

Notes from reflection by Mpho Tutu van Furth on the legacy of her father, Desmond Tutu.

When Desmond Tutu asked ‘tell me about yourself’ he meant not what you do, but who you are.

He feels very much alive still. His day began in prayer, continued in prayer, and ended in prayer.

Reconciliation for him was not cerebral; he was widely read but it didn’t live in his head, but in his very bones, his being. It was not an optional extra. For Desmond Tutu, justice is reconciliation. This is connected to the concept of Ubuntu; the power of love and compassion; the concept of ‘turning the human race into the human family’. Justice is the corporate face of love: but this is restorative not retributive justice, based in the wholeness of the relationship. For Desmond Tutu, this shaped the whole moral landscape.

And some of his church services held some of his biggest political speeches – he didn’t shy away from this.

Humility not humiliation: reparations can only begin with humility. When we’re humble we have a true sense of who we are.

Practice not just politeness, but reverence: how different would we be if this was how we lived!

I miss Desmond Tutu’s laughter, joy, clarity of his vision and genuine humility; his willingness to admit if he didn’t know or couldn’t do something, or that others could do it better; how he relished talent and ability in others. His involvement in such a breadth of causes, and that what tied them all together being a single ethic – the ethic of love. If in doubt, he asked himself where would love be? What would be the most loving thing? We’d do ourselves no harm if we did the same.

God challenges us to love those with whom we don’t agree, or like much. Engaging in the challenge of salvation is the work of bringing health and healing to the whole body.

‘If we’re willing to challenge when people are doing the wrong thing, we must speak up when they’re doing the right thing’.

How little attention we pay to small things in a time of war. Even the informal name ‘Putin’s war’ shows a lack of thinking about the detail: it’s not Putin in the frontline.

Wars once begun are never really won – they live in the memory, in the lives lost, in the ways we continue to talk about each other as less than human. Desmond Tutu was known to quote (from John 12:32) ‘if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all people unto me’ – and he would have drawn Putin as well as Zelenski. Do we have the space to hold that vision?

What does reconciliation mean in the context of the small wars we wage daily, and the space we make for unkindness and discrimination? How do we craft reconciliation if we refuse to live it? An icon is an image that lets us see through to the beauty of God. One doesn’t buy it, one is given it. We need to glimpse the face of God in every face we see: Desmond Tutu lived that out daily.