

2007

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### Recommended Citation

Riggle, Tracy (2007) "Desmond Tutu: A Theological Model for Justice in the Context of Apartheid," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 7, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol7/iss1/4>

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# **Desmond M. Tutu: Theological Model for Justice in the Context of Apartheid**

*Tracy Riggle*

**I**n our current age of modernity, the role religion can play in transforming the world is certainly highly debated. There are those people who relegate religion to a sphere of unimportance, deeming it a study only applicable to antiquity. There are others, however, who insist upon the continuing validity and importance of religion. The question around which this work will focus is what kind of impact religion can have on our modern world of injustice. The goal of this research is to highlight religion's propensity to be what Lloyd Steffen refers to as "life affirming" (Steffen 5). Religion which is life affirming acts as an alternative to a demonic religion which promotes violence and injustice by valuing the lives of certain individuals over others. In a period of history characterized by events such as September 11<sup>th</sup> and the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has become an immanent concern for scholars and members of the faith community alike to reevaluate the role religion plays in affirming life as opposed to denying or destroying it.

What Steffen and many others have come to realize is the crucial choice that religious people are faced with: whether they choose to accept a form of religion that promotes equality and justice as opposed to one that continues to endorse hatred and violence in the name of God. From Steffen's perspective it is a matter of choice whether or not human beings become part of a "life affirming" or "demonic" religion. Taking this analysis one step further, it is my contention that any understanding of the Christian religion that endorses violence, inequality, and injustice is an improper understanding of the Christian faith as a whole. It is, in effect, not Christianity at all. For this reason, those who call themselves Christian must resist the temptation to collude with the "demonic" and must critique those societal structures that promote values and practices which exacerbate our world's wounds.

Despite the tendency for media to concentrate on a negative portrayal of religion and behind the numerous examples of violence committed in the name of one's faith tradition, a growing number of people in our current age are active in transforming and bettering society in the name of religion. One such example is Desmond M. Tutu, humanitarian and former Archbishop of South Africa. Tutu

has become a well renowned activist for racial equality, justice and reconciliation and has had an impact all over the globe with his transformative religious beliefs. Desmond Tutu, in the context of South Africa's dehumanizing Apartheid system, stood up for his religious beliefs and motivated others to do the same. The result was a uniting of the black community in South Africa and a viable challenge to the country's corrupt government. Tutu, in a coalition with Nelson Mandela and other political activists, partook the long and arduous battle to eliminate the Apartheid system and ultimately fostered the creation of a new South Africa, free from a racist and oppressive governmental system - all in the name of his Christian faith.

Despite the susceptibility for religion to unite with the demonic, Tutu reminds us that things do not have to be this way. Underneath our mask of skepticism, believe it or not, people do take notice of individuals like Tutu who use religion to transform the world into a more just place. This type of transformation is happening every day, we simply must open our eyes to allow for this possibility. It was because of Tutu's strong convictions as a Christian that he was able to empower others in organizations such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC served as the organization responsible for mending a broken South Africa in the post Apartheid Era. It was through this commission that Tutu was able to use his theology, and especially his strong belief in reconciliation, as a tool for the creation of a more united South Africa.

It was the oft-quoted theologian Jürgen Moltmann who once wrote, "Peace with God means conflict with the world" (Moltmann 21). Whether it be in the context of South Africa or anywhere else across the globe, the current world in which we live is one that desperately needs repairing. The daunting task that all Christians face is saving religion from those who seek to align it with demonic forces. Moltmann's claim is profoundly valuable in the current age because it reminds us how very far we are from realizing the full potential of Christianity. Our world is unfortunately often characterized by bloodshed, hunger, hatred and divisiveness. Given this current state of affairs, "peace with God" must necessitate *action* in the world. Appreciating the seriousness of Moltmann's claim, it no longer becomes acceptable to settle for the current demonic turn religion has taken. Taking this claim to heart places upon members of the Christian community a responsibility to engage the world, face injustice head on and bring it to and end -the very same goal of Desmond M. Tutu.

