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THE BISHOP OF COVENTRY

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Friday 6th December 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters

I know that you will want to join me in expressing our sadness to the family of Nelson Mandela and to the people of South Africa as they mourn the passing of – in the words of President Zuma – ‘South Africa’s greatest son’. We also join them in celebrating the life of one of the most remarkable people of modern history.

I have just been reading one of the finest speeches of the twentieth century. It was given by Nelson Mandela in 1964 when he was already under arrest. It concludes with these words:

‘I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.’

When Mandela arrived at Robben Island one of the prison guards said to him, ‘This is where you will die’. It looked as if he would, indeed, pay the highest price for his ideals. Thankfully, he lived to see the dismantling of apartheid and was able to complete (in the words of his book) ‘the long walk to freedom’.

When that day came – and it had to come eventually because apartheid was so deeply contrary to the will of God’s justice and the law of God’s love that it could not last – Mandela was ready to keep to his ideals, ideals that had now been shaped by suffering and strengthened by prayer in the long years of imprisonment.

As Desmond Tutu has said, ‘he taught a divided nation to come together’. Many of us will remember the predictions of the country descending into chaos and spiralling into a bloodbath when white rule ended. Mandela would have none of it.

He remained committed to his principles of 'a free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities' *and* he had learnt that true freedom for all can only be built upon forgiveness by all.

Mandela knew the only way to build a new and better society was for there to be both truth (so that nothing was denied of the past) *and* reconciliation (so that an alternative to revenge and reprisal could be found). He became an embodiment of the Coventry story and the Coventry prayer of Jesus Christ, 'Father, forgive'.

As Desmond Tutu prayed today, 'Nelson Mandela showed us what we could become; help us to become that people, that nation'. That is a prayer that all the nations of the world can make their own.

+ Christopher