

Reconciliation. Justice. “How do we remain loyal both to the demand of those who are oppressed for justice and to the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation that Jesus the Crucified offered to the perpetrators? What does it mean to be a citizen of a world and a country at war, and a follower of Jesus Christ the Crucified?” I resonate with these questions asked by Miroslav Volf in his excellent book, ‘Exclusion and Embrace’. He was asked in 1993 as a Croat, ‘But can you embrace a četnik,? (the notorious Serbian fighters who had in Croatia, destroyed cities, burned down churches, raped women and herded people into concentration camps). His answer was “No, I cannot, but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.”

As a South African, I wrestled with this through the years of the TRC, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and still wrestle as decades later our nation continues to struggle with racial reconciliation and the tragically incomplete process of the journey towards justice, equity and reconciliation.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu is our national and global icon who led us to deeper understandings of reconciliation and justice, who insisted that there is no future without forgiveness. He said, “For our nation to heal and become a more humane place, we had to embrace our enemies as well as our friends. The same is true the world over. True enduring peace—between countries, within a country, within a community, within a family—requires real reconciliation between former enemies and even between loved ones who have struggled with one another...”

He continued: “True reconciliation is based on forgiveness, and forgiveness is based on true confession, and confession is based on penitence, on contrition, on sorrow for what you have done. We know that when a husband and wife have quarreled, one of them must be ready to say the most difficult words in any language, “I’m sorry,” and the other must be ready to forgive for there to be a future for their relationship. This is true between parents and children, between siblings, between neighbors, and between friends. Equally, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the lives of nations are not just airy-fairy religious and spiritual things, nebulous and unrealistic. They are the stuff of practical politics.” (Tutu, ‘*Truth and Reconciliation*’, Greater Good Magazine, 2004)

Dayenu. That would have been enough! And yet there is more. The legacy of Archbishop Tutu stretches far and long and wide. I believe that for years to come we will be discovering that his legacy goes much deeper than we know at present. Most people immediately associate him with reconciliation and justice, the focus of our reflection today, and with the TRC, with forgiveness and justice and peace making. For those of us who knew him, worked with him, listened to him, it is so much more.

Personally, I am beyond grateful for Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Mpilo Tutu. He is one of the most important influences on my spirituality, my understanding of reconciliation and justice, and the expression of my priesthood. I clearly remember my first encounter with him in 1982. I was a young campus ministry intern, in a car with the Archbishop and Michael Cassidy of Africa

Enterprise, traveling from Pietermaritzburg to Durban. They conversed about their recent encounters with then apartheid Prime Minister, PW Botha.

Halfway there the Arch turned to me and said, “Now tell me about yourself.” I started telling him about my internship and activities as a faith-based activist. “No, not what you do,” he said. “Tell me who you are.” His interest in me as a person and the presence with which he listened, reflected who he was - someone who affirmed the being and dignity of others, no matter their age or who they were.

This was partly just who Tutu was as a remarkable person. He paid as much attention to the ‘little people’ as he did with the highest international leaders, he interacted with you with his full attention. It was also rooted in the faith and theology that undergirded his personal interactions, his broad activism, and commitment to speak out and act for justice, both collective and global justice, and justice for individuals. He believed that every human being is created in the image of God, to be revered, and held in awe as if she or he is God, or they are God.

In mass gatherings he would encourage us to say out loud, ‘I am a VSP’, a Very Special Person, because all human beings, all of us, are made in the image of God. Therefore to mistreat another human being is not simply unjust, nor simply painful for the victim: it is blasphemous because for him it was as he said, “spitting in the face of God”.

Tutu’s theology, his faith, had concrete implications for how people and the environment were to be treated. John Allen, his media PA and aide, said that ‘If there was one thing which enraged him, it was to see the powerful inflict suffering on “so-called ordinary people”— “so-called because in my theology nobody is ordinary” (Allen, 2021).

