

Blackburn Cathedral, 8th December 2013

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NELSON MANDELA

July 18, 1918-December 5, 2013

A remarkable Sermon for Advent II preached by

Canon Chris Chivers

Canon Chancellor, Blackburn Cathedral

and Peace Ambassador to the

Middle East Peace Initiative,

at the 11.00am Eucharist in

St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem

which appeared

in *Music & More*, February 2008,

and which we reproduce here to commemorate

the life of

NELSON MANDELA



The flowering of peace

1. We are sitting in a civic hall in Guguletu, a Cape Town township community, in November 1996:



A 70-year-old woman has been called to testify before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (chaired by **Archbishop Tutu**) concerning the activities of a policeman in her township. It transpires that he had come one night with some others and in front of the woman had shot her son at point-blank range.



Two years later the same officer had returned to arrest her husband, whom she supposed subsequently to have been executed. Some time later the policeman came yet again. This time he took her to a place where he showed her her husband, still alive. But as her spirits lifted, the policeman doused the husband with gasoline, set him on fire and killed him.



As the woman concludes her testimony, **Archbishop Desmond**, trying desperately to keep his own emotions under control, addresses her: **"What would you like the outcome to be of this hearing?"**

After a long pause, the woman answers, "I would like three things. First, I want to be taken to the place where my husband was burned so I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial.

"Second, my son and my husband were my only family. Therefore, I want this police officer to become my son, to come twice a month to my home and spend a day with me so I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining inside me.

"Finally, I want this officer to know that I offer him forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive me. Please would someone lead me across the hall so that I can embrace him and let him know that he is truly forgiven."

As people lead the woman across the room, the police officer, completely overwhelmed, faints. Officials help him, whilst the woman's friends and neighbours, most of them victims of the same sort of violence, begin to sing softly, *'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...'*



2. We are now in Pollsmoor Prison, where **Nelson Mandela** and many of his fellow political prisoners have been moved after years of incarceration on Robben Island. We are in a small, white-washed room containing just a table, a fluorescent light and a few metal chairs.



Canon Chivers & Fr Wiggett

On these, a group of political prisoners, including **Mandela**, sit awaiting their monthly communion service.

This is taken by **Fr Harry Wiggett**, a local priest, who they've known for a long time because he also took services for them on Robben Island.

As ever, the service is conducted under the watchful eye of Warden Christo Brandt, the archetypal moustache-wearing Afrikaner and apartheid functionary, who sits next to the door. Fr Harry reaches the Giving of the Peace and is just about to share it with the six or so prisoners assembled when

Nelson Mandela interrupts the service. Calling over to the Warder he says 'Brandt, man, you're a Christian aren't you?' 'Ja, meneer' (Yes, sir), comes the reply. "Well then, you must join us for our service. Come over here."



3. We are now in the gardens of this cathedral church of St. George, Jerusalem, in June, earlier this year, as a group of interfaith pilgrims – Christian, Jewish and Muslim – gather to interview a local priest.

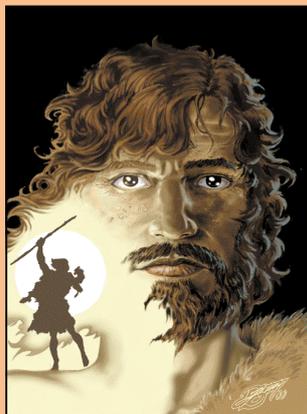


They're working for the BBC, making a series of programmes to mark the anniversary of the 6 days in 1967 which forever changed the physical and emotional landscape of the Middle East. They've already interviewed several locals from different communities – all of whom have exposed for them both the diversity and the divisions which are the glory and the challenge of this great city.

All the pilgrims in fact agree that whilst everyone has expressed considerable and heart-rending pain in respect to their own story, no-one so far seems to have been able to put themselves in someone else's shoes and to see pain from a different perspective.

But as this priest, who describes himself as an Arab Israeli begins to tell his story the whole pilgrimage shifts gear. For whilst there's much pain in what he says – he's, in the past, spent time here in Jerusalem separated from his wife because she had different papers from his – all the pilgrims, Christian, Jewish and Muslim realize that they are now in the presence of someone who's so emptied himself of his own pain that he's made a god-shaped space in his heart within which both to listen to the pain of others and to begin to transform it.

