

## ***Stirring Up Love***

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*By Fletcher Davis*

Long ago, a rural nobody leapt onto the world stage boldly condemning injustice. That made those who dwelt in citadels of power furious. He even rebuked the governor for violating the law, and for adultery. As those who aspire to higher status quickly learn, it is always dangerous to speak truth to power – unless it is flattery.

The governor had him arrested and locked in a dungeon. The woman the governor seduced was his brother's wife. He made a rash promise when her daughter danced for him, so he had to give her his prisoner's head on a platter.

That governor's name was Herod Antipas. His prisoner's name was John Bar Zechariah, better known as John the Baptist. John saw himself as a forerunner, preparing the way for the Messiah. He was immensely popular.

Echoing the prophets of old, he called people to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah by repenting of injustice. Justice is love in action. Injustice always reveals lack of love. John captured his relationship with Jesus memorably: "He must increase; I must decrease," [Jn 3.30]

As we heard in today's Gospel [Jn 3.2-11], Jesus said of John, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist." Then he added, "Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Why does he say that? Hold that question. More later.

Now fast forward 20 centuries to another rural nobody who leapt onto the world stage also boldly condemning injustice. This cattle herding son of his father's third wife, went to the city to study law and denounce leaders and laws that foster injustice. Of course he was incarcerated also.

Unlike John, however, he was not executed. Four years after his release, he was elected president and went on to become beloved elder of the world. His name was Rolihlahla, which means "troublemaker." He's better known by the name given at his baptism, Nelson. Nelson Mandela.

I have admired and followed his life for more than half a century since before I was a missionary in Botswana in the '60s. After whites had systematically humiliated, tortured and murdered many of his friends, and locked him in prison in the prime of life for 27 years, the question most often asked about him is, how could he emerge so free of fury?

Someone asked, "After such barbarous torment, how do you keep hatred in check?" He replied, "Hating clouds the mind. It gets in the way of strategy. Leaders cannot afford to hate."

To boost his self-discipline, Mandela took up boxing. To understand his oppressors, he taught himself Afrikaans, the language of those who wanted to execute him. To further his dream of equal justice for all, he met with anyone anywhere who might further the dream. He made friends and admirers of enemies. By his constant *example*, he taught the world the power of Jesus' ethic of forgiveness, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." [Lk 23.34]

He may be longest remembered for making Jesus' teaching about forgiveness national policy for the first time in human history. When elected as South Africa's first black president, whites feared they would be done unto as they had done unto others.

To avert violence, he created a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, naming Archbishop Desmond Tutu to lead it. The Commission not only deterred civil war, it revealed a more detailed and credible picture of victims, torturers and murderers than any previous investigations anywhere.

To be fair, Mandela failed to fulfill all his hopes of a just, multi-racial country. That's hardly a surprise after half a century of apartheid laws that, for example, rigidly excluded non-whites from education beyond that needed for laborers or servants. As one white official put it, "What's the point of teaching mathematics to a student who has no need of it?"

The Bantu Education Act was only one prong of apartheid apparatus intended to keep the races separate and unequal. In the aftermath of such repression, the marvel is how much injustice has been overcome by Mandela's laser-like focus on love and forgiveness. He changed laws – and hearts!

Few leaders rival him in moral authority – in the past century maybe Gandhi, Tutu, King; among political leaders still fewer, maybe Churchill and – who else? Mandela filled both bills, moral and political. He inspired and elevated people by enlisting them in a shared journey. It was never about him but always about justice, equal opportunity, reconciliation.

That humble hero was buried this morning in the rural grasslands where he once herded cattle. In tribute to him at the memorial service telecast around the globe last Tuesday, President Obama said, "His example made me want to be a better man." He had that effect on many of us.

Mandela enjoyed an advantage John the Baptist lacked, but one that you possess. Jesus had showed up among John's penitents and was baptized by him, but John had been executed before he began his ministry. So John never heard him preach, never learned from him how to love or to forgive.

Did John's zeal for preparing the way for the Messiah weaken in prison? He sent some disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them."

Note that Jesus did not answer John's question with a yes or no. He let John work out the answer for himself. We must do the same. Note too that miracles were not the point for Jesus. The most important part of his ministry was the least pretentious, his message of love and forgiveness. That's a message Mandela made central to his life. It's a message *you* know. Jesus said the least in his kingdom is greater than John. That means Mandela was greater. And you are too!

So what must we do to fulfill Jesus' great complement and Mandela's great example? We need to do so much to further justice, equal opportunity and reconciliation. How can we share Christ's love and put it front and center in our own lives? We can at least start by praying today's Collect every day this week. Be prepared for surprising results; it grows more effective with use. Will you pray it with me now?

"Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen."

On my way home from the Louisville General Convention in 1976, I stopped in a cafe for a bite before the flight. The man beside me at the counter emptied the half-full sugar container into his coffee then demanded more. The waitress, looking him in the eye, said, "Stir up what you've already got."

We know the love and forgiveness of Jesus and the example of Mandela. How could we prepare for Christmas better than by stirring up what we've already got?

No need to ask for more! Happy Advent.