

Desmond Tutu's Earliest Notions and Visions of Church, Humanity, and Society

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Raised from Broken Remnants

In 2006, a class of kids, ten-year-olds and younger, from Fellview Primary, a school in the town of Wigton in the UK, decided to write a letter to Desmond Tutu. In that letter, which was individually signed by the children and reproduced in full by Lavinia Crawford-Browne in *Tutu as I Know Him*, they refer to Tutu as one of the “famous Christian people,” noting in particular, his work “for greater understanding and peace in Ireland.” The kids, who thought Tutu “might like to know about our opinions,” then proceed to make “a list of our ideas about you. We think you: had a happy childhood, are helpful and generous, think about things before you do them, are caring and understanding; are honest, polite and share your thoughts, talk about problems, are a good listener; have the help of God . . . ask but do not force.”¹ This warm letter contains an amazingly incisive appraisal of Tutu’s character, coming as it does out of the proverbial “mouths of babes.” It must have brought a smile to the face of Desmond Tutu when he read it. For their insight and discernment, I would give these children nine out of ten. However, depending on how happiness is defined, it is, at the very least, debatable whether Desmond Tutu had a “happy childhood.”

Desmond Tutu was born on 7 October 1931 in a part of Krugersdorp where blacks used to live – a “black location,” called Makoeteng. Desmond Tutu’s biographer, John Allen, notes that Makoeteng refers now to the broken remnants of the mud-brick houses

¹ Lavinia Crawford-Browne, ed., *Tutu as I Know Him: On a Personal Note* (South Africa: Random, Houghton, 2006), 223.

remaining after the location was razed. Makoeteng no longer exists today. "In the decade after the formal policy of Apartheid was adopted in 1948 . . . its people were uprooted at gunpoint and moved six kilometers (four miles) away (from town). In its place the town council established a white suburb and named it Nesperhof after a local family."²

Desmond Tutu's father, Zachariah Zelilo Tutu (known as ZZ), was a teacher and a Methodist primary school principal. His mother, Aletta Dorothea Mavoerstek Matlhare, was "a domestic servant, only educated to primary school level."³ ZZ Tutu was one of "the South African natives" who, according to Sol Plaatjie, woke up "on Friday morning, 20 June 1913, . . . [and] found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth."⁴

Forced removal, the illnesses associated with poverty, and white supremacist dehumanization were Desmond Tutu's lot from birth. Like his elder brother, Sipho, his younger brother, Thamsanqa, and many black children at this time, Desmond could easily have died in infancy. Of the five children born to his parents, only three survived, namely, Sylvia, Gloria, and Desmond. Having lost two out of five children to infant mortality, for the Tutu family the consequences of discriminatory policies hit home in a very real way. Tutu's right hand atrophied owing to polio, which he contracted as youngster. As a result, he developed the habit of rubbing that hand so as to improve blood flow. He also learned to write with his left hand.

One winter morning, in Krugersdorp, the brazier fire – the best and only way black families living in residences without electricity could warm themselves during winter – caught Desmond Tutu's flannel pajamas, resulting in serious burns. To date he has permanent scars on one of his thighs. When Desmond started school in 1945, he was "scrawny, (and) spindly legged . . . wearing shorts but no shoes."⁵ Steven Gish describes Tutu's childhood as follows:

Like most black South African homes at the time, the Tutus' house had no electricity or indoor plumbing. Families would use a communal tap in their neighbourhood when they needed water. The Tutus and their neighbours were poor, but this did not trouble Desmond as a child. He and his playmates entertained themselves with what they could find or make. . . . According to

² John Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace: The Authorised Biography of Desmond Tutu* (London: Free Press, 2006), 9, 10.

³ Shirley Du Boulay, *Tutu: The Voice of the Voiceless* (London: Hodder and Houghton, 1988), 22.

⁴ Allen, *Rabble-Rouser*, 18.

⁵ Du Boulay, *Tutu*, 27.

his childhood friends, Desmond had a mild and non-confrontational temperament as a youngster. He was small in stature and had a good sense of humour.⁶

Elsewhere, Gish noted that Tutu “was once accosted by a police officer who suspected he was homeless or a beggar.”⁷ To make extra money, Desmond sold fruit and caddied for wealthy white golfers at the Killarney golf course in Johannesburg.

People and Institutions That Influenced Desmond

Most studies and biographies of Desmond Tutu are unanimous in recognizing his parents as his foundational and perhaps his most important teachers. Both his parents were baptized Christians who taught him “to say prayers before I retire.”⁸

Aletta Dorothea Mavoertsek Matlhare, Desmond’s mother, a Motswana, “was a short, dumpy woman with a big heart, and Tutu contends it was from her that he inherited his strong sense of compassion and humanitarianism.”⁹ Once when there was no money to send Desmond to school, his mother asked for advance payment in order to give the money to him so he could pay his train fare to school.