Today, as we continue our journey through Advent, the striking figure of John the Baptist is set before us, calling everyone to a Gospel of repentance. The Greek word used for repentance is **metanoia** – one of the most important words in the New Testament – which literally means **'to make a turning'**.



This is perhaps why the authors of our lectionary turn our attention in the passages we heard from Isaiah and from Paul's Letter to the Romans, to the product of all real repentance, which is peace, both for individuals and, crucially of course, for communities; peace, a goal constantly to be sought, not least on this the twentieth anniversary of the commencement of the first intifada in 1987.

How memorably Isaiah expresses what that turning will look like, as the new shoot – the flower of peace – springs

from the roots of the community, and causes all sorts of improbable things to happen: a wolf to lie with a lamb, a leopard with a kid goat, a calf and a lion, a cow and a bear, an infant and an adder: all to be at peace with one another.

It's so improbable isn't it? I mean, whoever heard of any of that stuff happening? Surely it's just all pious fantasy? But no, St Paul says, all of you, in your great diversity – Jew and Gentile – are called into harmony, into the divine network of peace That, he says, is actually your highest human calling.



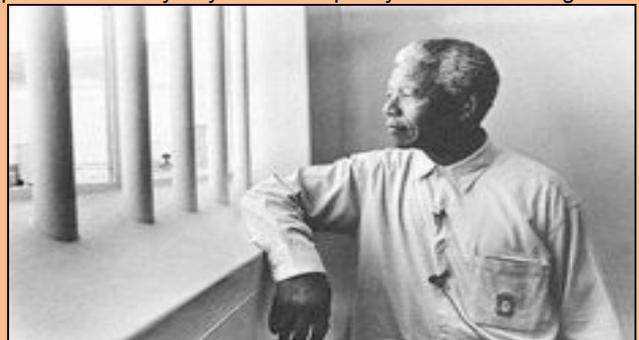
But are these simply more stirring words to add to the prophet's strident demand that we get on with peace-making or the visionary's poetic fantasy picture of peace? Camp David, Madrid, Oslo, now Annapolis. We've heard the call time and again. We know the promises and the rhetoric. But we never seem to get that close to the reality. Isn't genuine peace, in the end, just so elusive as to be unattainable, certainly something to which the likes of you and me cannot contribute?

It's understandable, of course, at a human level to succumb to an underlying feeling of helplessness and the despair that can go with it. But as people of faith of course we must never do so.

Which is why I shared with you by way of encouragement and – who knows – inspiration perhaps as well, a remarkable moment that I witnessed in South Africa's TRC when a single woman, who'd every reason to be bitter, both experienced and became the channel for divine grace as she turned to the way of forgiveness and love.



But perhaps that embrace of an enemy who's caused such pain seems way beyond our capacity as human beings.



Which is why I related that wonderful story of a first step taken by **Nelson Mandela** as he saw a gap, assumed the priest's role that was needed to fill it, and ensured that a supposed enemy is the very person with whom you begin your ministry of turning and transformation, especially so, when the priest himself hadn't made this connection or seen this possibility.

This is why I also told you a story that many of you know already about a priest who stands before you week by week, your own Hosam Naoum, who's an example to all of us in and beyond this cathedral and city, indeed, right across the world, of the truth that peace is always more than just a possibility.

John the Baptist calls us to that *metanoia*, that turning of heart and spirit which is the precondition for the flowering of peace.

But Jesus reminds us, as we turn, that peace is always cross-shaped.

