

In God's Hands-Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Study Guide

As Archbishop Justin Welby says in his foreword to Archbishop Desmond Tutu's book, it is written by one of the most extraordinary Christian leaders alive today, or to have lived in the last century or more.

Archbishop Tutu distils the wisdom forged through a childhood of poverty and apartheid, an adulthood lived in the glare of the world's media, and the long and agonising struggle for truth and reconciliation in South Africa, into the childlike simplicity which Jesus tells us characterises the Kingdom of God.

Archbishop Tutu has produced a meditation on the infinite love of God and the infinite value of the human individual. Not only are we in God's hands, he says, our names are engraved on his palms.

Throughout an often turbulent life, Archbishop Tutu has fought for justice and against oppression and prejudice. As we learn in this book, what has driven him forward is an unshakeable belief that human beings are created in the image of God and are infinitely valuable. Each one of us is a God-carrier, a tabernacle, a sanctuary of the Divine Trinity. God loves us not because we are loveable but because he first loved us. And this turns our values upside down. In this sense the Gospel is the most radical thing imaginable.

Again as Archbishop Welby says, this is a book of transparency about its author. We live the life alongside the author; and the voice we hear, even if we might disagree with some of what he says, challenges us to hear the voice of Christ.

Week 1: We are God's viceroys

Scripture Reading

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them. We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. (Hebrews 13: 8-15)

Reflection

Our God has become a real human being, not 'a make-believe or half-phantom'. He assumed our humanity in all its fullness with its strengths and its frailties. He experienced all that each one of us has ever experienced. He was tempted, not once but throughout his earthly life - and he goes on suffering, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, 'outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people with his own blood.' Only thus could he become our Saviour.

We are called to be his viceroys, his stand-ins. And that gives us a huge responsibility - that we should not waste nor ravage the natural resources that God places at our disposal. The Bible also makes it quite clear that

all of us are wonderfully made in the image of God - a remarkable and utterly subversive assertion. As Desmond Tutu points out, if we really believed what we asserted - that each human being without exception is a God-carrier - then we would be appalled at any ill treatment of another human being. It's not simply unjust; it's blasphemous - like spitting in the face of God.

Prayer

Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have given us,
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us.
Most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day.
(St Richard of Chichester)

Questions

- How might the world be changed if we were to recognize all our fellow human beings are made in the image of God?
- Can we see God also in non-believers/adherents of other faiths?

Week 2: We are created for togetherness

Scripture Reading

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3: 12-17)

Reflection

Ubuntu is a highly sought-after attribute meaning someone who is generous, magnanimous, hospitable, welcoming, affirming of others. It's a Southern African word which could easily be applied to Nelson Mandela, who emerged from 27 years' incarceration preaching forgiveness and reconciliation. Throughout the rest of his life, he exemplified graciousness, concern and caring. And it's that care for others - that none of us can be totally self-sufficient - that points us back to the second creation story in Genesis when God declares that it's not good that man should be alone. We are made for togetherness, created for a deliberate network of interdependence, of complementarity, of family - the human family, God's family. It was Martin Luther King who said: 'Unless we learn to live together as brothers and sisters, we will perish together as fools!' And, as Desmond Tutu observes, it does seem that the early Christians believed that they had been initiated into a new

fellowship that did indeed turn the accepted order upside down. They kissed one another as though discounting the divisions of their contemporary society. Slaves were the equals of their owners and women enjoyed rights denied to them by the secular authorities.

There are though, thank God, many glorious moments when we inhabitants of the earth do reveal our true characteristics as members of one family - the amazing outpouring of love and concern and generosity at the times of awful tragedy. Perhaps it's then, deep down, that we are being made aware of our natural connectedness.

Prayer

O God, who has bound us together in this bundle of life: give us grace to understand how our lives depend on the industry, the honesty and integrity of others; that we may be mindful of their needs, grateful for their faithfulness, and faithful in our responsibilities towards them. (Reinhold Niebuhr)

Questions

- What does it actually mean to live together as brothers and sisters?
- Should more effort be made to bring groups of Christians together so that the Church can be seen to be more effective?

Week 3: We worship a God in favour of the powerless and despised

Scripture Reading

Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said:

'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.'

'Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.'

'Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.'

'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.' (Luke 6: 20-23)

Reflection

The God of the Bible is a biased God. He intervened decisively in the history of a rabble of slaves, long before they had done anything to deserve to be chosen. He acts on behalf of the weak, the oppressed, the downtrodden and the despised. Indeed, as Desmond Tutu observes, he can't help his actions: he showed in the story of the Exodus from Egypt what his fundamental character is. And you can imagine the impact of this quality on people in South Africa who had been used to being treated like scum. It was almost as if the Bible had been written with the particular struggle against apartheid in mind.

God intervened most decisively in human affairs when he chose a humble couple to be the parents of his Son. God, in the infant Jesus, was born not in the splendour of an opulent royal palace but in a stable nuzzled by cattle and sheep. He identified with us at the lowest points of our existence, demonstrating that he took sides. This God wasn't neutral; he was notoriously biased. And when Jesus began his public ministry, after nearly thirty years in obscurity, he patterned that ministry on the history of the oppressed people of Israel. He called his disciples from the riffraff, for that was the company he chose to keep. Again and again he revealed the nature of the God he represented, not least by what he taught his disciples mainly through the parables he told. Perhaps the most significant is the parable of the Lost Sheep. It's no nice fluffy lamb that the Good Shepherd seeks and finds. No, it's the troublesome, smelly old so-and-so. And what does he do when he finds him? Puts him on his shoulders, carries him home and throws a party for him. A biased God indeed!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, God who came as one of us, you stand with us in the struggles of life: encourage and strengthen us, bless and question us - and help us to know you are the burning heart of God's love. Your obedience is our example and we praise your name.

