

Tribute to Nelson Mandela at Coventry Cathedral Service on 15 December 2013 by the Reverend Dr Sarah Hills

I thank you for asking me to speak today about Nelson Mandela. I have been in contact with South African friends and colleagues over the last few days, and I am going to reflect with you now on some of their, and my own, thoughts about Madiba, and the legacy he leaves for SA, and us all.

Today, of course, is the day of Nelson Mandela's funeral. It is also the beginning of Reconciliation Day in SA – an annual public holiday, which, since the end of apartheid, celebrates reconciliation – Mandela's legacy.

This time last year I was in Worcester, near Cape Town, in a big Reconciliation Day event – it was a bit warmer than today – about 40 degrees..hot! But like today in Coventry, there was singing, prayer and celebration...of forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope.

I am going to share with you some of Mandela's legacy in SA...the stories of everyday people like us, inspired to live better lives in the service of others, by the man we celebrate today...Nelson Mandela, Tata Madiba.

I was born in South Africa, and left with my parents when I was a young child. In Northern Ireland, where we moved to, I grew up rather confused. About whether my hair was so curly because I was African...about why, when we went back to visit my grandparents, only white people could go to the beach, or sit on public benches; about why my old nanny lived in a house with no running water. And then, as a medical student I spent time working in a rural hospital in SA. While there, I found myself joining in protest marches with thousands of other South Africans, demonstrating against apartheid – and taking bullets out of people who had been shot while demonstrating. Singing freedom songs with the others – 'Viva Mandela!', 'Amandla!' Mandela, then incarcerated on Robben Island, was the inspiration, the name on everyone's lips. And his life, his walk, was for us all – regardless of our race, our colour, our gender.

Madiba loved people – all of us. I am going to tell you about some of the people in SA whom he loved, about the journeys he inspired, on his own long walk to freedom.

I was in SA last year because I was working among a wonderful group of people engaged in a reconciliation process – the Worcester Hope and Reconciliation Process – people of all races - black, white, coloured, who come together in hope to try to make SA a better place – a more equal, just, loving place for children to have a better future.

One of the people I got to know is Olga. Olga lives in a black township called Zwelethemba, which means 'a place of hope'. At first sight it is not a very hopeful place. She lives in a shack, the roof leaks, the rubbish blows around outside, she only has electricity for one hour a day, and sometimes she has no money to buy bread. Olga was badly injured in a racially motivated bomb attack, which took place on Christmas Eve 1996. The 17 year old bomber has been asking for forgiveness from the victims from prison for years. Olga agreed to meet the young white man in Pretoria Prison, and in a very moving visit, gave him her forgiveness.

'He could have been my sister's boy' she said. 'He, like me, is also a child of God.' She told me that her inspiration to forgive was Tata Madiba.

Another person I journeyed with in Worcester, had, like Mandela, been imprisoned during the apartheid regime. But since then, Juan has devoted his life to trying to make SA a more reconciled place – he works with gangs, with young people, to try to stop the terrible violence against those who are different. His inspiration, too, is Madiba.

Mandela inspired us to try to live better, to love more, to respect each others differences. Let me tell you about a remarkable journey that would not have happened without his inspiration.

This was the peace train - a journey of encounter and hope.

We took 47 of the bomb victims from Worcester, survivors of the bomb attack in 1996 in which Olga was injured, to meet the young perpetrator of the bomb in prison in Pretoria, so that they could all see him face to face, so that they could tell him what had happened to them in the bomb, so that he could ask for their forgiveness. We travelled all day and night by train, which came to be known as ‘the peace train’. Everyone was given a food parcel for the 28 hour journey (made by the ladies of the local Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Churches- a powerful symbol in itself, as the Dutch Reformed Church had been one of the proponents of apartheid), and as we set off, the travellers were blessed with interfaith prayers.