Tutu was passionate about inclusion, that God welcomes all people, that Jesus said ‘I will draw ALL people to myself’ and meant it with no exceptions. At a sermon at All Saints Church, Pasadena in 2006, I heard him say, "Jesus did not say, 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw some.' Jesus said, 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all.' All! All! All! All!
Bush, Bin Laden (*yes, there were gasps from the congregation!*)
Black, white, yellow, rich, poor, clever, not so clever,
beautiful, not so beautiful. It's one of the most radical things!
All, all, all belong.
Gay, lesbian, so-called straight. All!
All are meant to be held in this incredible embrace that will not let us go."

Tutu did not only speak about inclusion as a principle of the liberation theology he embraced, he lived it out. He “walked the talk,” bringing his Black and African liberation theology into his spirituality, global prophetic-preaching, and priestly ministry. For him, faith and action, contemplation, prayer and activism, theology and praxis, justice and reconciliation, go hand in hand. They cannot be separated. They flow back and forth, integrally connected. For him, justice is reconciliation. (Tutu, *Justice is Reconciliation*, Project Syndicate 2006)

Desmond Tutu had a fundamental, core belief in God’s Love, as universal Love that welcomes everyone, absolutely everyone, even the worst sinners, the worst offenders, that Love and grace triumphs in every way over all else. That the most horrendous situations can be transfigured.

That Love wins. For him, Reconciliation is grounded in Love. Justice is grounded in Love. Justice is reconciliation, connected by Love.

Grounded in God's love overflowing into all of creation and all of humanity

Grounded in the unstoppable love of Jesus the Christ, who showed us how to live, how to love, how to walk the Way of Love.

Jesus who reached out with love and healing to those on the margins, the invisible and untouchable, who confronted religious authorities who lived by legalism and purity laws. Jesus who walked towards betrayal and torture and death, offered up his life on the cross, showed us how to die, trusting even in his abandonment on the cross, that God's love was strong enough to bring him through death to resurrection.

Jesus' death is seen as the groundbreaking encounter with human evil.

Jesus met the violence of his death with the power of non-violence, with the power of love and the power of truth, producing a different kind of power, a power as compassion and love, as opposed to power as control and domination. This death-defying power of compassion and love is power that can transform lives, bring reconciliation and justice to the most hopeless situations. Jesus challenged the dominant powers in the ultimate way, met the torture and violence handed out to him, not with violence, but with non-violent, powerful love.

Jesus died to establish a new beloved community and for us to become part of it - to realize that across the world, across that which divides us and unites us as human beings, we are kin, we are family, and we are responsible for each other. That as my former rector of All Saints Church, Pasadena, Ed Bacon, would say, our mission is to turn the human race into the human family. When one part of the body, the family, suffers, we also suffer. Thus the work of reconciliation and the work of justice are central to our humanity as the body of Christ.

That's the power of love and compassion over the power of violence and control, producing the possibility of reconciliation and justice, the possibility of transformation. But what do we mean by reconciliation?

RECONCILIATION

I found John de Gruchy's book, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, most helpful, and draw substantially from it here. Theologically, reconciliation is at the heart of Christian faith and belief. It has a variety of meanings and is associated primarily with belief about the Triune God's saving work in Jesus Christ, and can be interchangeably used with the words, salvation, redemption, atonement. There are different biblical metaphors and different biblical ways to understand all of these.

Paul in the New Testament, links his use of the word reconciliation with God's justice. The word reflects both the understanding of God's action and the understanding of human beings in social relationship. It has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. Found fifteen times in the New Testament and mostly in Paul's writings, the epistles, it refers to 'exchange, or 'the other', being in solidarity with the 'other', not against the 'other'.

