

# MANDELA'S LESSONS FOR ZAMBIA

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“Who is Nelson Mandela for me?” “What lessons does his life teach me?”

These are some of the questions which crossed my mind last week when celebrations were being held for the 90<sup>th</sup> birthday of this great South African leader. And I imagine many others here in Zambia had similar questions. And we wondered whether this great figure could teach us some things that we should know and practice here in Zambia these days.

Let me begin my reflections with a personal story. I'm indebted to Mandela for my first (and last??) arrest and jailing for civil disobedience! It was a bright summer day in the mid-1980s in Washington, DC, when I joined one of the daily protest marches outside the Embassy of South Africa, chanting “Free Nelson Mandela, End Unjust Apartheid!” with great courage and vigour.

Well, as was the custom I and my fellow protestors were arrested by Washington police (who probably themselves were in deep sympathy with our cause!), handcuffed and taken off to jail for booking as “disturbers of the peace.” We were released, with the reprimand to behave ourselves and not disturb the good relations between the USA and the RSA!

I've often thought of that event in reflecting on what Mandela has meant to me. But let me list here five lessons that seem to me to be very important for us these days in Zambia.

## RECONCILIATION

A truly amazing fact in the life of Mandela was his willingness to go an extra mile or two in the process of reconciliation with those who imprisoned him for 27 years. He did this because of his belief that it was only through an effort at reconciliation that a new, just and peaceful South Africa could be born. And so he was willing to sit down at the table with FW de Klerk and negotiate a new Constitution and a process of democratic elections for new leadership.

Mandela put into political practice the truth of the phrase, “If I am unwilling to forgive the enemies who oppress me, then I am willing to allow them to continue to oppress me.” Perhaps a phrase too easily said, and certainly a phrase that requires nuancing according to the specific circumstances. But a truth, nevertheless, and a call for political maturity.

There is much debate in Zambia today about “reconciliation” and what it should mean. Both those who espouse it and those who criticise it should reflect on the lesson of Mandela's practice of reconciliation which won for him (along with de Klerk) the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. It does not mean giving in or sacrificing on principles, but a willingness to be humble enough to come together and settle issues that would bring great good to the whole country.

“Reconcilers” in Zambia, indeed, all of us, can learn from that lesson!

## LEADERSHIP

I've heard it said that Nelson Mandela set a very bad example for the leaders of other African countries. Why? Because he willingly stepped aside after four years as President, to allow others to take up leadership positions. Bad example? Well, at least an example that was not

much appreciated by the self-acclaimed “indispensable” leaders of so many other African countries, especially those in the immediate vicinity of South Africa!

Mandela’s understanding of leadership appears to be beyond the person-to-holder understanding of power to be used for one’s own family, tribe, region, or bank accounts. Effective leadership is “servant leadership,” for the good of all the people. And it is humble leadership, leadership that does not focus on the glory of one’s own personality but the glory of the nation one is privileged to lead.

It is understandable, then, why Mandela could recently say, “We watch with sadness the continuing ... tragic failure of leadership in our neighbouring Zimbabwe.” And certainly his lesson of truly patriotic leadership should be closely examined right now in Zambia amidst all the fiery debates and polemical disputes about the status of future presidential candidates.

## **YOUTH**

It might seem strange to learn a lesson about youth from a 90-year old person! But his passionate commitment to learning – not for personal advancement but for the good of the nation – is surely an important lesson. While imprisoned on Robben Island, Mandela studied law and economics through UNISA and the London Law Correspondence College. Surely the prison conditions were not the best of situations for serious study, but his motives overcame all obstacles.

I recall Mandela’s visit to Lusaka just a short time after release from prison in 1990, when he addressed faculty and students at the University of Zambia. His message was a strong plea for students to take advantage of their wonderful privilege for higher education and to seriously prepare themselves to serve the people of Zambia. These were not just the formalised words to be expected to come from a visiting lecturer. They were the authentic calls from a selfless fighter for justice.

Youth at UNZA and elsewhere in academic institutions in Zambia would do well to reflect on the lesson espoused by Mandela about the value of education, education that can ultimately be acquired even in a miserable prison cell or in a crowded hostel filled with squatters!

## **POVERTY**

Mandela has taught many lessons about social justice, but one that really strikes me and inspires our work at JCTR is his exclamation about situations of poverty in our world today. In a famous speech in London’s Trafalgar Square in 2005, he powerfully stated: “We have made slavery history! We have made apartheid history! And we will make poverty history!”

In other words, Mandela was urging us to recognise that poverty is not a natural situation but a consequence of political, economic and cultural structures that “impoverish” people. Surely in Zambia we need to learn the lesson that terrible poverty in this very rich country is not primarily the result of people’s being lazy but the outcome of failed policies, bad priorities and selfish personalities!

## **SAINT?**

One final lesson from Mandela’s life: one can indeed be a “holy politician.” I’m not about to “canonise” Madiba -- leave that to others more knowledgeable and more authoritative! But I do believe we can see some of the traits of holiness that we often associate with Biblical

figures and great saintly heroines and heroes in history: love, mercy, humility, courage, selflessness, forgiveness, encouragement, etc.

Yes, maybe Mandela might be a “secular saint” – even with all the political and personal ups and downs that might mark his life. But at least I can say that he should be an inspiration in providing challenging lessons for Zambian politicians, both old and young, who aspire to lead in this so-called “Christian nation.”

Can we celebrate a 90<sup>th</sup> birthday of this great African by learning some lessons so needed here in Zambia these days?

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