## Apartheid

Dehumanization means treating people as if they are things. It means deny-

ing human beings their status as unique individuals with the ability to learn, the right to live and most of all the right to survive. Dehumanization is the strongest form of oppression and it is the goal most aptly achieved by the system of Apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid meant people were seen for what they are instead of who they are. One's worth was evaluated based on one's skin color, as opposed to one's ethics and personality. Apartheid meant, for all people, that first and foremost individuals were judged based on pigmentation and all other characterizations were evaluated as subsidiary considerations. For those deemed "white," this initial judgment based on pigmentation resulted in a human existence completely different than what was experienced by those individuals who found themselves outside the bounds of this limited category. To be deemed white meant initial power, status, and privilege in South Africa due to the assumptions of greater intelligence and propensity for productivity. To be deemed "coloured" or even worse to be branded "black" meant less freedom, more heavily restricted civil liberties, and the stereotypic characterization that those non-white individuals were less intelligent, less capable of making their own decisions, less productive, and more prone to destructive behavior. Because of this form of dehumanization, people in South Africa were never simply seen as people. There was always a qualifier and in South Africa the qualifier was most certainly the arbitrary category of race.

It was within this context of Apartheid that Desmond M. Tutu was fully embedded. Tutu's many experiences, education within the Anglican Church, African upbringing, and profound sense of spirituality and piety formed his theology and enabled him to challenge the South African government not as a politician, but as a theologian. Tutu cannot be torn from his environment for it is this context which is integral to his entire spirituality and system of beliefs. Ultimately, it was Tutu's theological beliefs that would help the future Archbishop of South Africa challenge the government head on and help bring Apartheid to its final days. It was Tutu's strong conviction that theology should affirm life for all people that led him to take this challenging risk of faith.

## **The Theology of Tutu**

If we could but recognize our common humanity, that we do belong together, that our destinies are bound up with one another's, that we can be free only together, that we can survive only together, that we can be human only together, then a glorious South Africa would come into being where all of us lived harmoniously together as members of one family, the human family, God's family. In truth a transfiguration would have taken place. ("Rainbow People" 121)

Because it is first and foremost Desmond Tutu's theological convictions that lead him to challenge Apartheid, it is necessary to take a closer look at just what those beliefs are. His very specific reading of the gospel of Jesus, coupled with his own Anglican tradition and his African spirituality, formed Tutu's theological convictions. The theme linking all of the former Archbishop's religious beliefs is a desire to connect people to one another, to bring people together despite the irrelevant differences of race, gender, and, even later, despite one's sexual orientation. When examining the life of Tutu one mustn't lose sight of these religious convictions, because he became a world peace advocate and socio-political reformer, Tutu was a man of faith who sought to truly live out the gospel of Christ. Once again, for Tutu the gospel of Christ necessitates doing something about injustice and challenging those so-called Christians who used their beliefs to subjugate blacks and endorse racial oppression.

## Imago Dei

The concept of God's love for humanity is central in Tutu's metaphor for God and it is the root of all of his religious beliefs. God, the Creator, made man in His image (*Imago Dei*) and He proclaimed that this creation "was good". The Biblical account of Creation in Genesis 1, specifically Genesis 1:26-27, provides the conception of *Imago Dei*. According to Tutu, we are all children of God created equally through God's love, which is unrelenting and not dependent upon our actions or successes in the world. One should not be valued based on external factors such as race, ethnicity, status or wealth because ultimately in God's eyes we are all the same, each integral parts of the common humanity God loves. God loves the sinner and the saint equally. Tutu states emphatically, "There is nothing you can do to make God love you less – absolutely nothing, for God already loves you and will love you forever" ("God Dream" 32). The love of God is always present, in all circumstances, no matter how much humans' freedom to sin has masked it. We must love each other in the same way God loves us, and unite in a common humanity in order to bring about God's transfiguration. From Tutu's perspective, this is the only way to deal with a world so overwhelmed with evil that too much of its good is masked.