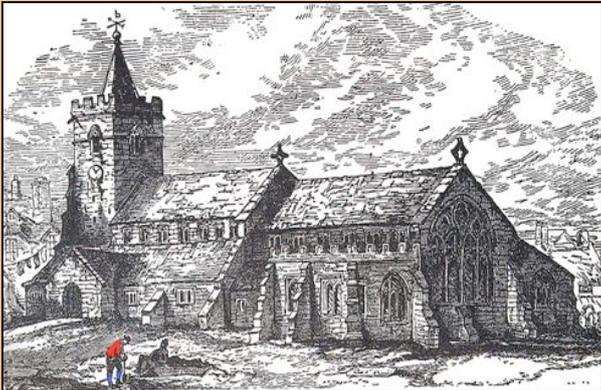


It involves *kenosis*, that other great New Testament word which literally means 'self-emptying'. A self-emptying which so completely frees ourselves of our own pain that we are able to take on someone else's – even, indeed, perhaps most often, the pain of a person from whom we feel most distant or estranged – so that all may turn to the path of peace.

This is the loving peace that comes down at Christmas, when we get there at the end of Advent, the love that's cross-shaped and costly because it challenges and changes everything. But it's the loving peace that's actually within each one of us, if only we will allow God to unlock its presence and potential.

4. We're now standing in the graveyard of a northern English parish church in 1820. Many of the grave-stones have collapsed.

All have to be moved to ensure people's safety. As one grave stone is lifted and put onto a cart to be taken elsewhere, the old grave digger who's doing the work spots some rags in the earth.



As he lifts them something golden briefly glints in the sunlight before it tumbles out of his hands to the ground. He stoops down to pick it up and realises that he's holding a beautiful, miniature golden image of the Madonna and Child.

A century before **Blackburn Parish Church** became the cathedral where I now minister that old grave digger had discovered its greatest physical treasure. You received a postcard of it on your way in to this cathedral. It's called a **Pax**, the Latin word for **peace**.

On it, as that grave digger discovered, is a picture of the flower of Jesse, the Christ-child in his mother's arms, because instead of shaking hands at the sign of the peace in the Eucharist, as we tend to do nowadays, worshippers used to kiss the **Pax** and pass it on. There are very few originals in the world. And at the time of the Reformation in England when Christians, catholic and protestant, were tearing each other apart over the issue of such images – whether they

could be used in church or not – someone must have hid it in the ground for safe-keeping.

That person understood the great truth that peace may be elusive but it can never be killed.

Centuries later, what was a secret long-hidden, as the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, was born again in a grave, a place where peace always has – as the Christian story reminds us – its moments of resurrection.

I'd like, with Canon Naoum's permission, to invite my Muslim colleague and friend, **Anjum Anwar**, who is with me here this morning, and who's the only Muslim working on the staff of a cathedral anywhere in the world – a woman who's helped Christians so much in the north of England to rediscover what it means to be peace-makers – I'd like to ask her to present this cathedral with a reproduction of the **Pax**.



Not, I emphasize, because we're in any lingering colonial fashion somehow bringing peace to you – peace can never be brought that way, a lesson some nations, not least my own, have struggled to learn – no, not to bring peace but because we give thanks daily for the peace that's here already, the **Pax** you've uncovered in this community, the **Pax** that you're struggling to bring to birth here amid the empty tomb of shattered lives and hopes, the **Pax**, the peace, which only comes through the resurrection life you are already living in the world. **Thanks be to God.**

On Sunday December 8th 2013 Reuters reported:

South Africans remember Mandela with praise and prayers

With hymns and eulogies, South Africans of all colours and creeds remembered **Nelson Mandela** in a day of prayers on Sunday, holding him up as a symbol of freedom, forgiveness and hope for the nation and the world.

At churches, mosques, synagogues and community halls from the Limpopo River to the Cape, millions offered praise and reflected on a man celebrated as "Father of the Nation" and as a global beacon of integrity, rectitude and reconciliation.



A girl prays during a service for Nelson Mandela, in the Regina Mundi Church in Soweto December 8, 2013.

Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first black president who steered his nation out of apartheid and into multi-racial democracy, died on Thursday at the age of 95 after months of illness.

Since then, the country has been gripped by an outpouring of emotion unrivalled since Mandela's release from 27 years of prison in 1990, and his subsequent election victory. Crowds have piled flowers, candles, balloons and messages outside his Johannesburg home.

At the cavernous Regina Mundi church in Soweto, South Africa's largest Catholic Church, hundreds of mourners, young and old, gathered to pray for **Nelson Mandela** and the nation's future.