She gave me the money for the train. After I left, she worked through the whole day, and at the end she had nothing. She had no money for the bus that usually carried her home at the end of the day. She would have to walk all the way. She would have no money to buy food for the evening meal or to pay her fare to work the following day.¹⁰

The bond between Tutu and his mother was strong. From her, Desmond also learned to always take the side of the underdog: “She was stumpy, and she had a big nose like mine. And I hope I resemble her in another respect: [she] . . . was very, very gentle and compassionate and caring, always taking the side of whoever was having the worst of an argument.”¹¹

⁶ Steven D. Gish, *Desmond Tutu: A Biography* (London: Greenwood Press, 2004), 3.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Desmond Tutu, *In God's Hands: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 126.

⁹ Alister Sparks and Mpho Tutu, *Tutu: The Authorised Portrait* (Cape Town: Pan Macmillan, 2011), 20.

¹⁰ Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness and Why This Makes All the Difference* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 28.

¹¹ Allen, *Rabble-rouser*, 22.

The Lovedale College trained ZZ Tutu, Desmond's father, who was a beneficiary of missionary education. He was descended from the amaMfengu, a Xhosa clan that, at least according one historical tradition, "originated as clusters of refugees of varied heritage who came together and became defined as a group only from the 1820 on."¹² ZZ was "the strict parent in the family and cared deeply about his children's health and education. On Saturdays he would take Desmond for rides on his bicycle, and sometimes the two would go fishing. . . . [H]e enjoyed spending time with his father."¹³ Though there was much respect and deep love between father and son, Desmond's regard for his father was a little more nuanced than his straightforward adoration for his mother.

The amaMfengu from whom ZZ descended were not that highly regarded among fellow Xhosa clans. According to Allen, the amaMfengu "were underdogs, discriminated against and exploited" until they were, ironically, "rescued" from their Xhosa overlords by the British, who called them Fingoes. Owing to their "adoption" by the British, the amaMfengu also became the most educated among the Xhosas.

Perhaps this contradiction of being a lowly clan and yet a clan that boasted some of the most educated created complexes of inferiority and superiority in the lives of the educated and uneducated Mfengus alike. ZZ Tutu appears to have been a victim of these complexes for, according to Desmond, ZZ was "quite arrogant. . . . He thought that the Xhosas were God's gift to the world. . . . He didn't think the Batswana were very smart. . . . I don't know why he married my mother, because he thought that anyone who was not Xhosa was a lesser breed in many ways."¹⁴

ZZ Tutu was a typical provider father. His family was poor but he ensured that they did not starve. To augment his teacher's income, which was not much in those days, he "fished in a nearby stream to supplement the family's food and earned extra money by taking photographs at local weddings, often being paid with eggs, chickens, or piglets."¹⁵ ZZ Tutu also "took work as a delivery boy at a bottle store in Boksburg to earn extra money."¹⁶ Such parental devotion must have left an indelible mark on the young Desmond.

¹² Ibid., 11.

¹³ Gish, *Desmond*, 3.

¹⁴ Allen, *Rabble-rouser*, 11

¹⁵ Ibid., 23

¹⁶ Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 39

But the arrogance of ZZ that Desmond lamented was not his worst trait. Much more troubling to Desmond was his father's pugnacious side owing to his occasional binge drinking.

There were so many nights when I, as a young boy, had to watch helplessly as my father verbally and physically abused my mother. I can still recall the smell of alcohol, see the fear in my mother's eyes, and feel the hopeless despair that comes when we see people we love hurting each other in incomprehensible ways. I would not wish that experience on anyone, especially not a child. If I dwell in those memories, I can feel myself wanting to hurt my father back in the same ways he hurt my mother, and in ways of which I was incapable as a small boy.¹⁷

And yet when Desmond received the news of the death of his father, he was devastated, more so because a day before his father's passing, Tutu had refused when his father asked for a moment with him: He had said, "I'm tired and I have a headache coming on. Please can we talk tomorrow?"¹⁸

I was doubly devastated by the loss. In spite of all the hurts and the complications of our relationship, I loved my father. I delighted in his stories, and admired his wisdom. He was clever, and loving, and witty. There was so much about him that I would miss. I had failed my father. I could have sat and talked to him. Whatever he had to say, would it have taken more than a few minutes? More than an hour? . . . I wanted to kick myself!¹⁹

Clearly therefore, both his parents meant a great deal to Tutu, each in their own way.