Reconciliation has to do with God relating to us, the human 'other', *hilasmos*, and in turn, our relationships with the 'other', as individuals or groups, *katalassoo*. John de Gruchy says that

reconciliation is fundamentally about God making us friends, and us restoring relationships with others. Think of the Sermon on the Mount, “if anyone has something against you, go, leave your gift on the altar and first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-24)

Reconciliation is more than a code-word for God’s work of restoring God’s people to Godself, it’s a way of life towards which Christians are called in this world, sharing in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. About breaking down walls of enmity between Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, males or females, and in these days between different races, nationalities, classes, genders, sexual orientations, age groups, those who are differently abled, and between humans and the environment. Nico Koopman) says that therefore reconciliation opposes the injustices of racism, xenophobia, classism, patriarchy and misogyny, homophobia, ageism and ableism, and ecocide (Koopman, 2021)

Thus the call is to live out the gospel of reconciliation, through the Spirit at work in us, with hope for God’s restoration and renewal of the whole creation, that anticipates the coming of God’s reign of justice and peace. (de Gruchy, 2002)

Reconciliation takes on different forms depending on the context. More secularly defined, it is the processes of building or rebuilding relationships that have been damaged or breached, after violations of trust or human rights or violence. It is hard work. It takes courage and perseverance, Reconciliation can be personal, interpersonal, institutional or socio-political, and it can be a combination of these. (Seils, 2017)

In South Africa we made reconciliation a national process through the TRC. Archbishop Tutu referred often to ‘true reconciliation’ or ‘real reconciliation’, saying that reconciliation that simply papers over the cracks will not last and is not real. Akin to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s cheap grace or costly grace in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, it is sometimes talked about as thin or thick reconciliation. Thin or minimal understandings of reconciliation, involve individuals, groups, and institutions peacefully coexisting but with little or no trust, respect, or shared values between them. Thicker versions of reconciliation involve relationships built on trust, respect, and shared values, which may all contribute to the restoration of dignity that may have been lost as a result of violations. (Seils, 2017)

GOING DEEPER:

There is nothing easy about Reconciliation, it’s painful, it’s a slow journey. It can happen by degrees, incrementally, painfully, it is risky. Archbishop Tutu said that “Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but, in the end, it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing.”

When it comes to the TRC, it was based on a largely religious concept of reconciliation, as well as Ubuntu, the African understanding that ‘I am a person through other persons’, that ‘I exist because you exist’. We exist in an interdependence and I can only be who I am because of you. I

am human because I recognize your humanity. Ubuntu emphasizes our common humanity in order to promote broader concepts of healing and harmony. (Tutu, *God has a Dream*, 2004)

JUSTICE

‘Justice is the corporate face of love’, said Bishop John Hines, former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. We are to love one another as Jesus loved us ... We are to love God, and our neighbours as ourselves.

My own conversion as a young white South African student was the moment I heard, in the context of a student conference where students of all races had gathered for the first time in decades, the reminder to love God and love our neighbours as we love ourselves. For the first time, I asked myself in context, What does it mean to love my neighbour as myself if my neighbour is a black South African? Clearly to me, it meant to work for the same rights and privileges for black South Africans that I had as a white south African. The decision to take that seriously changed my life dramatically then, and still drives my passion and work for justice and equality.

Justice in the Scriptures also has different understandings, there is sacrificial justice and forensic justice. Nico Koopman says that both fit with the description of justice as compassionate justice. God declares us just through the work of redemption of Jesus Christ. Justified people seek justice in the world and human rights for all. This compassionate justice does not seek revenge but is merciful. It seeks the healing of broken relationships. This is the restorative justice that was the basis of the TRC. (Koopman, 2021)

When it comes to reconciliation and justice, many people in South Africa thought the TRC was too much of a compromise, that the quest for truth and reconciliation was at the cost of necessary justice. However, their concept of justice focused on retribution and retributive justice. Do we not as humans long for the wicked to be punished? For our enemies to receive their just reward? The desire for revenge and for justice fuels anger and prevents reconciliation.

Archbishop Tutu explained that in Africa, in his words, “We have had a jurisprudence . . . that was not retributive but restorative. When people quarreled, the main intention was not to punish the miscreant but to restore good relations. For Africa is concerned, or has traditionally been concerned, about the wholeness of relationship. That is something we need in our world, a world that is polarized, a world that is fragmented, a world that destroys people. It is also something we need in our families and friendships, for restoration heals and makes whole while retribution only wounds and divides us from one another.

