

Prayer for Peace, Hope and Justice

As Alan lights the candle of Peace and Hope and Justice, I wonder if you've been struck, as I have, by how small the flame is, and how each week this light of Christ seems to struggle in the midst of the cruel barbs coiling round it?

We are passing through dark days – and not just because of Eskom. The promise of newness just two decades ago has been suffocated by the coils of greed and violence. In one of our last conversations Desmond Tutu who played such a preeminent role in bringing light and freedom to our land, lamented today's corruption and brutality: "We know our Bibles and our doctrine of the Fall," he said, "so we shouldn't be surprised, but we are allowed to be very, very sad." He carried that sadness to the grave.

Therefore, It is good to recall that that there are moments when God's truth, peace and justice do break into our broken world like an irresistible tide. I've seen such moments in my lifetime and so have many of you. Think about some of them:

- In the 1950s and 60s the Black Church and Martin Luther King Jr. led the descendants of enslaved Africans in America onto the streets, braving the billy-clubs, the dogs, the firehoses and the prison cell – all in steadfast non-violence - to claim what was rightfully theirs: their citizenship and their dignity. Years of such courage finally prevailed.
- In 1986, led by Catholic Cardinal Sin, people of all denominations peacefully packed the streets of Manila, blocking Ferdinand Marcos' tanks and waving at the Air Force jets sent by to bomb them. The pilots turned away, people power won the day and the dictator was toppled.
- In 1989, in Leipzig, every Monday evening, prayer meetings in the Nikolei church ended with candle-light processions, protesting the repressive Communist regime. The processions grew to many thousands chanting "We are the People!" and swelling the tide which ultimately pushed down the wall dividing our planet.
- And who among us can forget Cape Town in September of that same year, when decades of protest and resistance against oppression climaxed in the great march of the 30,000 led by Desmond Tutu and others, followed by the 25,000 in Johannesburg and marches right around the land? That day, people of all faiths and no faith showed that the power equation in apartheid South Africa had changed forever.

When we look back at these great "God-moments" and wonder why things are so tough now but it may be more helpful to remember that each of those moments had its birth in darkness, as a tiny candlelight:

- The courageous marches for black civil rights in America began in the Highlander Folk School, where Rosa Parks and Martin King and John Lewis and so many other leaders were trained in non-violent direct action. A tiny candle glowing in the hills of Tennessee.

- Meeting with some of those Filipino Christians just three months after they toppled Marcos, I asked them their secret, they said, “For ten years we met in small prayer groups for ten years, learning from Jesus to deal with the violence within ourselves and how to overcome our fear.”
- In 1981 I also met some of the East Germans who marched so bravely against their regime eight years later. The World Council of Churches had brought young Christians from the West to Dresden to meet Christian youth in East Germany. They struggled and prayed until they found each other and made a promise never to make war on each other, but to work for world peace. There is a line from that first encounter to the thousands of small candles in Leipzig.
- And yes, the great marches that helped turn the tide in this land would never have happened without decades of struggle by so many simple, courageous people, small acts of great bravery – and many, many funerals - each a tiny flame. This Candle of Peace, Hope and Justice was there too: first lit in the very dark 1970s on a church altar in Johannesburg, it soon spread to many churches across the land and the Prayer for Africa, written by a priest who was thrown out of South Africa for first exposing our darkness to the wider world*soon became linked with it.

We need it still.

God Bless Africa and all the World,
Guard our Children,
Guide our Rulers,
And give us Peace. AMEN

*Father Trevor Huddleston’s Naught for Your Comfort and Alan Paton’s Cry, the Beloved Country both burst on the world in the 1950s with what was really going on in South Africa

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