Questions

- When there is need, God can't help stepping in on the side of those who are suffering. How do we reconcile this with the view that it is the suffering in the world which most challenges the idea of God?
- How do we respond to Desmond Tutu's emphasising the radical, almost subversive nature of Jesus's character?

Week 4: God loves us even before we were created

Scripture Reading

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation. (2 Corinthians 1: 3-7)

Reflection

The essence of this chapter is the breath-taking fact, as Desmond Tutu calls it, that God knew each and every one of us before we were born, and he loved us before we could do anything to deserve that divine love. Julian of Norwich, the medieval mystic who was granted visions of the ways of God, says that God did not begin to love us; his love for us is as eternal as God is eternal. We don't need to do anything to curry favour with God. And once again, Desmond Tutu uses Jesus's parable of the lost sheep to point out that our God is ready to leave ninety nine perfectly well-behaved sheep to go after a recalcitrant and troublesome one. He could then

announce that there was not just great joy but greater joy in heaven over the obstreperous one who had caused so much trouble than over the ninety nine who needed no repentance. Our God really is amazing - his love gives up on no one. Indeed he invests all his divine love and concern on each one of us.

Origen, the Early Church theologian, is another influential figure whom Desmond Tutu admires. Origen teaches that the divine love is so appealing, so attractive and so irresistible that even the Devil will be unable to defy it: he and his demon angels will be drawn back into the heaven of the God of love where worship and adoration never cease. And the hope is that we who have experienced the wonder and depth of God's love will in turn attract others, inspired as we are by the example of the one who was ready to give his all for us.

Prayer

Lord, thou knowest what I want. If it be thy will that I have it - and if it be not thy will - good Lord, do not be displeased, for I want nothing which you do not want. (Julian of Norwich)

Questions

- If God's love for us is eternal and unconditional, why should we bother to behave as we believe God wants us to?
- How does that attitude affect the way we behave towards others?
- And how does God respond when we deliberately ignore his will?

Week 5: God's grace is freely given

Scripture Reading

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned - sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5: 12-21)

Reflection

Desmond Tutu's exuberance is particularly infectious in this chapter. He stresses again and again that all the magnificent teeming creation around us has come about through the outpouring of God's love as an act of sheer grace. God could have been God without us, but he decided otherwise. Having been lavished with this gift, which is then followed by that other act of sheer grace - the self-giving of Jesus on the cross - all we are expected to do is to be grateful. We who are freely loved and affirmed are meant to be as God to others, caring, compassionate, loving and affirming.

It's not easy to be open to receiving when one seems to lack nothing, and Desmond Tutu points out that this is perhaps the reason why so many who come from affluent societies do not easily understand the wonder of grace, freely bestowed by a deeply generous God. But that is the very nature of God: God would not be God without God's *kenosis* or self-emptying. He longs that we will see his image in each other and so recognise that each of us, whatever our gender, our nationality, our orientation, are fundamentally members of one family. If only we could acknowledge this, we would live in a world free of so many nervous breakdowns and stomach ulcers!

Prayer

Grant us such grace that we may work Thy will,
And speak Thy words, and walk before Thy face,
Profound and calm like waters deep and still;
Grant us such grace. (Christina Rossetti)

Questions

- Stomach ulcers have become status symbols supposedly proving how hard we are working. How can we dispel this notion and why do we find it so difficult to accept the ethos of grace - of sheer gift?
- Why is it so much harder to receive than to give?

Week 6 (Holy Week): Jesus experiences extreme separation from God - death

Scripture Reading

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the

human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. (1 Corinthians 2: 1-12)

Reflection

The inspiration behind the title of this final chapter is a sermon given by one of Desmond Tutu's heroes, Father Trevor Huddleston, in South Africa just before his return to the Community of the Resurrection back in Mirfield, Yorkshire. Huddleston had been a thorn in the side of the South African apartheid government and his defiant last gesture assured the authorities that the days of their abominable policies were numbered. God was not to be mocked. All would one day have to give account: in the beginning, God; at the end, God.

Desmond Tutu graphically describes how the relationship between God and his creation went awry: where there should have been teeming life, there was a cold clammy death. It was a far cry from the paradise God had intended, and the catalogue of atrocities seems never to end. Yet God hasn't given up on God's dream.

Throughout the ages it's been kept alive by those whom God has sent to remind us of it – the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Micah who both speak, almost in identical language, of a time of universal peace. The dream became more and more remote as God's people reneged, until just one representative figure remained - the Suffering Servant. In the divine economy, it was he who would attain redemption through his vicarious suffering. Tempted as we are, yet not succumbing to sin, he experienced the most extreme form of separation from God - death. Wonderfully, he rose again, ascended into heaven and now he reigns for ever. And it's that triumphant victory that awaits us: in the beginning, God; at the end, God.

Prayer

O Lord Christ, Lamb of God, call us, who are called to be thy saints, along the way of thy Cross; draw us, who would draw nearer our king, to the foot of thy Cross; cleanse us, who are not worthy to approach, with the pardon of thy Cross; instruct us, the ignorant and blind, in the school of thy Cross; arm us, for the battles of holiness, by the might of thy Cross; bring us, in the fellowship of thy sufferings, to the victory of thy Cross; and seal us, in the kingdom of thy glory, among the servants of thy Cross. (Eric Milner-White)

Questions

- *Endzeit ist Urzeit* is a German expression meaning 'the time of the end is as the time of the beginning.' And the poet T.S.Eliot wrote: 'In my end is my beginning.' How can this be true?
- How important is it to our faith to spend time reflecting on the sequence of dramatic events of Holy Week when they happened such a long time ago?
- How necessary is it to see the life and death of Jesus within the context of the whole story of our salvation?