

Prayers for Peace, Hope and Justice: Mandela Day

In June 1984 I received a handwritten letter from Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison, PB X4, Tokai. The letter was from Mr Nelson Mandela. When he wrote it, he had been locked away from his loved ones and society for twenty-one long years. It would be a further six years before his release. By this time, Madiba was the most famous political prisoner in the world, and yet ... well, listen to these opening words from private human being who had suffered so deeply:

Dear Rev Storey,

Way back in the early forties I was walking along Kruis Street when I came across a wayside pulpit with the words "The greatest glory of living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time you fall." The pulpit was just outside the Central Methodist Hall and that is how I was introduced to that famous building. I had recently arrived in Johannesburg straight from the countryside and, at that moment, I was still encountering a variety of problems as I tried to adapt to an urban environment miles away from my small world of open plains and quiet hillocks where nature's peace reigned supreme. Those words tended to stimulate and steel a person against the host of traumas he was to experience in later years.

In the mid-sixties the substance of the same message was repeated by a priest on Robben Island when he described a saint as "a sinner who keeps on trying." These words make a formidable impression on all those who reflect on them and strengthen one's capacity to face up to the challenges of life; they give even the humblest of individuals the inner resources to excel himself.

But to return to the CMH; I kept checking the wayside pulpit whenever I could, and read many beautiful messages...

The letter went on in this vein: no pretentiousness, no dwelling on his suffering. All about his memories of the Methodist Church - those who had educated him, his memories of some of its leaders and his thanks for the care the church was giving his family.

He ends focused on the future: *"I must conclude by pointing out that I look forward to the day when I will meet you and you wife in the flesh and shake your hands very warmly. Meantime, I wish you the best of luck."*

This is the person I'd like us to remember as we light our Candle of Peace, Hope and Justice on Mandela Day.

Lighting of the Candle

I invite you to fix your gaze on that small flame shining through the barbed wire, and before we pray our prayer, let us listen for some of the words that once inspired us to be different:

"What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived, it is what difference we have made in the lives of others ...

"No one is born hating another person. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite ...

"It is not our diversity which divides us: it is not our ethnicity, or religion or culture that divides us. Since we achieved our freedom, there can only be one division amongst us: between those who cherish democracy and those who do not ...

“Remember that hope is a powerful weapon when all else is lost ...

“It is in your hands to make a better world for all who live in it ...

And then, a word about his own legacy:

“Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got up again. ...

And with these words from one who helped us all be different - and one who must be very sad at the brokenness that we have made of this land - let us seek God’s healing as we pray the Prayer for Africa and all the World:

God bless Africa and all the World

Guard our children

Guide our leaders

And give us peace

AMEN.