There were other people and other influences in Tutu's life. These included the first black Anglican priest Desmond met, Father Zacharia Sekgaphane, Father Raymond Raynes of the Community of the Resurrection. He also speaks fondly of his maternal grandmother.

The *eZenzeleni*, or school for the blind, the school in which Matse worked, had a profound impact on Desmond in other ways. He became acquainted with the incredible work of that school for black blind women and the vocation of its founders, Reverend Arthur Blaxall and his wife, Florence. Desmond was particularly touched by the devotion of Mrs Blaxall, nicknamed Nomsa by the locals. In a letter to her many years later, Desmond wrote:

¹⁷ Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (London: Harper Collins, 2014), 16.

¹⁸ Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

Knowing you has made it virtually impossible, I think, for people to be embittered because of how they were treated in this country, because they would recall how you had treated them as if they were what they knew themselves to be, human beings, made in the image of God. And so your contribution to this country is immeasurable. And thank you very much, Nomsa.²⁰

It seems that Desmond's earliest sightings of the tiniest possibilities of a non-racial future were at *eZenzeleni*, where his mother worked. Later Desmond was to meet and admire many priests belonging to the Community of the Resurrection. By far the most influential on him was Father Trevor Huddleston. The circumstances under which they met were both grave and unforgettable.

I was sixteen or seventeen years old then, and I had been in this place for months. It was the men's ward at Rietfontein tuberculosis hospital. I was in the bathroom coughing up blood. It was not just coming in isolated drops. I was hemorrhaging. The blood was coming like a flow. I knew what this signaled. The doctors knew it, too. "Your young friend is not going to make it," they had told Trevor Huddleston. They didn't have to tell me. I had seen it before. I knew. In the short shuddering breaths between coughs I spoke to God: "Well, God if I'm going to die it's OK. And if not, that's OK too."²¹

This then was the life-and-death context in which Desmond met the monks of the Community of the Resurrection in close encounters, especially the man whom Tutu was later to credit as the one who "single-handedly made Apartheid a world issue."²² That man was none other than Trevor Huddleston. Trevor helped Tutu to realize that "there were white people who care for us, who really care for us . . . I do believe that that relationship with Trevor certainly saved me."²³ Elsewhere Tutu noted that in the 20 months he spent in hospital, "almost every week, Trevor Huddleston visited me in hospital. It is very difficult to explain what it meant for a black township urchin to have an important white man do this."²⁴

Trevor was an astonishing man. He was like the pied piper. When he walked on the streets of Sophiatown, his white cassock would not stay spotless for long, the children ran to grasp his hand or hold onto his cassock. "fadder, fadder" (father, father) they would call, wanting a word or touch, or smile. It seemed the world walked through his office at 74 Mercer Street. One moment he would have a number of small boys, almost street urchins, like us playing marbles

²⁰ Allen, *Rabble-rouser*, 26.

²¹ Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 159–60.

²² Sparks and Tutu, *Tutu*, 27.

²³ Desmond Tutu, *In God's Hands: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book 2015* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 134, 135.

²⁴ Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 51.

on the floor of his office. The next moment he would be meeting with mining magnate Harry Oppenheimer of De Beers.²⁵

If Desmond thought Trevor was astonishing, Trevor also thought highly of Tutu. In his letter recommending Tutu for the priesthood, Huddleston described Desmond, amongst others, as an intelligent, conscientious, and sincere man.

Early Experiences of Church and Community

Desmond's childhood was imbued with religious teaching and symbolism, unfortunately, not always of the most helpful kind. Many of the homes Tutu frequented as a child had "very lurid pictures of hell," so that when Tutu was seven or so he had "a kind of vision in which the Devil was trying to pull me . . . I had a clear understanding that someone remonstrated with the Devil . . . and God said – 'This is my child.'"²⁶

If the Tutu family was "very peripatetic – here one time, then moved to some other locality,"²⁷ they were equally peripatetic when it came to church affiliation. Desmond, whose father worked at a Methodist school was baptized a Methodist. His paternal grandfather, Solomon Tutu, was an African Independent Church minister. Similarly, Desmond had an uncle who, apart from being a township shoe repairer, was also a priest in an African Independent Church. His uncle often went about preaching in the township: "When he went around evangelizing I carried his banner. I would walk in front of him, carrying the banner, and . . . he would sing: Simon Petrus, *ndincedise* – 'Simon Peter, help me.'"²⁸ They did this often enough for fellow children to start calling Desmond, "Simon Petrus" child. The ecclesiastical world of the young Tutu was thus inhabited by both Methodism and African Independentism.

