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B Easter 06

Prayer and Archbishop Desmond Tutu
A Sermon For the Induction of Daughters of the King Members

One of my favorite people and heroes is the former Anglican Archbishop of Capetown, Desmond Tutu. A man of surpassing courage and compassion, this diminutive first black Archbishop in South Africa models his deep spirituality on our Lord Jesus to a degree that brings “Ohs” of wonder to any thinking person. A victim of, and leader against, the vile system of racial discrimination that was apartheid in South Africa, this leader in God’s church proclaims the words of his Lord from the cross, “Father, forgive.”

Let me briefly tell you a little about him, courtesy of Wikipedia. In 1984, Tutu became the second South African to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Tutu was the first black South African Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, and primate [Presiding Bishop] of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that is bringing healing to his country. Tutu is vocal in his defense of human rights and uses his high profile to campaign for the oppressed. Tutu also campaigns to fight AIDS, homophobia, poverty and racism. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism, and the Gandhi Peace Prize in 2005.

In the early 1980's Archbishop Tutu was the speaker at one of our clergy conferences. I think it no exaggeration to say that we all fell in love with this engaging Anglican who was then putting his life on the line against apartheid.

Besides his compassion, one of the things I most admire about Archbishop Tutu is his devotion to prayer. In his writings over and over again one hears his call to prayer, his confidence in the power of prayer. Let me quote you one of his stories from the magazine of the National Cathedral in Washington in 2007:

‘Some years ago, during the era of apartheid in South Africa, I visited General Theological Seminary in New York. I met up with a nun; in fact, she was a solitary. And I said, “Please, just tell me a little bit about yourself, about your life.”

‘And she said, “I live in the woods in California, and my day starts at two in the morning, and I pray for you.”

‘I said, “Here I am being prayed for at two in the morning in the woods of California! What chance does the apartheid government stand?”

‘Most of us don’t take seriously the power of prayer. How much we owe to those dear old ladies who faithfully go to the Eucharist every Wednesday morning. They’re unspectacular, unsung.

We're probably going to discover some extraordinary things when we get to heaven. We'll be amazed at the number of people who sustained us.

'In the prophecy of Zachariah, the New Jerusalem will be so populous that it can't have conventional wars. Yahweh says, "I will be a wall of fire all around it, and I will be the glory within it" (2.5). As we struggled to end apartheid, we experienced that wall of fire, provided by the staggering number of Christians around the world who prayed for us. That was one of the most important things for us....

'The wonderful thing of course is that ultimately nothing depends on you. So if my prayers are lousy and arid, and I'm bombarded by all kinds of distractions, in a way it doesn't matter. Just throw yourself into this stream, because it's an ongoing stream.

'As you go about your business, angels and archangels are glorifying God in an amazing current that says you don't have to do anything! Just trust. Just throw yourself into this current and you're borne up, buoyed by that unbelievable fervor of those who are holier than you....'

(Archbishop Desmond Tutu, November 2007, remarks at Washington National Cathedral, quoted in Cathedral Age, p 18-23.)

I share Archbishop Tutu's confidence in prayer. I am also confused and amazed by prayer. I don't understand how it works. I know all the arguments against it. I know that many times, maybe most, it seems our prayers are not answered. I know that many times the answer to my prayer is not the one I want. I know the atrocities in our world that people cite as proof that there is no God to pray to, at least, no God that is concerned. I know all this, and yet I pray. I know all this, and yet I believe in a God of mercy and compassion who knows His people by name (Isaiah 43.1) and shepherds them home (John 10.11). I know all this, and yet believe that God did indeed focus Himself into the life of Jesus Christ as a way to bring us creatures closer to Himself. I know all this, and yet put my confidence in all those gospel passages that say that Jesus went away by Himself to pray, often all night long. I put my confidence in the prayers we hear him utter as He heals the sick around Him. I put my confidence in those two magnificent prayers from Gethsemane and from the cross: "not what I want but what you want" (Mark 14.36) and "Father, forgive." (Luke 23.34) I put my confidence in the experience that my prayer is answered, often in better ways that I can understand, just like Job in the Old Testament (Job 38 - 41). I am just glad that I have someone like Archbishop Tutu in my corner to encourage me in my trust in a mystery that I cannot fathom.

Then it will come as no surprise to you that I value and encourage the Daughters of the King in our parish. This order of women is devoted to prayer and study in the ways of the Lord. When we formed our parish chapter of the DOK decades ago, I asked them to make their central task to pray for our parish and its people. Members of the DOK meet weekly to do just that and in the process produce the prayer list for our parish. All of the Daughters meet once a month to study a book or other material, relate their own spiritual experiences, and remain true to their promise to

pray for the world and its needs. We're going to bring in some new members to our parish chapter in today's prayers of the people.

But don't let the Daughters of the King, as faithful as they are, be the only ones to pray in our parish. You don't have to understand prayer; I don't. But we do have to trust prayer, which is really trust in the God to whom our prayer is addressed. God would not be God if She were small enough to be comprehended by our tiny intellects. So the only reasonable approach is that of the heart, the faith in that One who goes beyond where we can follow, the trust that we are loved ever before we get around to returning that love. Trust and pray. Amen.