As we slid past the barren landscape baking in the sun, the turmoil of people's emotions was palpable. Anger, fear, and grief were contained by the rocking of the train and the growing sense of community as we held groups to prepare the survivors for the encounter with 'the bomber'. 'Seeing' the person who left your family without the breadwinner; who took away your child; who left you scarred, seemed to be very important. Some wanted to tell him how angry they were, some wanted to be able to forgive, all wanted to share their story of that 'terrible Christmas'.

And when we arrived? A hall in the prison filled with survivors, prison staff, the press, a choir...and then the bomber enters. Thin, upright, tearful as he listened to their stories, and answered questions. Gasps as he said, 'We wanted to kill as many people as we could..we were extremely disappointed that so few people were dead' ...but he quickly added that he was shaken to the core when he realised that children had died. He said, 'I am really sorry for what I have done. I don't deserve anyone's forgiveness.' Some of the survivors gave him their forgiveness, others said they are still very angry and cannot yet forgive him. A queue of survivors embraced him before he was taken out. An encounter which felt truthful, hugely painful, embodied, hopeful, sacred.

Waking up in my cabin on the train the next morning on the journey back, I watched a herd of springbok jumping in the veld. The sense of relief on the train matched their light footed ness .

Two of the survivors described how they felt. 'I slept so well because my heart is now clear' and 'I have got to this old age and for the first time because of this train I feel like somebody'

The peace train could not have happened without Mandela's example. His example of courage, of the wish to forgive and be forgiven, of meeting, talking with, really seeing the other person, no matter how different.

But the journey is not over. Economic inequalities, poor education, HIV/AIDs are still realities in SA, and Mandela cared deeply about those. He spoke up, both during his term as President, and also afterwards, for those people living in poverty, for those children orphaned by HIV/AIDs, for those young people with little education and no prospects of work. The journey towards reconciliation also needs to address these material differences. Mandela said 'The long walk to freedom will only be complete when we have in effect made poverty eradicable'. Juan adds 'We have a long walk ahead of us if we want to do justice to his legacy'.

It was a huge privilege to travel with the bomb survivors. The journey of reconciliation is risky, it takes courage, it takes faith, but in a world which is so broken, the peace train provided a beacon of hope.

Mandela's walk, his life, provides light for that beacon of hope – for us all. But he was human too. Juan in Worcester said, 'As a South African I believe we were fortunate to be once led by a person who refused the cult of personality we put on him. He represents the best of humans we can be, flaws and all. When represented as a saint Mandela would say, "I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying"'.

I will finish with one more story from SA, which embodies Mandela's influence, and the inspiring legacy he gives us...

On one of my visits back to South Africa, my family and I went up Table Mountain in Cape Town. Table Mountain is spectacular - and a special place. You can see for miles - and you can see Robben Island just off the coast, where Nelson Mandela and other prisoners of apartheid were kept. It was very hot that day on the top of Table Mountain, and there was a very elderly black man dressed in a woollen suit and hat. He was having difficulty going up a set of stone steps, so my mother, who is also elderly, gave him her hand and helped him up. At the top, he doffed his hat to her, and said, "Madam, I have waited all my life for this. To be helped and my hand held, by you, a white person- as an equal - is extraordinary. Do you know I am 94? And now I can die happy!" And they both laughed, and they both had tears in their eyes.

During the apartheid regime, this could not have happened. These two people would not have been allowed to be in the same place - as equals. So what happened that day was extraordinary. High on top of a mountain... a place which has witnessed great transformation, a bringing of light out of the darkness of apartheid. A seeing, an experiencing, of a different image of what humanity could be...this is Madiba's legacy for us...a different image of what humanity can be...a deep care for each other, despite our differences; a deep love of equality, truth and justice; and the hope of reconciliation for us all. And so, Trevor Huddleston's prayer for Africa:

God bless Africa
Guard her children
Guide her leaders
And grant us peace
For Jesus Christ's sake, Amen.

Madiba, we thank you. May you rest in peace, and rise in glory. Amen.