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MY PERSONAL JOURNEY INTO RACIAL RECONCILIATION

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“Hello, Piet. This is Desmond speaking. Are you sitting down?”

It was on a Thursday afternoon in January, 1996, when I was quietly working in my office at the University of Pretoria when the telephone rang.

“The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is in the process of being appointed,” Desmond Tutu continued, adding that “it was decided that the representative of the white Afrikaans churches have to be included”. It had to be me, Tutu informed me, adding with emphasis: “Piet, you know I am the Archbishop of Cape Town and I speak for the Lord God. Well, the Lord says you have to come, but you have three days to decide.”

In this way I departed on my journey, a journey shared by millions of Christian South Africans on our way from a painful past, from a time of conflict and suffering and injustice to a new future of reconciliation and peace. On this journey, I was often aghast and deeply ashamed by the revelation of the atrocities that the previous regime had perpetrated, as the suffering humiliation of thousands of victims from all communities brought their stories to the TRC.

I was often at a loss for words sharing with my fellow TRC members the tears of the victims. I was also heartened and consoled by the love and the compassion of so many South Africans willing to forgive, wanting to reconcile as I was humbled by the grace of my fellow members of the TRC, many of whom also suffered terribly in the past, to embrace me, the Afrikaans dominee, coming from the church that had not only lived with apartheid but provided theological justification for it.

“Tell us about your journey with apartheid. When did you start seeing the light? How did you move from racism to reconciliation?” Often in the TRC years I had to answer these questions, the same challenge that was put to me by Michael Cassidy in his invitation to speak to you tonight: “Tell us about your personal journey into racial reconciliation.”

Friends, in trying to find answers to these questions, I am often embarrassed by the little progress I have made over the years; that it took such a long time to open my eyes to the plight of fellow South Africans; that it took so long to open my ears to their cries. How was it possible that I and my fellow ministers of the Gospel preached the message of Christ’s love and reconciliation Sunday after Sunday while gross human rights violations were taking place all around us, while all of us were beneficiaries of a system that was patently degrading and unjust to so many brothers and sisters in Christ. The fact that I did eventually start on my journey was due to a number of factors – being exposed to the realities of South Africa and being challenged and guided by many friends and colleagues to whom I will refer just now. But, looking back, the real push came when the Lord, over a long period, opened three windows to me, the windows the apostle Paul often referred to: the windows of faith and hope and love.

Speaking of faith, I often think back to the day when I, together with my classmates, stood before the congregation in the old Klip Kerk in Heidelberg to confess our faith. I knew my catechism well. My father, the local dominee, saw to that. When I, with my friends, declared Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Saviour we sincerely meant it, even though it took years for me to discover the full content and the consequences for my life of my credo.

Heidelberg in the 1950s was a seedbed of Afrikaner nationalism, and weekly in the Hoër Volksskool we received with our Latin and maths, daily doses of patriotism and Afrikaner history. Everything was so clear to us. Apartheid – separate development – was the perfect solution to South Africa’s problems, our local MP, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, told us. In the vestry of our church, the portrait of Dr D F Malan, who started his career as junior pastor in the Heidelberg congregation, reminded us that we should believe in God, in our people “die volk”, and in ourselves. We were on our way to the Republic of South Africa and all was well.

It took me a couple of years at the University of Pretoria to discover that all was not well in the country.

Neither in my own life. I discovered that once the Lord opened the window of faith in one's life things indeed appeared different, that accepting the Lord Jesus meant that other loyalties, even sacred loyalties of "volk" and "taal", needed to be reassessed and put in their proper place.

And then Sharpeville burst upon the scene, and the State of Emergency, the first of many to follow. It was the early 1960s, the time of Cottesloe, when the churches were challenged to their prophetic role, when the Afrikaans churches elected to sever their ties with the ecumenical community and the world who had little sympathy with our fears, who did not understand our Afrikaner way of thinking.

It was also the time when, in Afrikaans circles, prophets did come to the fore – the likes of Ben Marais, Beyers Naudè and David Bosch, who uncompromisingly called their brothers and sisters to reach out to their fellow South Africans and to take their stand with them. They made me realise, through faith, everything to do with justice and reconciliation and exposing the evil and heresies of racism and discrimination. It was a rocky road to follow for Beyers Naudè and his band. It meant moving out of the laager, being ostracised, and in Beyers' case, being banned for many years.

For the Dutch Reformed Church years later at long last also to reject apartheid and to confess the theology of apartheid as sin and a heresy was equally painful. But to many of our black and coloured fellow Christians also in the NG Kerk, Dutch Reformed sister churches, taking their stand of faith often meant paying a very high price: arrest, incarceration, often torture, even death.

It was only during the TRC years when my blood brother, Don Montata, took me to visit bereaved families in Soweto, to stand at grave sites in many places, where we listened to the testimonies at the Faith Communities Hearing that I realised how high the price of faith was, the price of refusing to bow before the false gods of race and greed and self interest.

The second window the Lord opened to me on my pilgrimage was that of hope which, brings me to one afternoon in the house of the Rev Willem Nicol in Pretoria. It was during the early 80s when South Africa seemingly was pushed to the edge of the precipice. In the townships it was war. Young people, you will remember, left the country in droves, or were herded into trucks and driven away. In white suburbs, men and women locked their doors at night against the "swart gevaar". Politicians pulled one political hare after the other out of their hats to no avail. We sat in Willem's lounge, a group of perplexed and worried NG Kerk dominees in dire need of advice. "What can we do, what can we tell our congregants?"

Desmond Tutu on his way back from Sweden left his luggage at the airport to spend some time with us. "Oom Desmond," one of us ventured, "if you were in our shoes, if you were the NG Kerk dominee, what would you say to your flock?"

