

Sermon: Sunday 14 August 2011
Genesis 45: 1-15

‘As the Captain held the cup, Mandela put his left hand on his right shoulder, fixed him with a fond gaze, shook his right hand and said “Francois, thank you very much for what you have done for our country” (from ‘Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Made a Nation’ by John Carlin. NY, Penguin Books c 2008.) Pienaar, meeting Mandela’s eyes replied “No, Mr President, thank you for what you have done for our country”.

The book ‘Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Made a Nation’ and the movie ‘Invictus’, tell of the long history behind, and eventual power of the 1995 World Cup. Historically, the South African rugby team, the Springboks, embodied white supremacist rule. But through the teamwork of Nelson Mandela and team captain, Francois Pienaar, the 1995 World Cup held in South Africa victoriously reconciled and united South Africa in miraculous ways.’ (Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life p83)

The story goes something like this (source Wikipedia):

After 27 years in gaol Nelson Mandela is released in 1990. His immediate challenge is to ‘balance black aspirations with white fears’ as racial tensions from the apartheid era had not completely disappeared. While Mandela attempted to tackle the country’s largest problems - crime and unemployment, among many others - he attends a rugby match where the Springboks were playing. Mandela recognises that the blacks in the stand cheer against their home team because the Springboks represent prejudice and apartheid. Mandela remarks that he did the same while imprisoned on Robben Island.

Knowing that South Africa is set to host the 1995 World Cup in one year’s time, Mandela convenes a meeting of the newly-black-dominated South African Sports Committee to support the Springboks rugby team. He then meets with the Springbok Captain Francois Pienaar and implies that a victory in the World Cup will unite and inspire the nation. Mandela also shares with Pienaar a poem, ‘Invictus’ that had inspired him during his time in prison.

Pienaar and his team mates train. Many South Africans, both white and black, doubt that rugby will unite a nation torn apart by some 50 years of racial tension. For many non whites, especially the radicals, the Springboks symbolised white domination. However both Mandela and Pienaar stand firmly behind their theory that the game can successfully unite the country.

Things start to change as the players interact with the locals. During the opening games, support for the Springboks begins to grow among non whites. By the second game, citizens of all races attend to support the Springboks and Mandela’s efforts.

The Springboks surpass all expectations and qualify for the final match against the New Zealand All Blacks - the most successful rugby team at the time. Prior to the game, the Springbok team visit Robben Island where Mandela spent 17 of his 27 years in gaol. Pienaar mentions his amazement that Mandela “could spend thirty years in a tiny cell, and come out ready to forgive the people who put [him] there”.

Supported by a loyal home crowd of both whites and blacks, Pienaar motivates his team. The Springboks win the match in a last minute long drop kick with a score of 15-12. Mandela and Pienaar meet on the field to celebrate the improbable and

unpredictable victory. Mandela's car can be seen driving away in the traffic-jammed streets leaving the stadium. As Mandela watches the South Africans celebrating together, in the car, his voice is heard reciting the poem 'Invictus', by William Ernest Henley, 1848-1902

It goes like this:

Invictus

Out of the night that covers me
Black as the pit from pole to pole
I thank whatever gods may be
for my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
my head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
looms but the horror of the shade
and yet the menace of the years
finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate
How charged with punishments of the scroll,
I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.

Joseph, who has been sold into slavery, deserted by his brothers, falsely accused, imprisoned, and risen to be the most powerful man in Egypt - beside Pharaoh, also makes bold moves towards reconciliation - but with his family.

Remember the dream? God's dream? His dream? All turns out well in the end.

This Joseph seems to have grown up! Hardship, prison, God's presence seem to have changed him.

Unlike the poet in 'Invictus', Joseph thanks God for his wellbeing and growth. Yet he too, like Mandela, must have been made of stern stuff. He interprets all his history as within God's grace and providence.

Finally, Joseph's brothers had come seeking help during the famine. He gave them a bit of a hard time - a testing time, only now is he ready to reveal himself to them.

Joseph is overwhelmed with emotion at having his brothers, those who had treated him with such cruelty, in his presence. Joseph wept so loudly, the household of Pharaoh hear him. I wonder.

What are your hopes for forgiveness and greater peace and harmony within yourself, your relationships, our community and the world?

As a community gathered around the table to celebrate communion together, one person was deliberate about standing next to the minister with whom she had a disagreement that had festered for months. The minister was fully aware of the

presence, and, to be honest, it made her a little uncomfortable. But then it came time to share the peace. The two turned to one another and said ‘The peace of God is with you’, and reconciliation had begun - brave, bold reconciliation. (Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life)

It takes an act of will, of desire, to take steps towards reconciliation. Yet it is we who suffer most if we do not. It takes one step at a time. And for me, the first step is to pray for my enemies, to pray for those from whom I am estranged. Day by day by day by day, bring them before God in my heart. If I cannot forgive, I ask God to. Slowly, slowly my heart melts and changes and I write, or ring and offer peace. It may be rejected but I offer. It is not simple, and it is not a linear journey but with God’s help, transformation begins. Sometimes a way forward is difficult to imagine. I begin with prayer. I cannot change others, only myself. I can take tiny steps towards restoration, peace; and it makes a difference.

The stories of Mandela in South Africa and Joseph in Egypt gave me hope. that I can grow, that I can choose peace and reconciliation.

‘It matters not how strait the gate
How charged with punishments of the scroll,
I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.’

I thank God ‘for my unconquerable soul’. I have choices, and I thank God, I am not alone. In God I trust, to God I turn and choose reconciliation, peace, by God’s grace. And I pray that a way forward can be found, in Britain, in Ethiopia, in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, in Australia, in Canberra, in this community, in my home, in my heart.

In ‘Simple Peace’, Bruce Davis writes:

‘Instead of controlling others, Francis [of Assisi] wanted to feel his own pain and bring this to God. Instead of looking for love from others and then being disappointed when they were not how he wished, Francis knew God could only be found inside. Instead of judging others and complaining, he went further inside to the place of total support. Francis had found God. He knew this love was the only true healer, friend and lover. His heart went out to all those who were in pain but had no place of refuge, who had found no clear way to love’s simple peace. Francis laid down every struggle as soon as he could. “There is only forgiveness. There is only forgiveness,” he would shout out for anyone who was listening. Francis knew the first and perhaps only relationship is between each soul and God. Until this relationship is affirmed, all others will suffer.’

Daily at the Abbey of the Iona Community, at 2.30pm there is a service focussing on Peace and reconciliation. That is one of the charisms of that community. It is encouraging and challenging.

‘There is only forgiveness’