

Sunday December 8, 2013

Bumbling error helps break barriers

By Jim Taylor

Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison as a terrorist plotting against the state, 18 of in them the notorious Robben Island prison, before becoming South Africa's first black president in 1994, died on Thursday.

I'll let others describe his exploits and achievements. I want to celebrate Mandela by telling a story – a skill in which he himself excelled – about doing my own little bit to abolish apartheid.

Forty years ago, I was a young journalist, sent to the landlocked and desperately poor nation of Malawi, in Central Africa, to help the churches there tell their story to the world.

The country's churches – including the Roman Catholics and Pentecostals -- had set aside their doctrinal differences to work together through an organization called the Christian Service Committee. Part of their goal was simply to avoid duplicating efforts – to ensure that the Presbyterians and Lutherans and Catholics didn't all solicit funds from the same overseas donor with conflicting claims.

First hand experience

I arrived in Malawi to discover that the man who had arranged for my visit wasn't there. His assistant decided that if I was going to write about CSC projects, I should see them first hand. He put me into the back of a Nissan station wagon, along with a Malawian staff driver, photographer, and guide, plus a tent, four sleeping bags, and a picnic basket.

For two weeks, we travelled through the country. I got to see how donor organizations in England, Germany, and Canada helped to build medical clinics, provide clean drinking water, plant trees, equip schools, train farmers, and teach nutrition.

At night, we found accommodation wherever we could -- in guest houses, nunneries, schools, or medical clinics. Several times, we simply set up our tent beside a dusty back road, on the shores of a lake, or in a school playground...

Two weeks in close proximity like that can make or break relationships. In this case, fortunately, we became friends.

Dinner invitation

One afternoon, we swirled down a winding dirt road into an idyllic valley. A neat whitewashed farmhouse stood beyond a manicured green lawn, tucked under the shoulder of a rocky ridge. Multi-coloured bougainvillea climbed the walls; blue jacaranda blossoms echoed the sky above.

The missionary was a white Afrikaner, sent to Malawi by the Dutch Reformed Church, the most powerful bulwark of apartheid in South Africa. Proudly he showed me the modern farming methods he was teaching local villagers.

And at the end of the tour, he asked me, generously, "Would you like to have dinner with us?"

I accepted with pleasure. And then, realizing this might be an imposition on his family's food resources, I asked, "Will you have enough for all of us?"

There was a startled silence. My three black friends exchanged looks, but I didn't understand why. The Boer man swallowed. But having extended the invitation, he couldn't withdraw it.

"Oh, yes," he said, grandly. "We have plenty."

It was an excellent dinner. The host and his wife inquired about the project I was working on. My three friends participated in the conversation, speaking knowledgeably about the places and projects they had shown me.

But I noticed that the host's children never ate a single mouthful. They just stared at the three black men sitting at their dinner table.

We drove off as the evening light faded to mauve. Once out of sight of the farmhouse, my black friends burst into gales of laughter.

"What's so funny?" I demanded.

"You!" they chorused. "The servants told us that was the first time any black man ever sat at that table! And you just blundered into it, as if it was the most normal request in the world!"

Cracks in the armour

I had no further contact with that South African farmer. So I can't know if his prejudices went back up after we left. Or if, as a result of our visit, his relationships with his black students and neighbours loosened a little.

But I'm sure that things could never be the same again. For him. Or for his awestruck children.

That was 1971. Apartheid in South Africa didn't end until 1994.

It's often forgotten that the constitutional changes that dismantled apartheid, that enabled black Africans to vote, first had to be approved by an all-white government dominated by the Dutch Reformed Church.

I doubt if the Boer farmer I embarrassed in Malawi had any significant influence in his church. I hope that perhaps he was able to witness to a few others in his denomination, from his own experience, that breaching the colour barrier did not necessarily usher in the apocalypse.

I like to think that my social gaffe might have created a tiny crack in the fortress of apartheid. Until eventually Nelson Mandela could become his country's first black president.

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YOUR TURN

Just in case anyone was wondering, I wasn't suggesting that at Advent we should be anticipating someone or something other than Jesus. I'm just not sure he's going to bring a message that we're expecting.

As Isabel Gibson mused, "Leave it to you to contrast 'certainty' and 'hope.' I'd never thought before about how they might be opposites, since the one sort of rules out the point of the other, but I hope (hah) to never forget it. [The column was] a great and unexpected gift for the start of Advent. I wonder what else lies in wait?"

Similarly, John van Dyk wrote, "It seems that we have our Christmas traditions so sewn up that we leave no room for the unexpected. The real mystery of Christmas is not only what happened so long ago, but what's happening now and especially what happens next. As C.S. Lewis wrote [about Aslan, in the Narnia tales], 'He's not a tame lion, but he is good'."

And David Denholm took some potshots at predictable preaching: "Unfortunately most preachers already know what they are going to say today ... the same as they said 'yesterday, (today), and will say again in all their tomorrows.' However there is still the 'remnant' who wait ... and wonder -- much of the time outside and away from 'the baby Jesus' community."

John Willems sent his own version of waiting for a spouse: "I remember well, the day that my wife told me, 'I'll sit in the car and honk while YOU get the kids ready.'"

Then he carried on: "You ask, what am I waiting for? I'm waiting for the realization of a vision a convict had serving out his sentence on a penal colony in the Mediterranean Sea. But I don't want to be so heavenly minded that I'm no earthly good. So I'm not going to miss an opportunity to give food to people who ask for it without sitting in judgement, I am going to give strangers car wash tokens, I am going to visit lonely people in the hospital, I am going to be somebodies friend. Advent can then last all year."

Randy Hall admitted that he borrowed part of the column for his sermon last Sunday. "The anticipation of Advent, however, makes me think about the tension between living in that anticipation and 'living in the moment.' What think ye?"

I replied that I don't think the two are in conflict. To me, "waiting in anticipation" doesn't mean sitting on my backside doing nothing. If I'm waiting for a dear friend to arrive, I still have to clean the house and get the dinner ready. Even if we don't know exactly what we're waiting for, we still have to clean our societal house and feed the hungry. It's an active waiting, not an idle waiting.

Or even an idol waiting...

Lyle Phillips was more interested in the letters about Rob Ford: "I agree with the points made in Constance St. Hilaire's letter. However, her last statement 'Isn't it the role of the churches to be our moral counselor?' seems to contradict the rest of her letter. She seems to be blaming the church for our lack of moral comfort. I think our morals come from many different sources from the time we are born -- our parents, our friends, our observations, our teachers, as well as the church."

Eileen Wttewaal also commented favourably on Constance's letter: "Churches need to be much more moral counsellors than physical comforters."

On Advent, Eileen went on, "Too many, whether Jewish or not, are still looking for a superman and a false certainty. It is why, to me, the advent season is a time when most hymns and readings are theologically repulsive with the romanticized stable and the anticipated king who will fulfill all our dreams."

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslIKEGod" page, www.seemslIKEgod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsraps@shaw.ca

- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. [<http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>](http://www.churchwebcanada.ca)
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
