

52 Human clay and the divine Potter

In South Africa this weekend the funeral of Nelson Mandela is to be held, the final act in the peoples of that great country paying their respects and saying their good-byes to the one they see as "the father of the nation".

Nelson Mandela has of course been a truly remarkable man. To emerge from "the white man's prison" after 27 years of harsh captivity, and then set a steady course of reconciliation between the races as the country lurched rapidly into a new era, is surely his greatest legacy.

For the risks in those critical years were all too plain. Apartheid was crumbling, the whites were fearful and well-prepared for trouble, and decades of pent-up anger amongst the black peoples were just needing a spark to set things ablaze. A few ill-chosen words by Mandela could have provided such a spark, giving the justification for wholesale violence, and leading to a catastrophic bloodbath.

But that bloodbath never happened, for which we thank Almighty God for His over-arching providence, and, on a different level, we thank Nelson Mandela.

Mandela had spent some years in a Methodist school in his formative years, and clearly some Christian understanding and influence had entered his system. In later years he never majored on any such influence, or on any personal Christian faith that he may have had, and certainly in other parts of his life over the years he showed he was a very fallible human being. In that sense he was just like the rest of us - that old mix that each of us experiences, of getting things right and of getting things wrong.

A second man was a key player in those critical years - Desmond Tutu, the then Archbishop of Cape Town - who is also due deep thanks. Here was man who made no secret of the fact that his words and deeds were a response to the Lord Jesus Christ. The "Truth and Reconciliation Commission", which Tutu argued for and then oversaw, provided a forum for robust addressing of the many wrongs of the previous decades.

The Commission was not perfect, and clearly not all that should have been addressed has been addressed, even now. But it did serve as a vital safety-valve, producing numerous incidents of true reconciliation across the deep divisions of that hurting country.

So what are we to make of all this from a Christian perspective? - of men like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, and of the great political changes that have happened in South Africa.

Above all does it not show that Almighty God really does respond to the prayers of His people? How much prayer was being lifted to "the throne of grace" in those critical times we shall never know this side of heaven. But it must have been considerable, and heartfelt, and persistent, and arising from peoples of different colour from right across the nation and beyond.

The Lord tells us through James - "Tremendous power is made available through a good man's earnest prayer" (James 5.16b, JBPhillips).

In response, and indeed in His foreknowledge, the Lord brought men like Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and the last white president F W De Klerk, into the right positions at the right time. Against all the odds, and against many expectations, the transition from white minority government to black majority government was safely achieved.

We are to pray, we are to listen, we are to serve. We are to allow the Lord to achieve what He wishes, even through our fallible lives and feeble efforts, just as He did in South Africa.

For the Lord still uses ordinary, sinful people to achieve His purposes - just as He has always done. Some men He uses will openly acknowledge that "Jesus is Lord", and some men He uses will not so acknowledge.

But each one He does use serves as the clay in the merciful hands of the divine Potter.

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