One of Desmond Tutu's memories of "the church" – before he was ten, living in Tshing in present-day Northwest Province – must have been on occasion of the funeral of his deceased younger brother, Thamsangqa, who died as an infant. Apart from the emotional toll that comes with the loss of a sibling, the pain of watching one's parents in pain, even before one understands death and its devastation fully, the funeral was

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 126.

²⁷ Allen, *Rabble-rouser*, 126.

²⁸ Ibid., 34

memorable for young Desmond because ZZ conducted it himself, as the local minister was absent. Although ZZ was probably an elder with burial rights, it was not by any means usual for a father to officiate in the burial of his own child. On the plus side, the church of Tutu's childhood was always present, below the surface; it convened as and when needed, with or without a priest in attendance.

The fact that Desmond grew up in the Methodist Church Yard where he also attended school gave the young Tutu another picture of the church. This was a church intimately involved in education, such that the words church and school must have sounded interchangeable. As a child, Desmond's classroom in Tshing was also the same place that church took place.²⁹

Desmond Tutu would never forget the role of the church in the education of many Africans: "Many, many, many of us owe the fact of us having been educated at all to the indomitable men and women who blazed the trail to provide education for the Africans when the secular authorities were less than enthusiastic."³⁰ Later and more formally, the Tutu family moved on, rather nonchalantly, to Anglicanism:

When my older sister became friendly with the daughter of an African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) pastor, I became a member of that church: it's a Black church that came from the United States; episcopal – with bishops. Very beautiful singing. Then my sister went to an Anglican (boarding) high school where the Community of the Resurrection (CR) ... and she said she wanted to be confirmed as an Anglican. My parents said yes that was ok, and we all duly followed her into the Anglican Church.³¹

Soon after the family joined the Anglican Church, the young Desmond and his younger sister, Gloria, often played church Anglican style, Desmond pretending to be the priest and Gloria the congregation, to the amusement of their father. Was this the first time Desmond pictured himself as an Anglican priest?

One of the most powerful pictures of "the church" in young Tutu's life came when once during a visit to his mother's workplace at *eZenzeleni*, Tutu saw "a white man (who) ... doffed his hat to my mother.... it was almost mind-boggling, that a white man could doff his hat to my mother, a black woman, really a nonentity in

²⁹ Ibid., 21.

³⁰ Ibid., 43.

³¹ Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 126.

South African terms.”³² The incident left a mark in the memory of young Tutu. It was a picture of a church in which whites treated blacks with respect and not only vice versa. This was also an excellent advert, to young Desmond, of the Community of the Resurrection, “an order whose influence was to become crucial in his life.”³³

In his thesis on Desmond Tutu, Gideon Khabela suggests that while at Rietfontein for TB treatment, Tutu “underwent a moment of spiritual awakening,”³⁴ which Tutu later described as “God grabbing him by the scruff of the neck.”³⁵ Care must be taken not to over-privilege the Tutu hospitalization moment in relation to other “milestones” as illustrated in the preceding. What is clear is that the time spent in hospital was a time young Desmond experienced the support of the Community of Resurrection monks who visited him often, gave him books and a rosary, and prayed with him. Here Desmond experienced a caring church.

The church of Tutu’s childhood was as colourful, exuberant, and noisy as the African Independent church of his grandfather and his uncle. Born and baptized into Methodism of the African variety, Tutu started out in a church of loud and fiery preaching. Later in the AME Tutu, found a church of black pride, with black bishops as well as the beautiful singing of the Negro and African spirituals. By the time the Tutu family joined the Anglican Church, Tutu had tasted a variety of church types and models.

The Road to Priesthood

The priesthood was neither Desmond Tutu’s first love nor his second. Medicine was his first love. In this, he was inspired by two considerations: a desire to tackle TB, the disease that nearly took his own life, and the example of Dr Alfred B. Xuma, “the first western-trained African physician to practice medicine in Johannesburg.”³⁶ Desmond was admitted to medical school at WITS but had to de-register owing to lack of tuition fees. So he ended up training as a teacher at Bantu Normal College in Pretoria. There

³² *Rabble-rouser*, 26.

³³ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁴ Gideon Mfanyana Khabela, “A Seamless Garment: Tutu’s Understanding of the Role of the Church in South Africa,” PhD Thesis, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1991.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁶ Gish, *Desmond Tutu*, 12.

he rubbed shoulders with the likes of Casey Motsisi (one of the most creative South African newspaper columnists in the 20th century), Stanley Motjuwadi (famed Drum writer through his “De-Kaffirnated Stan” column), and Mmutlanyane Stanley Mogoba Mogoba (Robben Island prisoner and Methodist Church bishop), among others. For a while, Tutu was a teacher, apparently a great teacher who, according to one of his students, Joe Seremane, taught his students to be “masters of our aspirations and ambitions.”³⁷

