

## “Jesus, Nelson and Thabo...”

29/7/18

**I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.**

**Amen.**

I have refrained in recent years from preaching and talking about the life and times of Nelson Mandela when so much was being said by so many.

However, you may recall that recently, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July to be exact, the world stopped and celebrated the centenary of Nelson Mandela’s life. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of July of this past month, should he still have been alive, Nelson Mandela, or Madiba as he is affectionately known, would have been 100 years old.

Perhaps it was serendipitous that I also, at about the same time, read a book penned by our Arch Bishop, Thabo Makgoba. I share a close link with Thabo in that he ordained me as Priest back in December 2013. Thabo released his book entitled Faith and Courage in 2017. What caught my eye about this book is that it also details, apart from Thabo’s personal journey, his interactions and ministry with Madiba in the closing chapter of his life.

I found it fascinating to read of Thabo’s personal journey in terms of how he grew up, what he struggled with and how he eventually accepted his calling to the ministry. I became interested how many threads in his life could be compared to Madiba. Now, I am not for one moment comparing Thabo to Madiba or saying that Thabo is the next Madiba. What I am saying is that both these giants of men show similar courage in the face of fortitude and grace similar values and ideals.

Let me explain myself a bit more clearly...

Many people are aware of how Nelson grew up in a rural village in the Eastern Cape early in the previous century. Nelson learnt respect, dignity and tradition and the values of his people’s culture here. He also grew up relatively poor from a materialistic point of view... but rich in terms of family, support and community.

Thabo had a similar background, in that he grew up in a Black township on the reef where his family was also relatively poor. He used to have to walk for miles to school every day, often past gang ridden areas. When his family was part of the forced removals, he tried to carry on going to his previous school, but found transport and protesting action an issue. Thabo also came from a very supportive family that believed in supporting one another and the value of community. He speaks very warmly of his mother and father, as well as of his siblings.

Another interesting similarity is that both these leaders displayed independence from an early age. They were not afraid to stand tall for their beliefs. For example, when Nelson's family organised a pre-arranged marriage, he skipped the Eastern Cape and went to Johannesburg where he started to work. Similarly, Thabo found himself wanting to continue his studies but ran out of funds. This did not put him off. Thabo applied for a job as a researcher whilst simultaneously putting his name forward for the Diocese of Johannesburg's selection conference. Both these men made a plan that helped to shape their futures. They took both the initiative and responsibility to take control of their destiny and lives. This would be instrumental in time to come.

I was also interested to note that both Madiba and Thabo come across as very human in this book. Thabo tells a story how when once ministering in King Williams town in a difficult parish, he called a difficult gentleman back to the vestry, disrobed and prepared to enter a boxing match with him to settle their differences. Luckily, it never came to that and they settled their differences amicably. Similarly, Thabo tells the story how once when he was praying at the ailing Madiba's bedside, Madiba woke up and shouted to his wife, Graca, to fetch his "fighting sticks" so that he "sort" this man out! (Madiba later apologised to Thabo for the outburst)

Both Madiba and Thabo show exceptionally high EQ. Madiba became a figure much loved around the world for his generosity of spirit and love for fellow human beings. Thabo tells the story how Madiba once allowed an Afrikaans family, who had lost their daughter in tragic circumstances, to visit him for relief and guidance during their time of loss. Thabo describes how beautifully Madiba handled this difficult visit. Madiba always put others first. Similarly, Thabo relates in detail, how during the early days of his ministry, his home was

always open to all and sundry. His wife was always supportive of those in need. Great leaders have high EQ. They would be lost without it. There are powerful leaders in the world who lack EQ. They will not be remembered for the love they shared. They will be remembered for the power they ruled with.

Truly great leaders are always spiritual. Thabo spent enough time during the last few years of Madiba's life to understand who he was and what he believed in. Thabo describes Madiba's spirituality as private and complex. Thabo suggests that the world did not always see Madiba as a person of faith. However, after spending 27 years in prison, his writings began to reflect the importance of the role of churches and their ministers as educators, but always refrained from speaking about his personal beliefs.

"The relationship between a person and his or her God is a deeply intimate and private matter. It is not a matter I usually regard as open for public discussion... There is a sense in which, for me, it is a matter beyond articulation. It is an experience I do not fully comprehend." (P122: 2017)

Thabo is also a deeply spiritual man but unlike Madiba, he is open about his faith and spiritual journey. Thabo's election to Arch Bishop is definitive of the fact that the Anglican Church of Southern Africa recognised his humble and profound spirituality.

Lastly, both Madiba and Thabo are prophets in their own way. Whilst Madiba did not preach the Gospel directly, he certainly lived a life that many Christians would struggle to emulate. In Chapter 12 (p175:2017) Thabo asks the question, "How should Madiba be remembered?" Thabo suggests that Madiba's vision was for a free, democratic, non-racial world in which we are all afforded equal opportunities and are freed from poverty, marginalisation and disempowerment. Thabo continues by saying that Madiba was an extraordinary man, an icon of peace and reconciliation who appealed to a sense of common humanity among all people. Madiba lived the idea of the Kingdom of God on earth now.

You see, it took Madiba's life and example to free South Africa from the tyranny of Apartheid and the certainty of a bloody revolution. It took a man of great integrity, wisdom and humility to bring the South African government to the negotiating table that would eventually pave the way for the first free and

fair democratic election. In a sense, Madiba was one of the great players who started the ball rolling... he is gone now and the ball has been passed on to the likes of great current leaders like Thabo and others who keep the ball in play.

Thabo, as well as all of those in positions of leadership, are called to keep working for a united, free and equal country where resources are shared and the wrongs of the past are corrected. This is no easy task, as can be seen from the recent protests around land and service deliveries.

You may be asking the question as to why I entitled this sermon, "Jesus, Nelson and Thabo?"

I realised as I read the story about Nelson and Thabo's life that everyone who makes a real difference in the world, does so at great cost. Look at Jesus. He ultimately died for what He believed in. Jesus was independent, spiritual and a prophet. So was Madiba. So is Thabo in his own right. You cannot make a real difference in this world without great sacrifice and cost to yourself and often your loved ones around you.

I am reminded of the quote by Madiba that perhaps details the extent to which Madiba was prepared to sacrifice his own life...

***"During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. 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."***

***(Rivonia Trial 1964)***

Jesus made a difference.

He is why we are gathered here tonight.

Mandela made a difference.

He is why we have the freedom to worship here tonight.

Thabo makes a difference.

He is why I am standing here in this pulpit sharing this message tonight.

What difference can you make?

I would like to close off this evening with part of the prayers that Thabo used at the National Memorial Service for Nelson Mandela on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2013.

***Lord, we pray for South Africa in particular on this Memorial Day. Help us to draw on the best lessons of our past,***

***And to build on the firm foundation that, by your grace, Madiba laid for us.***

***Give us courage to hold fast to his values, to follow the example of his praxis and to share them with the world.***

Amen.

(I acknowledge the ideas and content from Thabo Makgoba's book, Faith and Courage, 2017)