Tutu relies heavily on the scripture of the Genesis creation stories to make the claim that God created all individuals in His image in order that they may be interdependent and coexist. He criticizes Apartheid for failing to honor this conception by placing undue emphasis on the importance of race, which Tutu finds to be a biological irrelevancy with which God was never concerned in creation. The

themes present in the biblical creation stories make clear that God wills “peace, prosperity, fellowship, justice, wholeness, compassion, love, and joy” (“Rainbow People” 61). These characteristics had been completely ignored under the Nationalist rule of white South Africa. Tutu’s hope for the future depends on the realization of Image Dei and the recognition that we are all part of “koinonia” or the African concept for community. Tutu makes this clear in a sermon as he powerfully engages the audience proclaiming his dream “where all of us, black and white, count because we are human persons, human persons created in your own image” (“Rainbow People” 17).

One of the major themes from the Hebrew Scripture and which Tutu emphasizes, and in a way similar to that of other theologians’ insistence upon liberation, is that of the Exodus event. Tutu states, that God is a “God of the Exodus, with power and might; with an outstretched arm He had led this group of slaves victoriously out of their slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the promised land” (“Rainbow People” 18). God first showed through Moses that He would deliver his people. This theme was then carried to Joshua and finally to the one Christians call Christ. For Tutu, Jesus’ ministry is the way that individuals can experience the concreteness of a transcendent God. God for Tutu is “spirit” and “sometimes dwells in light inaccessible” (“Rainbow People” 27) but Jesus makes this God known. Jesus, through his breaking of social conventions, feeding of the poor, forgiveness of sins, healing of the sick and uncleanly, ultimately identified with those on the margins. This is the theme that should be derived from Jesus’ ministry and it is what must be incorporated into our own daily lives. The fundamentals of Christianity must be drawn from Jesus’ life, death and resurrection; Apartheid is fundamentally evil and un-Christian because these themes of the Gospel are completely ignored in a world based on dominance, superiority, and negligence of the oppressed. Our criterion as Christians must be Jesus Christ (“Rainbow People” 54-55).

## Transfiguration

Central to Desmond Tutu’s religious beliefs is the concept of transfiguration. Transfiguration is defined as, “God’s transformation in the world” (“God Dream” 3). Transfiguration can be anything from the changing of nature from season to season, or even an occasion in which people, who were previously separated, come to unite. Such is the case with South Africa post-Apartheid. For Tutu, the prime example of transfiguration is the resurrection of Jesus on the cross. What was supposed to be an instrument of death has now become the basis of eternal life for all Christians. Jesus subverted the powers that were to be and because of

his transfiguration and God's transformation was able to escape death. It is this process of transfiguration that people of faith must look out for in the world, for God's transformation is always occurring; it is simply masked from time to time by a human propensity towards evil and a lack of genuine faith.

God's love is not passive, and although He loves all of creation equally He is one who is willing to take sides, according to Tutu. Jesus' ministry makes this fact known and illuminates the theme of God's preference for the poor. Although God loves all of creation, He wants each member of creation to work towards the betterment of creation as a whole. This is where the concept of human love comes into the picture. It is not only important to know that God loves us, for that can serve as a destructive opiate. God loves us in order that we actively take part in His transfiguration, and the only way we can do this is by loving one another. Love, according to Tutu, "is not an action, it is something we do for others" ("God Dream" 78). God loves us, and correspondingly needs and demands us as members of the faith community to love one another as well.

## Ubuntu

Tutu's entire moral and theological framework rests on the supposition that individuals are all inextricably connected in a common web of being. This is where Tutu's conception of "ubuntu" comes into play. Tutu describes this belief, one that is somewhat hard to define in English, as "hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate" ("Rainbow People" 31). The fundamental tenet of this conviction is that people are always connected to one another and the greatest good must be social harmony. In accordance, people should see each other not as individuals but as partners who must work together to achieve any ends. Life under *ubuntu* means there is no room for completely self-sufficient individuals; we are all mutually dependent, for only together can we overcome our faults. Concretely what this means is that each and every individual sees himself or herself as a brother or sister to everyone else. God's whole creation is one large family, and whether we like it or not we owe it to our family members to help care for one another and jointly alleviate each other's pain. The superficial external distinctions (i.e. race, class, gender, or political orientation) start to break down when people elevate the importance of love. Only then will we begin to respect the positions of all of our brothers and sisters, no matter how much they may differ from our own.