Upon realizing the full implications of Nationalist Party policy’s targeting of “the bantu teacher” for integration “as an active agent” so that “he must learn not to feel above his community,”³⁸ he felt that, as a teacher, he “couldn’t be part of this. . . . I said to myself, sorry, I’m not going to be a collaborator in this nefarious scheme. So I said, ‘What can I do?’”³⁹

Desmond had no Damaskan epiphany. He saw no burning bush before which he had to take his sandals off. It was the cumulative experiences of humiliation and dispossession and an appreciation of the inferior life that Verwoerd had prepared for him as a teacher that pushed him toward the church. Social and political reality sent him into the priesthood. And so ended Tutu’s short stint as a teacher and thus began his road to the priesthood.

Unlike Gabriel Setiloane, theologian and Methodist church minister, who confessed to an irrational attachment to Christianity – an attachment akin to the kind caused by bewitchment – Tutu utters no such confession. I venture to suggest that there may have been a point of concurrence between Tutu and Setiloane – at the feet of the cross, at the point of black suffering. That was the experience that sent both to the church. Setiloane wrote:

And yet for us it is when He is on the cross
 This Jesus of Nazareth, with holed hands
 And open side, like a beast at a sacrifice
 When He is stripped naked like us
 Brownd and sweating water and blood in the heat of the sun
 Yet silent,
 That we cannot resist Him.⁴⁰

³⁷ Du Boulay, *Tutu: Voice of Voiceless*, 41.

³⁸ Allen, *Rabble-rouser*, 60.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁰ Setiloane, *I Am an Africa, (a poem)*, 1975.

With characteristic honesty, Tutu has on occasion sought to downplay the religious motif for his decision to join the priesthood. “It wasn’t for highfalutin ideals that I became a priest. It was almost by default . . . I couldn’t go to medical school. . . . [T]he easiest option was going to theological college.”⁴¹

Thus began Tutu’s career in the priesthood, to the chagrin of his father, who apparently had it on good authority that his son would have soon become a school principal, had he stayed a little longer in teaching. Tutu’s final theology college report, dated July 4 1960, was not entirely flattering, but full of praise for him:

He continues to be a diligent and intelligent reader and a most receptive pupil. As senior student he is efficient and dependable, if sometimes a little lacking in tact and in soundness of judgment. His health causes me some anxiety; he has had no serious illness, but very easily catches cold and is of poor physique (with quite considerable skill and energy on the football field in spite of this). . . . but his outstanding intellectual gifts, combined with well-trying moral integrity, mark him out as a man likely to be of almost unique value to the church of the future in South Africa.⁴²

Where Desmond Came From

There is significance to the context, realities, occurrences and peculiarities of Tutu’s (early) life – a context within which his concept of church was shaped and formed. Living as we do during a time when “self-made” men and women who “make it against all odds” abound, it is crucial that we recognize the role of place, nurture, nature, chance, and context in character formation. Like Nelson Mandela,⁴³ albeit to a lesser degree, Desmond Tutu is in danger of being over-individualized as a one-man hero.

It is therefore important to understand the “the type of soil” out of which the Desmond Tutu type could germinate and grow. The tone of his character was carved out among a people who woke up landless on the 20th of June, 1913. He was born of a people who irked out an existence in the “*makoete*” precariously perched outside the gates of the burgeoning mining and farming towns of the then Western Transvaal, only to be pushed further and further away from the centre.

⁴¹ Allen, *Rabble-rouser*, 47.

⁴² Ibid., 73

⁴³ Tinyiko Maluleke, “The Search for a More Human Face for Nelson Mandela: An Urgent Task,” *HTS Theological Studies* 71:3 (2015), at: <http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article.view/2941>.

Desmond Tutu's spirituality was forged in the intersection of the practices of the African Independent Churches, the faith of his mother, the pragmatism of his father, the sounds of African healers living and working in his community, as well as the lives and teachings of the monks of the Community of the Resurrection. The smells, colours, noises, silences, songs, and languages that filled the atmosphere of his childhood in Makoeteng, Tshing, Munsieville, Western Township, and Sophiatown all contributed to Desmond's notions of church, humanity, and society.

Around the time of Tutu's birth, "Klerksdorp's black residents were referred to in the news columns of the local newspapers mainly as a source of trouble."⁴⁴ If the written histories of Klerksdorp were anything to go by, the black people who lived in Klerksdorp when the Afrikaner trekkers arrived, around the time of Tutu's birth, committed "robberies," and occasionally "threatened to attack" the whites.⁴⁵ In Klerksdorp court records of the time, blacks, who were only referred to by their first names, show up as, "tax dodgers," undocumented vagrants, white "employment deserters," fowl thieves and shop burglars. This then is the people out of which Desmond Tutu came – a dispossessed and criminalized people living on the fringes of an expanding white world.

