

Let South Africa Show the World How to Forgive

— Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu

If you asked even the most sober students of South African affairs what they thought was going to happen to South Africa a few years ago, almost universally they predicted that the most ghastly catastrophe would befall us; that as sure as anything, we would be devastated by a comprehensive bloodbath.

It did not happen. Instead, the world watched with amazement, indeed awe, at the long lines of South Africans of all races, snaking their way to their polling booths on April 27, 1994. And they thrilled as they witnessed Nelson Mandela being inaugurated as the first democratically elected president of South Africa on May 10, 1994. Nearly everyone described what they were witnessing -- a virtually bloodless, reasonably peaceful transition from injustice and oppression to freedom and democracy -- as a miracle.

When the disaster did not overtake us, there were those who said, "Wait until a black-led government takes over. Then these blacks who have suffered so grievously in the past will engage in the most fearful orgy of revenge and retribution against the whites."

Well, that prediction too was not fulfilled. Instead the world saw something quite unprecedented. They saw the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, when perpetrators of some of the most gruesome atrocities were given amnesty in exchange for a full disclosure of the facts of the offence. Instead of revenge and retribution, this new nation chose to tread the difficult path of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

We South Africans have not done too badly. It is sometimes said of newly democratic countries that their first elections too frequently end up being their last. Well, we have already had a fairly uneventful second general election and have witnessed the transition from a charismatic, first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela, to the more pragmatic, pipe-smoking Thabo Mbeki. The turmoil and instability that many feared would accompany these crucial events have not occurred. Why? Well, first, you have prayed for us and, if miracles had to happen anywhere, South Africa was a prime site for a miracle.

And we have been richly blessed to have had at such a critical time in our history a Nelson Mandela. He was imprisoned for 27 years; most expected that when he emerged, he would be riddled with a lust for retribution. But the world has been amazed; instead of spewing calls for revenge, he urged his own people to work for reconciliation -- and invited his former jailer to attend his presidential inauguration as a VIP guest.

Wonderfully, Mr. Mandela has not been the only person committed to forgiveness and reconciliation. Less well-known people (in my theology no one is "ordinary," for each one of us is created in the image of God) are the real heroes and heroines of our struggle.

There was a Mrs. Savage who was injured in a hand-grenade attack by one of the liberation movements. She was so badly injured that her children bathed her, clothed her, and fed her. She could not go through a security checkpoint at the airport because she still had shrapnel in her and all sorts of alarms would have been set off. She told us [at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission] that she would like to meet the perpetrator -- she, a white woman, and he almost certainly, a black perpetrator, in the spirit of forgiveness. She would like to forgive him and then extraordinarily she added, "And I hope he forgives me." Now that is almost mind-boggling.

The daughter of one of four African National Congress activists, whom the police ambushed and then killed gruesomely -- their mutilated bodies were found in their burnt-out car -- came to tell her story. She said the police were still harassing her mother and her children, even after their father had died. When she finished, I asked her whether she would be able to forgive those who had done this. We were meeting in a city hall packed to the rafters. You could hear the proverbial pin drop, as

she replied, "We would like to forgive. We just want to know whom to forgive."

Our country did not go the way of Nuremberg, to bring the perpetrators of such crimes to trial. After the Second World War, the Allies had defeated the Germans and could apply so-called "victor's justice." In our case, neither the apartheid government nor the liberation movements had defeated their adversary. Our country could not afford the exorbitant cost of trials, even if we could have held them and had the evidence to satisfy a court of law.

Our country rejected the other extreme of a blanket amnesty, as happened in General Augusto Pinochet's Chile. It victimized the victims a second time around and was really trying to let bygones be bygones, when in fact they never become bygones. Certainly, Gen. Pinochet now knows you can't act with reckless impunity and hope to get away with it forever. This is a moral universe.

Our country chose a middle way of individual amnesty for truth. Some would say, what about justice? And we say retributive justice is not the only kind of justice. There is also restorative justice, because we believe in Ubuntu -- the essence of being human, that idea that we are all caught up in a delicate network of interdependence. We say, "A person is a person through other persons." I need you in order to be me and you need me in order to be you.

The greatest good is communal corporate harmony, and resentment, anger, revenge are corrosive of this harmony. To nurse grudges and resentment is bad for your blood pressure. Psychologists have now found that to forgive is good for our personal, physical, psychic health, as well as our health as a community, as a society. We discovered that people experienced healing through telling their stories. The process opened wounds that were festering. We cleansed them, poured ointment on them, and knew they would heal. A young man who had been blinded by police action in his township came to tell us the story of that event. When he finished he was asked how he felt now, and he said, "You have given me back my eyes."

Retribution leads to a cycle of reprisal, leading to counter-reprisal in an inexorable movement, as in Rwanda, Northern Ireland, and in the former Yugoslavia. The only thing that can break that cycle, making possible a new beginning, is forgiveness. Without forgiveness there is no future.

We have been appalled at the depths of depravity revealed by the testimonies before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Yes, we human beings have a remarkable capacity for evil -- we have refined ways of being mean and nasty to one another. There have been genocides, holocausts, slavery, racism, wars, oppression and injustice.

But that, mercifully, is not the whole story about us. We were exhilarated as we heard people who had suffered grievously, who by rights should have been baying for the blood of their tormentors, utter words of forgiveness, reveal an extraordinary willingness to work for reconciliation, demonstrating magnanimity and nobility of spirit.

Yes, wonderfully, exhilaratingly, we have this extraordinary capacity for good. Fundamentally, we are good; we are made for love, for compassion, for caring, for sharing, for peace and reconciliation, for transcendence, for the beautiful, for the true and the good.

Who could have imagined that South Africa would be an example of anything but the most awful ghastliness? And now we see God's sense of humour, for God has chosen this unlikely lot and set us up as some kind of paradigm, as some kind of model that just might provide the world with a viable way of dealing with post-conflict, post-repression periods. We have not been particularly virtuous, anything but. We are not particularly smart -- precisely. God wants to point at us as this unlikely bunch and say to the trouble spots of the world, "Look at them. They had a nightmare called apartheid. It has ended. Your nightmare, too, will end. They used to have what people regarded as an intractable problem. They are now resolving it. Nowhere in the world can people ever again claim that their problems are intractable." There is hope for all of us.