"God forbid," the Archbishop smiled, "me an NG Kerk dominee! I would not last a day, neither would the church." He then went on to say what he would have liked to say to white Christians in the country.

"I would speak to them about faith, their personal relationship with Christ, without which none of us can survive especially in trying times like these. And then I would speak about hope. All of us black Christians suffering in the townships, as well as whites living in fear in the suburbs, need to hear it time and time again. God is in control. He is the God of history. He's got the whole world in His hands; us, too. If He is for us who can be against us? I would advise my white congregants who are so afraid because their foundations are rocked to cling for dear life to their privileges, to let go and let God." Then Tutu added with a smile but with steel in his voice: "Lastly I would press upon them to take leave of apartheid. That is where all the trouble started."

At the time of the first SACLA, David Bosch spoke movingly about this, about hope, about how living in hope of the coming Christ forces us to take seriously this world and what people are doing to people here and now. I quote: "Someone who knows that God will one day wipe away all tears cannot with resignation accept the tears of those who suffer and are opposed now. If we believe that one day all disease will vanish, we cannot but anticipate here and now the victory over disease in individuals and communities. If we accept that the enemy of God and man, the devil, will ultimately be completely conquered, we cannot but begin at once to unmask these stratagems in the individual family and society."

On my way, during the years the Lord allowed me to experience hope, sometimes at big meetings – at PACLA in Nairobi, SACLA I and Rustenberg – when black and white former enemies embraced, at other times in faraway places in a squatter settlement, in the dead of winter at a small fire where men and

women who, humanly speaking, had every reason to despair, rekindled a fire of hope in my heart. I am forever grateful to the Lord for sending me friends. Many of them are here tonight. Friends from the other side, black South Africans, brothers and sisters from other denominations, limeys and rooineks from Pietermaritzburg, who are willing to share their lives with me, to entrust me with their stories, who are willing to guide me on the road of hope.

The final window that the Lord opened to me was the window of love. Paul had it right: "If I speak the tongues of men and angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and I have all faith so as to remove mountains and have not love, I am nothing." I know it is a hackneyed cliché but it is nevertheless true that the final answer to the political and social and economic problems of the world is not primarily to be found in the making of new laws and regulations or in structural change important as these are, but in the hearts of people, in the relationships between men and women. Love, indeed, is the final answer. The love of God that He pours into our hearts, the love that casts out every fear.

But this love, I have seen along the way, comes at a very high price. God's love for us cost Him the life of His Son. Jesus, on His way to the cross to show His love, told us, His followers: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." I have seen this love on my way and it is never easy.

Reconciliation between white and black, rich and poor, perpetrators and victims, does not come cheap. There are prerequisites for reconciliation I came to realise. Reconciliation presupposes the truth be told, even a painful and shaming truth. Reconciliation is not synonymous with amnesia. Reconciliation asks for justice, too. For justice you can never reconcile at the expense of what is right and just. When you speak of reconciliation, you have to speak about poverty and unemployment and Aids and land. For people to reach out to one another, to truly, humbly ask for forgiveness and to genuinely, honestly reach out to grant forgiveness, asks for a miracle, the miracle of love. But it happens. It happens.

Reconciliation healing is, indeed, possible. It happened when Nelson Mandela walked out of Victor Verster Prison, after 27 years, with a wide smile on his face. It happened when a former policeman stood in a village church in KwaZulu-Natal to ask for and receive forgiveness for a massacre many years ago. It happened when a mother, who shared a harrowing story of how her son was tortured and killed senselessly in the Eastern Cape, smiled through her tears and said: "Tonight, for the first night in 14 years, I think I will fall asleep immediately. Tonight I will sleep without nightmares."

It happened to me at a service in the Catholic Cathedral in Johannesburg when, one afternoon at a South African Council of Churches service, I embraced Father Michael Lapsley, the Anglican priest at the altar, the man I met years before in London. He, the ANC chaplain, and I, the NG Kerk dominee, were ideologically miles apart. I later read the news that he was severely injured in Harare, when a letter bomb sent to him by the South African forces exploded in his face. It was a miracle that he lived, but he lost one eye and both his hands. My heart went out to him but we still lived on different planets. But on that day in the cathedral, when it was my turn to warm my hands over the fire of reconciliation that was burning at the altar, the man who joined me had no hands, only stainless steel claws. I looked up into the face of Michael Lapsley. When we embraced, the fire of reconciliation was lit in our hearts, fusing us together, after all these years, as brothers. Today it is my honour to serve as trustee of Michael's Institute of the Healing of Memories.

Have we attained reconciliation in South Africa? Have we conquered racism? Not yet, I'm afraid I have to answer. Apartheid, racism is a tenacious foe. To write apartheid out of the books, out of the statues of law, was one thing; to get apartheid out of our hearts, out of our minds, quite another. It may take years. But we are on our way. All of us are called to join in the journey. Also, my fellow Afrikaners, fellow whites, many have travelled along this road. They are here, but some of us still find it difficult to reach out to embrace and to be embraced.

May I end, on a very personal note, to plead with all black and white South Africans as Paul pleaded with his peers: "I implore you be reconciled to God and become ambassadors of reconciliation." Let us walk on this road of faith and hope and love together.

On the day the final TRC report was handed to the people of South Africa, Desmond Tutu said: "We have been wounded but we are being healed."

It is possible, even with our past of suffering, anguish, alienation and violence, to become one people, reconciled, healed, caring and compassionate and ready to share as we put behind us the past to strive into the glorious future God holds before us as the rainbow people of God.

I thank you.

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