Ironically, there is near Klerksdorp a site of the Afrikaner memorial of 149 adults and 968 children who died in a British concentration camp. The total number of Afrikaners who died in concentration camps created by the British in the Anglo-Boer wars of 1878, 1899, and 1902 is estimated at 6000 women and 22,000 children. Research has since revealed that, though unnoticed and unremarked by historians for a long time, 14,000 black people also died in the Anglo-Boer concentration camps. Desmond comes from those people who died needlessly, unremarkably, and anonymously in the war between the English and the Afrikaners.

In short, in Desmond Tutu we have someone who: was frail, delicate, and susceptible to the diseases of poverty that feasted on his people, was "disabled" for life by polio, was born of a criminalized people, was a member of a despised underdog clan, and was a descendant of those who died anonymously and unremarkably. These formative realities not only shaped his concept of church but also marked his priestly vocation deeply.

The ecclesiology of Desmond Tutu can only be fully appreciated once we have dared to probe not only how he individually survived his own death but how his community

⁴⁴ Allen, *Rabble-rouser*, 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

coped with the multifaceted forms of death engulfing it. His name, Mpilo, is both a prayer for life and a protest against death. His ecclesiology will be understood once we probe the life, coping, survival, and sense-making skills of the society in which he grew. Similarly, we may learn as much about Desmond's formative years from those peers, contemporaries, and friends of his who committed their experiences to writing, like Don Matera, Eskia Mphahlele, Stan Motjwadi, Casey Motsitsi, and many others. We can also feel in his style and demeanor the rhythm of the music of his times, played by the likes of Spokes Mashiane, Hugh Masekela, Dorothy Masuku, Miriam Makeba, and others.

All these experiences shaped Desmond's vision and notions of church and society. What emerges is a vision of the church as a life-enhancing community – a church opposed to the forces of death in society, a church of and for the underdog. Desmond's notion of God was also deeply marked by this.

A key pillar in Tutu's theology is the question of the image of God, an understanding that suggests that the "true nature of humanity" is based on "the infinite value of each person as a child of God."⁴⁶ For him, therefore, human worth and human freedom does not depend on the incidentals of race, religion, and social status.

As the "first black dean of a South African cathedral (St Mary's Cathedral)" in Johannesburg, among other things, Tutu would "refuse to apply for permission to live in the deans official residence" located in a white area, announced in a church magazine that he was "not committed to cheap reconciliation," and proposed "services of penitence for the sins of racism and injustice" on Fridays.⁴⁷

Gideon Khabela⁴⁸ suggests that Desmond Tutu – similarly to Martin Luther King Junior in his notion of "zeitgeist," that is "a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promised land of racial justice"⁴⁹ – understands the church essentially as "the manifestation of the divine intention for the world" and a "sacrament that made visible God's grace by denouncing sin and announcing God's love to the poor and the oppressed."⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Khabela, "Seamless Garment," 125.

⁴⁷ Allen, *Rouble-rouser*, 147.

⁴⁸ Khabela, "Seamless Garment," 10, 11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

A key source and guide for Tutu's ecclesiology was the Bible. Nothing underscores this better than Tutu's oft-quoted suggestion that if whites took the land and gave the Bible, then we who received the Bible have a better deal. For him, the Bible is a "record of God's liberative activity."⁵¹ To this end, the exodus story seems to have loomed large in Tutu's theology.

Desmond and the "Voertsek" Streak

Voertsek is an Afrikaans "vloekwoord," an insulting word reserved for use in relation to dogs – effectively used to tell dogs to get lost. Predictably, the word is used in relation to people who are either thought to be dogs or thought to be behaving like dogs. How Desmond's mother, Matse, ended up with a name like Mavoertsek is perplexing. According to John Allen, this name might reflect the high infant mortality rate at the time she was born, since she succeeded a sibling who died in infancy. He surmises that she might have been named in a manner that diminishes the importance of the child as a means of discouraging and warding off the bad spirits of death. It is probable but does not exhaust the matter.

A more likely reason is that this was in fact the (nick)name of Matse's father, old man Matlhare, or her own mother, Desmond's grandmother – Kuku, as Desmond lovingly called her. She who "would pretend to slap us away from her saying, "get off me, you little dogs! Yet this person who cursed us so roundly had brought us the incomparable treat of bread and jam, the breakfast her employer had given her. She hadn't eaten her morning meal. She had saved it for us."⁵² Is it possible that Matse got her name Mavoertsek for being the daughter of the old lady who would use that term often, but clearly in jest as per the quotation above?