Accordingly, we must spend our time trying to love one another to facilitate the creation of a loving community made of blacks, whites, men, women, rich and poor. This is a difficult task to accomplish in modern society because we have been so engrained with the importance of achieving success, especially on indi-

vidualistic terms. Once again, Tutu's insistence on *ubuntu* and interconnectedness and his conception of a God who loves demonstrates that our ultimate concern must be to love God and all of His creation in return. Echoing the language and ideas of Paul Tillich, Tutu states that we are finite beings made for the infinite whose ultimate loyalty must not be to success, money, fame or really anything other than God. Without God the Creator as the root of our being, we are bound to "turn ashes in our mouths" ("God Dream" 34).

Battle states, "*Ubuntu* theology asserts that persons are ends in themselves only through the discovery of who they are in others" (Battle 43). The highly divisive institution of Apartheid has missed this tenet of African theology. For Tutu, community is a primary requirement for Christians and therefore individuals must tend to the needs of their neighbors, as Jesus exemplifies in his own ministry and as God has made evident through his transfiguration. As Christians, according to the profoundly spiritual Tutu, we must take part in God's transfiguration recognizing our common humanity as people equally created in God's image.

## Community and Forgiveness

"God's love is for us and our love for others is the single greatest motivating force in the world. And this love and the good it creates will always triumph over hatred and evil. But if you are to be true partners with God in the transfiguration of His world and help bring triumph of love over hatred, of good over evil, you must begin by understanding as much as God loves you, God equally loves your enemies" ("God Dream" 40-41).

The only way to bring about transfiguration and God's dream of peace, compassion, love and sharing, is for one to start "seeing with the eyes of God" ("God Dream" 93). First we must recognize that we are all equals created according to the Image Dei. Then we must see that God loves us all, not for our successes, but rather for our potential to do good. It would be very easy to love those people whose values and beliefs coincide with our own, but God demands more of us. Because we are all equally prone to sin, we are all equally capable of bringing about justice in the world. We must love all people, valuing each other for their potential role in the delicate network of being. This means that we can no longer afford to see people as enemies. We must welcome into our families the drug dealers, terrorists, as well as the sinners if we are to be dedicated Christians wholeheartedly following the life of Christ.

In the case of South Africa, the only means to achieving an end to racial injustice was forgiveness through reconciliation. Reconciliation was a way to move



past the many injustices and sins inflicted upon blacks and to a lesser degree whites under the system of Apartheid. Ideally, confession, forgiveness and reparation form a continuum but we must remember and be ready and willing to forgive without one's acknowledgement of sin, as illustrated by Jesus' ministry. Before this can happen we must truly try to see people the way that God does, and for Tutu this is as brothers and sisters who love and respect one another as the divinely created beings which together make up God's world and in time will prove to be instruments of His dream and transfiguration. The first step, and a difficult one at that, is seeing the world as God does and realizing that God's transfiguration is already occurring little by little, through small examples of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. God has faith in His creation and is currently working to put an end to suffering, we simply must find a way to link onto these small acts of transfiguration and the only way to do that is to start loving one another.

Being able to hold onto a firm belief in the power of reconciliation and forgiveness is what sets Tutu apart from other anti-Apartheid leaders. However, Desmond Tutu is certainly one of the most notable leaders of the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, and it is due to the dedication of this man and others that in 1994 one of the most basic of human rights, the right to vote, was granted to citizens of South Africa regardless of race. After hundreds of years of history defined by laws of separation, racism and segregation, South Africa was finally able to participate in its first democratic election, bringing former prison inmate Nelson Mandela into the Presidency. This is the movement in which the profoundly religious Tutu found himself wholly embedded. Examining Tutu's work as Chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission can give us a glimpse of this extraordinary man's dedication to liberation in the name of his faith. In a way, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought to life many of Tutu's own spiritual beliefs and as such sought to deal with the aftermath of Apartheid, transforming a blood soaked land into a land of justice and peace.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created after President Botha, the Nationalist Leader, was forced by his cabinet to resign from the Presidency, the first of what would be many steps on the road to freedom in South Africa. This Commission was set up after Nelson Mandela won the electoral vote in South Africa and became the first non-white President to preside over the country. The TRC was established by the larger *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act* and was charged with assessing how people who engaged in violent crimes would be dealt with in post-Apartheid South Africa. This Commission, composed of members of various political and theological orientations (including one of Af-

rikaaner descent), was to strive to hold individuals accountable for their unjust actions during the Apartheid era.