Only together, hand in hand, as God’s family and not as one another’s enemy, can we ever hope to end the vicious cycle of revenge and retribution. This is the only hope for us and for making God’s dream a reality. Because God truly only has us. There is no future without forgiveness.” (Tutu, *God Has a Dream*, 2004)

The TRC was also based on the Ubuntu philosophy of healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, which are strategic gateways to restoring human dignity to both victims and perpetrators. The principles of restorative justice are deeply rooted in African philosophy and values.

In my understanding, restorative justice views crime as a wrong against another person, not simply as an impersonal breaking of the law. It attends to the broken relationships between three players: the offender, the victim, *and* the community. Accordingly, restorative justice seeks to elevate the role of crime victims and community members; hold offenders directly accountable to the people they have harmed; and restore, to the extent possible, the emotional and material losses of victims by providing a range of opportunities for dialogue, negotiation, and problem solving. It recognizes how offenders harm victims, communities, and even themselves by their actions. (Armour, Charter for Compassion website)

Archbishop Tutu said: “ Restorative justice is hopeful. It believes that even the worst offender can become a better person. This does not mean being soft on crime. Offenders must realize the seriousness of their offences by the kind of sentences they get, but there must be hope, hope that the offender can become a useful member of society, after paying the price they owe to society. When we act as if we really believe that someone can be better, is better, then they will often rise to our expectations.”

The ultimate aim of restorative justice is one of healing. If survivors of crimes receive appropriate emotional and material reparation, the harm can be redressed; by seeking to repair the damage caused, the offender can be reconciled with the victim and reintegrated back into his or her social and familial networks; and through such reconciliation and reintegration, community harmony has a chance to be restored. This manner of healing gives the actual victims and the community, as well as the offenders, the opportunity to take an active part in the justice process. (Armour, Charter for Compassion website)

I am attracted to this notion of compassionate justice. When people who engage in caring and compassionate justice are focused on the quest for communion between interdependent humans, called into communion with the Triune God, we are on the way to a life of reconciliation, or embrace. (Koopman, 2021, and Volf, 1996).

Restorative justice is taken further, towards restitutive justice, by Dirkie Smit and Nico Koopman. This also helps us as we think about the TRC and justice. Restitutive justice is found in the moral framework of Aristotle, of Thomas Aquinas, and historically has dimensions of restoration of conjugal rights and cohabitation, of return of goods unjustly acquired, and reparation of harm done. It goes broader, to refer to slavery, colonization, racism, and in some Episcopal churches in the USA there is deep discussion and ongoing work about restitution for relatives of former slaves who were owned by slave owners on church properties. Nico Koopman refers to a long list of injustices, injuries and harms that call for restitution, including discrimination and dehumanization in the forms of sexism, patriarchy, classism, violation of dignity and human rights. (Koopman, 2021)

“Archbishop Tutu, back in August 2011, at Stellenbosch University, spelled out the agenda for restitutive forgiveness. He pleaded for restitution as the rehumanisation of wounded and dehumanized persons. He called for economic restitution and asked senior government officials to share their personal resources. He called for white resourceful people to consider paying a form of wealth tax. He called for psychological restitution. Oppressed people should overcome the erosion of their self-esteem and the advent of self-hate in their midst. This dehumanization, self-hate, and low self esteem, is internalized oppression that paves the way for crime and violence, road anger and reckless driving and even tolerance for littering.” (Koopman 2021)

Restitution focuses on the past and on the future. Sometimes restitution seeks symbolic reparations, other contexts material reparation. Koopman says that “Desmond Tutu is in a theological tradition that adheres to a grace that is not cheap, but that is seeking repentance and restitution. Tutu puts it clearly: “Confession, forgiveness, and reparation, wherever possible, form part of a continuum.”

One of the tragedies in South Africa during the years following the TRC is that the intended reparations for victims who told their stories, for the most part did not materialize, and those that did, took a long time. It was more than disappointing. It was a tragedy. Had they been rolled out as planned, sometimes simple requests for a gravestone for a family member who died, or payment for studies for a victim’s child, we may have been further on the journey of reconciliation than we are today.

