

Remembering Nelson Mandela: A Homily¹

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Readings: : Isaiah 32: 15-18; Gospel: Mt 5: 1-12a

How does a man born in an obscure village of Qunu, who grew up herding goats, become one of the most admired and celebrated world leader, who, as we saw on Tuesday, drew hundreds of world leaders to his memorial service in Soweto?

How does one who spent twenty seven years of brutal imprisonment, emerge from that jail with one of the most endearing and genuine smiles the world has seen?

How can a man whose hands were chained and enslaved by the cruelty of apartheid, emerge from jail with arms outstretched in a forgiving embrace of the enemy?

How can one who suffered the most debasing and dehumanizing cruelties and injustices, forgive his jailers?

How can one deprived of his freedom for so many years turn out to be one of the most free persons?

These and similar questions have been on our minds since Thursday when we learnt of the passing of Nelson Mandela in South Africa. They are the same questions that flood our minds and hearts as we remember and celebrate Nelson Mandela at this mass.

These questions are born not merely out of curiosity; they register our amazement, in fact, gratitude for the extraordinary Nelson Mandela. A life like Nelson Mandela's could not possible without God. That is why we join the psalmist to say: *"What wonders the Lord has done. Indeed we are glad (Ps 126: 3).*

But that we are glad means that we find ourselves, just like the crowds we have seen on TV from Soweto and other parts of South Africa - singing and dancing in the rain – at the strange intersection of mourning and thanksgiving; of sadness and joy; lament and praise; of death (and loss at his passing) and resurrection (that we already saw and felt in his life).

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We find ourselves within a strange ‘Goodnews’ – the strange goodnews of the beatitudes: *Happy are they who mourn...*; *Happy are the meek...*; *Happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice ...*; *Happy are the merciful...*; *Happy are the peacemakers...* ; *Happy are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness...*

I must confess that even after many years of studying and teaching theology; and after over 25 years as a priest, I still find these words of Jesus difficult to comprehend let alone embrace.

And this is what makes the life of Nelson Mandela a remarkable gift to the world and to the Church. For only with such lives as Mandela’s are we able to see and affirm the truth of the Beatitudes, namely that the joy, comfort, and freedom that Jesus speaks about for the peacemakers, and those who quest for justice and righteousness is indeed real.

But also with the life of Mandela, we catch a glimpse of what it takes to be peacemakers – and therefore to live within the Beatitudes. There is a lot we can learn from the life of Nelson Mandela, but I want to highlight three simple, but crucial lessons:

In the movie: Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom, which I had an opportunity to see last evening (a very powerful movie), there is a scene. Nelson Mandela and his fellow inmates have just arrived on Robben Island to serve life sentences. They are given prison uniforms: shorts for the Africans, long trousers for coloreds and Indians. Later Mandela tells his friends:

“We need to fight for our rights. Our first demand will be for long trousers for all of us. They need to learn to respect us.”

One of his friends responds: “They will not listen. It will take a long time before they learn to respect us.”

And Mandela responds: “We have time. We start with small things...”

1. “We have time”

Peace requires time because peace is not a finished product. It is a journey – a long: “Long Walk” to Freedom (the title of Mandela’s autobiography). One of the striking things about Mandela’s Long Walk to Freedom is that it is the story of his personal transformation. As one follows Mandela through this long walk, what one sees is that the “freedom” (in the Long Walk to Freedom) is not

simply his release from jail, or the freedom of South Africa from apartheid. But on a deeper and personal level it is about Mandela's inner freedom. Through the struggle, particularly the 27 years of imprisonment on Robin Island, Mandela became a "free" man; inwardly free: he became free of hatred and vengeance. Mandela's freedom of spirit was not only evident from his genuine smile, his laughter, but his embrace of the enemy and his gift of forgiveness for the apartheid regime that oppressed him and his people. *"Resentment," he would late note "is like drinking poison and expecting it would kill your enemies."* It took time for Mandela to come into this sense of freedom. It is this sense of "freedom" that he already lived into, into which he invited South Africa and extended even to his enemies through forgiveness. Coming to this inner and deeper sense of freedom takes time. We have time, Mandela told his friends.

2. "They need to learn to respect us".

On Robin Island, Mandela decided to learn Afrikans, so that he could understand the enemy better. But as he did and began to talk to his jailers in their language, he inquired about their children and families, they sensed that he was interested in them as human beings. They in turn got to respect him more and treat him more humanely. But even more importantly, for Mandela the more he talked to the jailers, the more clearly he was able to see the fear, hatred and hopelessness within which the apartheid system had forced them to live. He started not only to feel pity for them, but to see that his own freedom is caught up in the freedom of everyone else, not just his black countrymen and women, but also the white oppressors. This is what fuelled his energy for a new society in which all people, black, white, colored lived in peace. *"To be free," he would say, "is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."* Only when we learn to understand and respect others does our freedom "liberate" others, and is our commitment for peace and justice in the world renewed.

3. "We start with small things":

The pursuit of peace can be overwhelming. In the midst of so much violence in the world; so much poverty and abuse of human rights; so much injustice, where does one even begin? Mandela reminds us: "we start with small things"

(like asking for long trousers); Eventually the demand was granted. They got their long trousers. But there were other demands by Mandela were never met, like when his first born son, Thembi died, and he was refused permission to go to attend his funeral. But Mandela never gave up. He never allowed himself to be discouraged. That is why he was, years later he told people: *“Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.”*

Happy are the peacemakers, they shall be called God’s children; Happy are those who are persecuted for the same of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.

This is the happiness for which Mandela lived and is a witness of. It is the happiness into which we are called. We are therefore grateful to God for the gift of Mandela’s life, his struggle and his legacy. For like him, we too are invited to into the freedom and happiness of peacemaking. There is no doubt it is a long journey, which involves sacrifice and loss. But as Mandela reminds us, “we have time.” Moreover, with people like Mandela who have gone before us, we know that we are not alone, but that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, of which Mandela is a member. Let’s therefore not be afraid to embark on the journey, and to begin where we are, with small things.

Thank you Madiba for the gift of your life and your struggle and for all you have given to us and all you have taught us and given to us. Rest in Peace.