

Nelson Mandela

Some of you will have seen the film 'Long Walk to Freedom'. All of us have been made aware in recent weeks of the life of this extraordinary man. Is it not true to say that no other human being in our age has been such an inspiration to so many people? Does that sound extreme? To be honest I don't think it is. I can think of no one else who has received so many tributes from all parts of the political spectrum. The South African comedian and political satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys, (he was said to be Mandela's favourite comedian) commented that he was capable of 'taking people's fear and turning it into friendship'.

So perhaps that is one of the keys to his charismatic power? President Jimmy Carter was asked whether, as some people have said, he was indeed to be compared to Jesus Christ. 'No', he said firmly, 'no one can be compared to Jesus Christ...but he was the most extraordinary person I ever met.' It doesn't take long to think about the events of Mandela's life to realise that he wasn't a perfect human being. Yet it was the way he came through those 27 years in prison as a human being without bitterness, with the intention to make friends out of enemies, that marked him out as a unique sort of leader. The word 'forgiveness' has been used more than once in descriptions of his attitude to those who had been responsible for his suffering. From what I have heard of him, and the way he treated people, it seems that the key to it all was a determination to see others as he would wish to be seen by them - not to speak down to people, to recognise another as a human being, to learn how to love them.

He said as much when he said in his autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*:
'No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.'

Perhaps three little stories might illustrate the ways in which he did this. On the morning after his death was announced, a man who had been his chauffeur when he visited London spoke to the BBC and told the reporter that, of all the famous people he had driven for, it was only Mandela who had taken the trouble to speak personally to him and ask him about his own family.

Secondly, while he was in prison in those long years on Robben Island he made the effort to learn Afrikaans, the language of his captors and guards. He did this so that he would be able to talk to them about their lives, to understand them properly, to meet them as fellow human beings.

Thirdly, an acquaintance who had been courting his wife when they both met Mandela briefly, later encountered him and, by this time, the wife was holding their infant child. Mandela turned and picked up the child and said, 'So is this the little totsi (thug) then?' He asked to be photographed holding the little boy, and turned to his mother and said: 'In a few years time, he's going to look at that photo and say, 'Mum! How could you hand me over to that ugly old man!''

It was, I think, this special, but not unique, ability to see not only the good in others but also the faint absurdity of human beings whoever they were - not least those in leadership - that enabled him, in the end, to be such a good and inspiring leader. He had said, of course, that 'a good leader should be

prepared to die for his people' and had announced, in his trial speech in 1963, his willingness to do so. Later, reflecting on death and its inevitability, he said: 'When a man has done what he considers his duty to his people and his country he can rest in peace. I believe that I have made that effort, and that is why I will sleep for the eternity'.

Among leaders it has to be said that we rarely do find that sort of commitment, and that sort of humanity. Which is probably why his legacy is fragile, despite his massive achievements of reconciliation (in partnership with others including Desmond Tutu who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission). Wherever leaders, of whatever political creed, let themselves be corrupted by power, and indulge in favouritism and recriminations, we find that the hopes of the poorest are dashed, and civil unrest erupts.

Maybe Nelson Mandela was not like Jesus Christ, but, echoing Christ's teaching about forgiveness, he demonstrated some characteristics which were indeed Christlike. Which is, of course, what all who profess the name of Christ are called to show. Such attitudes are perfectly able to transform relationships today, as they were yesterday, and will be tomorrow.

Nelson Mandela's death has taken me back to a book which has sat unopened on my bookshelf for many years: Bishop Trevor Huddleston's account of his ministry in Sophiatown, Johannesburg, between 1943 and 1955: 'Naught for Your Comfort'. In the first chapter of that groundbreaking book, which only got published because Huddleston had posted the manuscript 24 hours before the police raided his home, he reflects on the evil of apartheid and of reducing anyone (and in his context especially a black person) 'to a thing rather than a person.'

He writes: 'I pray God I may never forget nor weary in fighting against it, for it seems to me that as a Christian, and above all as a priest, my manward task is always and everywhere the same: to recognise in my brother more than my brother: more even than the personality and the manhood that are his: my task is to recognise Christ himself. And I cannot, therefore stand aside when it is He whom men treat contemptuously in the streets of the city.

"I was in prison, and ye visited me not..."

Naught for Your Comfort - Trevor Huddleston: Collins 1956

Martin Stephenson

Warden of Readers