Archbishop Tutu acknowledged that the TRC was flawed. He said, “Despite that, I do want to assert as eloquently and as passionately as I can that it was, in an imperfect world. The best possible instrument so far devised to deal with the kind of situation that confronted us after democracy was established in the motherland.” He saw it as a sign of hope for others around the world. He also said that God must have had a sense of humour for using South Africa, such a hopeless case, to bring hope to the world.

EXAMPLES OF RECONCILIATION AND JUSTICE

One example of how the Arch implemented reconciliation in the arena of gender justice and women’s ordination is a strong memory for me. It was almost thirty years ago at the Provincial Synod in 1992, known as the ‘women’s synod’ as we tried for the second time to pass a resolution to ordain women priests. Three years before it had failed to get a two thirds majority by only thirteen votes. Our church and synod were not in one mind about this. The prediction for that synod was that it might again just lose, but it had a chance of passing the two thirds mark.

Archbishop Tutu had asked religious communities around the world to pray for this synod and the process of discussion and debate and awareness raising that preceded it. It was an intense day, in which some members publicly changed their votes from against it to for the resolution. The Arch was a masterful chair of the proceedings. By the end of the day, pausing for prayer before voting, grace prevailed, and the synod voted to ordain women priests with a totally unexpected high majority of 79.2%. The archbishop had requested silence, no clapping or verbal response, whatever the outcome. This restraint was monumentally challenging! He immediately had a resolution ready to say that the church cherished and treasured those who could not agree to the ordination of women priests, which passed. This included several bishops well known to be opposed, who could have led a breakaway of the Anglican Church had they wanted to do that.

This resolution passed, and several speeches were made by those opposed to women’s ordination, affirming their sense of belonging in the church. It was his plan to keep the church united and as challenging as that moment was for some of us, it worked.

The Archbishop’s foresight and intentionality to ensure that everyone felt welcome in our church, no matter what they believed about women’s ordination as priests, ensured that we stayed together as a church and did not split, as many had predicted would happen. Reconciliation at work in the heart of the church.

The Parents Circle, In Israel and Palestine: The Parents Circle was created in 1995 by Yitzhak Frankelthal, whose eldest son was abducted and murdered by Hamas. It is a joint Palestinian Israeli organization of over six hundred Israeli and Palestinian families, all of whom have lost a close family member in the violent conflict. Through their shared experience of loss, they identify a call to promote dialogue, reconciliation and peace. Archbishop Tutu spent time with them during one of his visits to the Holy Land.

Questions they ask: Where does forgiveness and reconciliation fit into the difficult dialogues between bereaved parents or two communities at war? How can you forgive when the power imbalance is so vast and when justice is so far from being achieved? One parent said, “The only real way of affecting change is through heart-to-heart discussion, one person at a time.”

South Africa, The Gugulethu Seven: This was one of the better known killings during the mid 1980s that involved the murder of seven young ANC activists. Notrose Konile testified before the TRC as the mother of one of the Gugulethu Seven. Most of the other mothers testifying before the Commission showed an extraordinary spirit of forgiveness. Mrs Ngewu, also the mother of one of the Gugulethu Seven, responded to the question of a lengthy prison sentence for her son's murderers in the following way:

“I do not agree with this view. We do not want to see people suffer in the same way we did suffer. We do not want to return the suffering that was imposed on us ... We would like to see peace in this country ... I think all South Africans should be committed to the idea of reaccepting these people back into the community. We do not want to return the evil that the perpetrators committed to the nation. We want to demonstrate humanness towards them, so that they in turn may restore their humanity.”

The Heidelberg Tavern: In 2002 a mother whose daughter was killed in the 1993 Heidelberg Tavern massacre in Cape Town, was invited by the man who masterminded the attack, to speak at his homecoming ceremony. For years, she had hoped for some kind of reconciliation, not knowing what was possible. She said, “It was here that I was able to apologise to his people for the shame and humiliation which my ancestors had brought on them through slavery, colonialism and apartheid. Vulnerable feelings, when expressed to other people, have the potential to establish lasting bonds.”

