

Modern Christians we Can Admire: Desmond Tutu

Readings: Micah 6:6-8
Matthew 25:31-40

I don't agree with Desmond Tutu on everything. I disagreed with him at the time when he wanted the world to stop investing in South Africa: I disagree, too, with his view that a gay lifestyle is fine. But that doesn't matter. You don't have to agree with someone on everything to admire him/her. I admire Tutu for his intellect and his earthiness in what he says. I admire him for his concern for ordinary people - that's a Jesus concern, which is why I chose that gospel reading. I admire him for his courage in speaking out fearlessly against white and black. And I admire the way he is not afraid to show his emotions: to let tears pour down his face on TV or to explode into a high-pitched giggle which shakes his whole body (he says that black people laugh with their whole bodies, not with their teeth, like white people). His exuberance and joy are wonderfully infectious. An American reporter said he is "a bit like a black leprechaun!" I think that joy comes from his faith; it comes welling up in him, despite the tragic conflict situations he often faces, such as when he visited Rwanda just after the genocide.

I have met him twice. The first time was in passing, when he came to apologise for not leading a Retreat in Johannesburg, but dropped in all the same, just to say hello. He and a white woman flung their arms round each other in a wonderful display of affection in Apartheid South Africa. The other time was when he was coming to speak at the boarding school where I was teaching in South Africa. I was asked to go and pick him up from Durban Airport. I was a bit apprehensive about picking him up in my little green Mini, so I did wash it. But it meant on our journey back to the school I could have him all to myself for nearly two hours. The thing I remember most, though, was that when I opened the passenger car door for him, he didn't just sit there waiting for me, but he leaned over and opened my side for me. Little things like that mean a lot to me. And when he spoke to the school that night, a very bright pupil tried to trip him up with a question. Tutu just put the boy in his place very gently and then answered the question. What a man!

Tutu calls himself a township urchin! He became a teacher until

the Apartheid government forced him out, so he became a clergyman instead, since that was one of the few careers open to educated blacks. Dean of Johannesburg, then a bishop, then Archbishop, he never lost his simple touch, his concern for ordinary people. Yes, he could be difficult: he once sent packing a young clergyman who arrived to see him but was rather casually dressed. But he would spend 4 hours a day on his knees in prayer, even getting up in the early hours to do so; it seemed to give him huge strength and energy, and he said that that time was "like sitting before a warm fire on a winter's night".

He had a very simple, clear faith. No situation is "untransfigurable", as he termed it, since each of us is a God-carrier, and God does not give up on any of us. "And, in the meantime, "to quote him again," God is there with us in the muck."

After Apartheid collapsed, he led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which enabled those who had suffered appalling violence to confront those who had done it to them. It had the legal power to grant people amnesty too. Usually, although it was a legal tribunal, and often televised, the victims spoke straight to Tutu. He would take survivors and victims through what had happened, encouraging, gently questioning through it, and then asking them quietly at the end if they could forgive their persecutors. A remarkable number did. But just telling their story seemed to help heal them and restore their dignity. Tutu would often be weeping with them through it all. I still remember him speaking to Winnie Mandela during one session. She had been a close friend of his, but was accused of ordering the necklacing of a young boy (when a car tyre is placed round a victim and then set on fire). Tearfully he pleaded with her, "I beg you..... I beg you..... I beg you, please. You are a great person. And you don't know how your greatness would be enhanced if you were to say, 'I'm sorry.....things went wrong. Forgive me.'"

Even some of the reporters at these hearings had to be given psychological counselling after these sessions. But Tutu kept the hearings on course, even while undergoing radiation therapy for prostate cancer at the same time. His two or three hours a day of prayer enabled him to get through.

Truly, a GREAT man, and a great man of God.
Chris van Straaten