There was much debate over just how perpetrators were to be punished in the years following the ban of Apartheid. There were some who were supportive of an approach similar to that of the Nuremberg Trials which would consist of extensive investigation and strict reparations while others, mainly those whites who were quick to forget their involvement in Apartheid, advocated complete amnesty and absolution. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, under the leadership of Desmond Tutu, took something of a middle ground between these two opposite spectrums and decided to "grant amnesty to individuals in exchange for a full disclosure relating to the crime for which amnesty was being sought" ("No Future" 30). Specifically, the requirements for amnesty were as follows: the act for which amnesty was required must have occurred between 1960 & 1994, the act must have been politically motivated, the applicant must disclose all relevant facts, and all must be measured according to a rubric of proportionality, that is, as to whether the means were proportional to the objective ("No Future" 49). Based on these qualifications the TRC was able to make a recommendation which was to be approved by the President and lastly by Parliament as a final check.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is Tutu's most notable political activity in South Africa and it was through this commission that many of the injustices of Apartheid were handled. Over a decade after its creation, the success of the TRC is more than acknowledged but the process of creating a unified commission and coming up with an effective strategy for dealing with the dehumanization left by Apartheid at times seemed insurmountable to the former Archbishop. It was not until taking a "spiritual retreat" upon the recommendation of Chairman Tutu and President of South African Nelson Mandela that members of the Commission were able to unite in a common vision ("No Future" 81-82). From the very beginning the work of the TRC was going to be founded heavily upon both Christian and African themes. It is from this religious background, mainly the faith grounding of its leader, that reconciliation became the means to an end for the commission. An emphasis was shifted to achieving restorative justice as opposed to retributive justice ("No Future" 260). This justice would come about through the threefold process of confession, forgiveness and reparation ("No Future" 173). Granting amnesty did not mean forgetting the horrible crimes committed under Apartheid; it meant holding one accountable for participation in injustice and forgiveness from those upon whom injustice was inflicted. It meant telling the stories, owning up to one's role in the stories, and setting forth a way to move past those stories towards a more peaceful future.

Appropriately, the basic premise and slogan of the TRC was “The Truth Hurts, But Silence Kills” (“No Future” 107). The process of de-silencing South Africa was by no means an easy process, a fact the Commission was often reminded of. Many times the stories told by individuals subpoenaed to the Commission were brutal and on more than one occasion brought members of the TRC to tears. It is important to note that the TRC, although often criticized as being secretly controlled by Mandela’s ANC, was granting amnesty both to proponents of Apartheid, such as police officers and elected officials, as well as those deemed “terrorists” who revolted against the state and Apartheid. This meant that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was forced to tackle both sides of the Apartheid debate by showing that violence under the system was not acceptable and that retaliation to the system through the use of even more violence was also unacceptable. Implicit in the TRC’s goals and overarching framework was an ethic of reconciliation, with the ultimate goal of moving beyond the divisive days of Apartheid to a future in South Africa where, in Tutu’s words, “all the Rainbow people of God” could find a home.

Tutu was able to realize on a personal level, by working with the TRC, just how prone individuals truly are to sinful behavior. He states repeatedly in his own account about his work with the Commission how everyone has “the capacity for the most awful evil—every one of us” (“No Future” 85). As a religious leader centered in the fight against Apartheid, Tutu came into contact with many people who, due to either their dehumanization or their blindness to the evils of the system, were able to commit awful crimes - including rape, murder, physical beating, bombing of public areas, and even the use of chemical warfare. It seems difficult to understand, in the context of all of this sin and evil, how Tutu or any of his colleagues could actually retain any sort of faith or hope that reconciliation was possible. Tutu’s strong theological convictions were what enabled him to realize not only humans’ universal propensity towards evil, but also their propensity towards forgiveness. Through the many horror stories, members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were able to advocate for reconciliation because of a belief rooted in *ubuntu* and in God’s love for all of creation - a belief that Christianity could be a tool used to affirm our togetherness and the importance of respecting the lives of members of all races.