Restorative justice in Chicago: Restorative justice and the possibility of healing, even after violent tragedies, involves two young men in Chicago, a few years ago, one shot by the other. The 14-year-old slayer was convicted. The parents of the young man who had been shot, against their better judgment and conventional wisdom, started visiting the shooter in jail. Over time their fear changed and they wanted to learn more about him. They came to understand the forces that contributed to his terrible crime, and discovered there was little to forgive. They realised that so many children have no home, while their son's room in their home stood empty. When the young man's jail time ended, they asked if they could take him into their home and if they could adopt him. This seems so impossible in theory, yet it becomes possible when there is openness and courage and a willingness to change, to embrace the other, to overcome fear of differences, to walk the journey of restorative justice that brings healing.

Observations: Reconciliation and justice takes intentionality, foresight, courage, persistence, honesty, even the willingness to be criticised by others for engaging in this endeavour.

Forgiveness requires acknowledging the pain of the “other,” i.e. the person who caused you pain or harm, but not necessarily accepting the injustice.

Reconciliation involves the necessity of compromise, even choosing to compromise, choosing love, and the embrace of our enemies, of ‘the other’; choosing restorative justice and healing over retributive, punitive justice; choosing compassionate, restitutive justice, for the sake of healing and nation building.

Note the importance of relationships – making friends again is more important than being right.

THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

Does Archbishop Tutu’s legacy of reconciliation and justice still speak to our world now? Our world, our country of South Africa, is so different now than it was during the days of the TRC, and for us, while much is better, much is also worse. We are the most unequal country in the world, in terms of wealth and poverty. We are #1 when it comes to rape and gender based violence. Our younger generations did not experience the violence and trauma and evils of the apartheid system, and do not understand the compromises that were necessary to move our nation forward to democracy without a bloodbath.

We know that Archbishop Tutu said there is no future without forgiveness and Nelson Mandela’s reconciliatory approach to bringing change to post apartheid South Africa. While that makes sense to many of us, though it is difficult for others, the younger, mainly Black generations who were born after apartheid, question this approach. The reason for their suspicion of Archbishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela and their emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation, is that forgiveness and amnesty was not followed by restitution and reparations.

By focusing mainly on forgiveness and reconciliation, and neglecting reparations and restitution, the strength of what the TRC stood for and what he and others on the TRC worked for, was lost. His message is now in danger of being domesticated, and used as a buffer between restitution and the perpetuation of white privilege and intergenerational racism and inequality.

As I remember, he himself was deeply pained and angry about the lack of payment of reparations to TRC victims who told their story. His forgiveness and reconciliation was based on a robust understanding of compassionate justice along with restitution and reparations, and this must not be diminished. Nico Koopman seeks to “honour him by resisting a reduction of his subversive and transformative piety and radical Christian proclamation of forgiveness, that brings forth contrition and confession, remorse, repentance, reconciliation, redress, reparation, restoration and restitution. We have so much work to do to bring about his dream, which was God’s Dream.” (Koopman 2021)

Archbishop Tutu shaped the moral landscape of reconciliation and justice, and his legacy will continue long into the future. As he said so often, let us work together, with each other, with God, to make God's dream a reality.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- How can forgiveness (a word too often seen as a weakness and associated with excusing and condoning) be used in the everyday world to develop and sustain community-building and peace?
- Can we forgive an ongoing evil?
- Can forgiveness be granted to those who have committed violent acts?
- Can there be reconciliation in situations of GBV or murder?
- Can there be reconciliation following mass murder? Is forgiveness also then possible? As defined by whom? For whose benefit?
- Can one forgive in the absence of apology or remorse?
- What kind of processes should be developed so that dialogue continues and peace can be maintained?
- Can it ever be wrong to offer forgiveness, or to attempt reconciliation?

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