From Desmond's descriptions of her, Matse does not come across as someone who would be hurling "voertseks" at anyone. But there obviously was a "voertsek" streak in Desmond Tutu. This streak surfaced from time to time. It also surfaced much later during his meeting with P. W. Botha, when Tutu intended to plead for clemency on behalf of the Sharpeville six, at Tuynhuis on the 16th of March, 1988. No sooner had Botha started wagging his finger at Tutu, berating him for all manner of things, than Tutu interrupted him saying: "Look here, I'm not a small boy. Don't think you're talking to a

⁵¹ Ibid., 104.

⁵² Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 40.

small boy. I'm not here as if you are my principal." Then the meeting descended into a shouting match between Tutu and Botha. The word "voertsek" must have been at the tip of the tongue of each man.

Has the Tutu "voerstek" streak any relevance to Tutu's notion of church? I think so. Clearly, Desmond Tutu believed in a church that could speak truth to power so much so that it was able to say "voertsek" to the forces of death and dehumanization. This is a church that will not tolerate injustice and corruption. This is the church that will march against the government of Botha and speak out against corruption in the Mandela and Mbeki governments. The "voertsek" element of Desmond also flared on occasions when he saw his father disrespected and called a boy. Also, as remarked earlier, he would fume inside on the few occasions when his drunk father would abuse his mother.

And yet, it is also possible that it was from his own father that he inherited his "voerstek steak." Old man Tutu was apparently a strict disciplinarian. His students remembered him as a stern teacher who would not hesitate to administer corporal punishment to the whole school.

The Emerging Picture of the Church

From his childhood and youth Tutu experienced a church that, in the greater scheme of things, took the side of the underdog. It was not a perfect church, just as the underdogs were themselves not perfect. There is a strong ascetic element in his spirituality, probably owing to the influence of the lives of the monks of the Community of the Resurrection.

Thus it was a picture of the church deeply marked by personal encounter – at home when his father officiated in the burial of his brother, during his sojourn at hospital, in the street evangelism of his African Independent church uncle, and at the Zenzeleni school for the blind where he saw a white man doff a hat to his mother. Desmond's exit report at theological college noted his partiality to certain elements and practices of Catholicism – from whence his sacramentalist understanding of the church probably emanated.

Tutu's understanding of the church was deeply marked by the black condition as it manifested in Makoeteng, Tshing, Munsieville, and Sophiatown. Desmond's faith and its language were carved out of the impurity, intellectualism, and precariousness of Sophia Town. As a boy who grew up on the outskirts of Klerksdorp, Ventersdorp, Krugersdorp, and Johannesburg, Desmond was a keen observer of black-white

relations – carefully noting the best and the worst in these relations. He dreamt of a church that would be a place where black and white would treat one another equally and with dignity.

From his stint as Africa secretary for the Theological Education Fund (TEF), and later as president of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), Desmond cultivated a strong sense of appreciation not only of the various political ideologies on the continent, but of being an African living in Africa and not just in South Africa. Desmond Tutu has a keen and realistic appreciation of both Pan-Africanism (through the influence of Sobukwe whom he respected) and Black Consciousness (through the influence of Steve Biko, at whose funeral Desmond preached one of his most powerful sermons).

At the height of the debate between Black Theology and African Theology, Tutu voted for Black Theology even though he actually argued that the two were soul mates rather than antagonists. And yet, Tutu was also “intensely non-racialist.”⁵³

Tutu's stint as general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, his leadership role in the radical relationship between church and state, as well as his immersion in the reality of black resistance and the nationwide push for ungovernability were to radicalize him further. Outside the confines of his own denomination, he became leader of the churches of South Africa. This gave a much broader slant to Tutu's ecclesiology. An ecclesiology that extended not only to the poor and the disenfranchised, but also those considered to be “outside of the church” such as homosexuals, women, and people of other faiths.

Tutu's ecclesiology makes space not only for African humanism and African spirituality but for the wisdom and spiritualities of other religions – which is notable amongst others, from his friendship with and deep respect for the Dalai Lama.

How and what is the church to Tutu? It resides at “makoeteng” among the throw-away people.

The church of God has to be the salt and light of the world. We are the hope of the hopeless, through the power of God. We must transfigure a situation of hate and suspicion, of brokenness and separation, of fear and bitterness. We have no option. We are servants of the God who reigns and cares. He wants us to be the alternative society.⁵⁴

⁵³ Khabela, “Seamless Garment,” 70.

⁵⁴ Desmond Tutu, *Crying in the Wilderness: The Struggle for Justice in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

The preceding is a classical statement of Tutu's understanding of the church, its calling and its role. But he was also aware of the growing despondency all around him and how difficult it was for the church to do and be all that the church was called to be.

