Forgiveness', Tutu says, gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanise them.'⁷

Perhaps this is what Mina Smallman, in her grief, was expressing. The desire to remain human in a situation attempting to dehumanise. Still, the ability for Smallman or Tutu to say, to act this, is remarkable. Counter to the way of the world. 'Yet the power to do all these things' says the Covenant Prayer, 'is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.' Only by relying on God's grace, God who calls us into this covenant, can any part of the covenant – whether we are full or empty – be achieved.

Covenant living, calls us to act in new ways – such as forgiveness; ways wise kings would recognise if they visited a baby in a stable.

A suffering covenant

People often balk at the words, 'put me to suffering.' None of us want to be in Mina Smallman's position. We would not pray to be.

The word, suffer, in the Covenant Prayer, as it was used in English at the time of Wesley, has a slightly different meaning – although, not unrelated to the suffering we understand. Suffering meant, to allow something to be done to you – which might not be unpleasant at all. But there was always the notion that it would put the one doing the suffering, the allowing, to some inconvenience, for the benefit of another – back to this sharing again.

You might remember that in the Authorised translation, Jesus says to the disciples, to 'suffer' the children to come to him. In other words, *allow* the children to come, don't stop them: although it will inconvenience you if I spend a bit of time with them, rather than you!

Desmond Tutu was being interviewed about Denmark, refusing to boycott South African goods at the height of apartheid.

⁷ Ibid, 1999 p35

He thought it 'rather disgraceful' that Denmark was supporting the apartheid system by buying South African coal. When the interviewer replied that such a boycott would mean that 'a lot of black [people] are going to be unemployed' he replied: 'They would be unemployed and suffer temporarily. It would be a suffering with a purpose.'⁸

They would *allow* something (unemployment) to be done to them– to *suffer* it – but it would bring inconvenience (to put it mildly), suffering.

**Put me to doing,
put me to suffering.**

Conclusion

For Tutu, his struggles, his forgiveness, were all simply an outworking of living the covenant, offered by God to everyone.

Of drinking Christ's blood of the covenant. Of anticipating in word and deed – God's covenant – freedom. Jesus says:

²⁵Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. (Mark 14:25)

**For love of you,
[we] engage ourselves
to seek and do your perfect will.
We are no longer our own but yours.**

Desmond Tutu wrote:

God says help me, help me transfigure the kingdoms of this world so that they become as the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever.⁹

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 1990 p28-29

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 1990, p123