Tutu states, “We have supplied God with enough evidence if God had needed it to want to dispatch us all, to wipe the slate clean as when He tried to make a fresh start with the Flood” (“God Dream” 144). But this is not what has happened in South Africa so it is up to the free will of humans to find their proper place in

creation, which for Tutu has to be in connection with all individuals irregardless of personal differences. This is why reconciliation between all people is what must be realized, and who better to lead the cause than a man whose entire life was pervaded by a theology founded upon the principles of equality and community? Tutu is a valuable model because of his insistence on using reconciliation to put racial injustice to an end and halt the violent policies endorsed by the Nationalist government.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, operating under a biblical ethic of reconciliation, sought to provide as many reparations as possible to the victims of Apartheid but ultimately monetary compensation would not provide the kind of healing that needed to take place in South Africa. What South Africa needed first and foremost was a way to come to terms with its awful past by owning up to injustice, attempting to compensate for that injustice, and most importantly, finding a way to move past that injustice to ensure a brighter future. The only way Tutu and his colleagues could imagine achieving that goal was through the ethic and process of reconciliation. Due to the African concept of *ubuntu*, people must always be interconnected and interdependent working on strengthening the bond between humanity as apposed to our divisions. Coupled with the biblical ethic of reconciliation present in the Pauline letters, bringing the people of South Africa back together was imperative.

Given the tragic experience of South Africa and what seemed like insurmountable challenges, it is amazing that individuals were able to retain a strong enough hope in a better future to actually enable that future to one day occur. South Africa was a country which since the early 1600's was led with an ethic of divide and rule, where whites and non-whites were relegated to completely different social, economic and occupational spheres. Since 1994, however, this is no longer a defining characteristic of South Africa and this is due in large part to those individuals who advocated reconciliation. Desmond Tutu clearly shows how the Biblical notion of reconciliation and the African concept of *ubuntu* are at the center of his belief system, but he also stresses the important role played by Nelson Mandela as the most "potent agent for reconciliation" ("No Future" 10). Not only was this man able to lead a country torn into two by bloodshed but he was also able to come to grips with his own unjust past. This ex-prisoner of 27 years, upon the day of his induction into the Presidency, did what many individuals never expected. He personally invited all of the police officers and correctional facility workers to his inauguration as an initial powerful step towards reconciliation. He was one who, according to Tutu, embodied *ubuntu* by the willingness to open himself up

to all of God's creation in order to restore the network of interdependence which had been broken down by Apartheid and its supporters for over 50 years.

These changes were only furthered by the work of the TRC under Desmond Tutu's magnanimous leadership. The TRC was able to hear over 2,000 claims for reparations and amnesty during the length of its commission. It was, of course, unable to attend to the nearly 1.5 million South Africans who died under the system of Apartheid yet it made many important strides towards reconciliation and "re-creating" a South Africa composed of a unified people, or of "all God's children" as Tutu so often likes to refer to it. Tutu's work and belief in reconciliation has not been limited to South Africa, for this Archbishop has visited other areas of political unrest including Ireland, Palestine, Rwanda, and Israel. In all these cases Tutu has preached and embodied an ethic of reconciliation as the only way to deal with the injustice and division of power in all of these countries. According to Tutu, reconciliation is an approach that has succeeded in liberating South Africa and other nations may look to South Africa as an example in order to deal with their own struggles. It is clearly his biblical ethic of reconciliation coupled with a profound African spirituality that has motivated Desmond Tutu to embody his beliefs and extend them to the TRC in order to reassemble a broken South Africa. He states, "To work for reconciliation is to want to realize God's dream for humanity-when we will know that we are indeed members of one family, bound together in a delicate network on interdependence" ("No Future" 274).

As a final note it must be emphasized that what was so revolutionary about Tutu's work with the TRC was his ability to combine his Anglican beliefs, African spirituality and concern for human kind and turn it into a plan for action. The former Archbishop was a man whose life was dedicated towards creating a theology of praxis that was actually able to speak to worldly injustice. In Tutu's case, his theology of praxis was very instrumental in bringing Apartheid to an end and his model of reconciliation still stands as a powerful example to nations under political strife throughout the world.