In South Africa, ... the church of God must sustain the hope of a people who have been tempted to grow despondent, because the powers of this world seem rampant. It does not appear that significant political change can happen without much bloodshed and violence, and it seems that God does not care, or is impotent. The Church of God must say that despite all appearances to the contrary, this is God's world. He cares and cares enormously, his is ultimately a moral universe that we inhabit, and that right and wrong matter, and that the resurrection of Jesus Christ proclaims that right will prevail.⁵⁵

So for Tutu the idea of a neutral God watching over the affairs of the world is as inimical as the idea of a neutral church that exists precariously between the rich and the poor, the oppressors and the oppressed.

We must say that that Jesus Christ has inaugurated the kingdom of God, which is the kingdom of justice, peace and love, or fullness of life, that God is on the side of the oppressed, the marginalized and the exploited. He is the God of poor, of the hungry, of the naked, with whom the Church identifies and has solidarity. The church in South Africa must be the prophetic Church, which cries out "thus saith the Lord," speaking up against injustice, violence, against oppression and exploitation, against all that dehumanizes God's children and makes them less than what God intended them to be.⁵⁶

Having taken its place among the oppressed and the crucified, this church would be able to look the Apartheid government in the eye and say, with a bit of the "voertsek streak" to which we referred earlier:

You are not God. You may be powerful, perhaps even very powerful, but you are not God. You are mere mortals. Beware when you take on the church of God. Others have tried before, and they came a cropper. They bit the dust and did so ignominiously – the Roman Emperor Nero, Hitler, Amin and many others. You will end up being part of the flotsam and jetsam of history, hardly a footnote on the pages of history.⁵⁷

To Be Continued

There are at least four characteristics of Desmond Tutu which, I believe, would be crucial to discuss further, as part and parcel of seeking to understand his

⁵⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Desmond Tutu, *God Is Not a Christian: Speaking Truth in Times of Crisis* (London: Rider, 2013), 155.

ecclesiology. The first is his sense of humour – a trait that draws both from township wit and African story-telling traditions. It is astounding that one whose ministry coincided with so dark a period in the history of South Africa and the world would also be renowned for his knack for a good story, a gripping punch-line, and his famous loud laughter. In Tutu's vision of the church, there is space for humour and laughter, even laughter with God and at our own selves.

The second is Desmond Tutu's penchant for lively en-action and dance – probably influenced by the Sophiatown music culture, the Methodist, African Independent, and AME streaks in him. In this regard, reading Tutu's sermons is a poor substitute to seeing him perform a sermon. Often he breaks easily into a dance or skit to demonstrate whatever he is talking about. It is a complete performance in a church that makes space for and allows exuberance and free expression. In this church, words are important, but words alone are not sufficient.

The third is Tutu's humanist theology, rooted both in the notion of the *imago Dei* and the African adage, *umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu*. Michael Battle, who did a thesis and a book on this aspect of Tutu's work, recalls what his supervisor Hauerwas once said of Tutu: "Tutu is not a theologian, he is better." It seems to me that the *imago Dei* and *Ubuntu* were, for Tutu, the critical bridge between theology and social activism, between the world of the church and the world of human rights, between religion and politics. And yet Tutu never destroyed that bridge. He preferred to dance across it and sometimes to stand right in the middle of it. It is Tutu's refusal to destroy that bridge that has gotten him into trouble with both church and state during and after Apartheid.

The last is Tutu's theology of reconciliation and forgiveness – something he seems to have chosen as his legacy. We owe it to him to try and understand this theology. This is the theology behind the notion of a rainbow people of God and the rainbow nation. It is a powerful idea that speaks in part to a present reality but crucially holds out an ideal toward which a previously disparate and warring people can work. The rainbow nation concept is certainly one of the most significant gifts from Tutu to his compatriots.

Earlier I referred to Tutu's altercation with P. W. Botha in the latter's office in 1988 – an altercation that ended with Tutu storming out of Botha's office in rage. There was a sequel to that event, a sequel that defines the measure of a man of God that Desmond Tutu is.

Almost a decade later, I again stood in his house. It was my second pastoral call on him and the first time I had met him since I stormed out of his office.... He was no longer state

president. Nelson Mandela was our head of state. I was the chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and I had come to him with a message from the former prisoner who was now our inspirational leader. Come and testify before the commission. “Mandela will sit beside you while you give your testimony,” I assured him. The octogenarian Botha declined. The third and final pastoral call transpired a few weeks later. Botha’s wife, Eliza, had died. I came as a loving husband to stand beside another loving husband in grief.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Tutu and Tutu, *Book of Forgiving*, 144.