

Christ Church, Bath

Isaiah 60.1-6

Psalms 72.[1-9]10-15

Ephesians 3.1-12

Matthew 2.1-12

Sunday 2 January 2022  
10am

*Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

We woke up on Boxing Day to the news that Archbishop Desmond Tutu had died early that morning. Yesterday his beloved rainbow nation honoured him with a state funeral.

You could say that Desmond Tutu's own epiphanies were given to him as a child. He spoke of two. The first, when he saw Trevor Huddleston doffing his broad-brimmed hat to his mother. The second, when he was a young teenager, and he noticed the township boys scavenging for food in the rubbish tip. The white boys in the school (this was before the apartheid laws had banned mixed education) would throw away perfectly good sandwiches from their lunch boxes. How come they had food to throw away, when his friends had none at home?

But Desmond Tutu's life isn't just about the epiphanies granted to him. His life was an epiphany in itself because he never tired of the task of opening our eyes to the glory of God and the kingdom of heaven. Our epiphany carols celeb-

rate the visit of the Magi, telling us that their gold was a gift for a king, incense points to the divinity of Christ, and myrrh foretells his death. I'm not sure about the last one, as I'll explain in a bit. But this morning, I want to use them as pointers to understanding how Desmond Tutu's life has helped all of us understand our own faith and beliefs a little better.

In almost all human societies, one of the jobs of a king (or his equivalent – today we might say government) is to give his people justice. When Desmond Tutu saw his friends scavenging for food amongst the refuse, he knew that the White government was doing the exact opposite. As a qualified teacher a few years later (and so at least indirectly an officer of the state) he decided he could not be part of that system. That's when he decided to be a priest. He was trained by the Mirfield Fathers, the community to which Trevor Huddleston belonged, and after ordination at King's College London. His theological training equipped him to articulate his call for justice, allowing him to draw on two thousand years of Christian tradition so that he could explain it –

first of all to his congregations, later to the world.

His appointment as the first Black Dean of Johannesburg made him a public figure. Within a couple of years he'd been ordained bishop, first of all in Lesotho (a nominally independent state landlocked within South Africa on all four sides), then of Johannesburg, and in 1985 Archbishop of Cape Town.

From the first he was warning that a failure to address racial inequality would lead to dire consequences. Politicians (including liberals and those sharing his passions) accused him of naivete. But that wasn't the point. As a high church Anglican we might say that he knew all about incense, and it was his status as a priest that gave him both his moral authority, and ironically protection. It was the image of God in people that he saw disfigured by apartheid. Not just in the victims of apartheid, but also in the perpetrators. Their humanity was being destroyed too, for that's what hatred does to hearts and minds.

He could see that God's image was being overshadowed in the church too. My guess is that he

found our English Christianity very buttoned-up. While studying at King's he was attached to churches in both London and later Southwark dioceses. He encountered in these congregations the same racist cold-shouldering that the Windrush generation was finding. Sharing the peace was quite a novelty in the 1970s. (I suspect that generation would have welcomed our distanced peace-sharing in Covid!) Although this story doesn't date from those days, the present Bishop of Manchester tells of a service the now retired archbishop was leading. To encourage people to overcome English shyness at the Peace, he led the congregation in a conga round the building.

It's very easy for us to forget that Desmond Tutu spent a lot of his time being a priest and being a bishop. An English friend of mine (I was his churchwarden for a time in Manchester) was a priest in both Lesotho and Zimbabwe back in the 1980 and 90s. He was having a terrible time with the authorities, not least his bishop (who was being pressured by the government). Desmond Tutu may have been active on the world stage, travelling overseas and all the rest. But he still

found the time to intervene in my friend's plight as his Archbishop, to give support and work for a resolution.

Myrrh. Western Christianity has long associated this gift with Christ's burial, and it's true that it would have been among the spices brought to the tomb. But eastern Christianity also remembers that myrrh is one of the ingredients that the Hebrews used in the oil by which they anointed their kings. (Incidentally, it's an ingredient in the oil used to anoint the Queen in Westminster Abbey – the recipe is in Exodus chapter 30.) I think it is highly probable that this is what St Matthew has in mind in telling this gospel story. The magi, in recognising the infant as king and priest, also saw in him the One who was to redeem Israel.

As a priest, Desmond Tutu believed in redemption, in forgiveness. This found expression in the way he chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But it was also seen when he dived into a black township mob, and physically prevented them from 'necklacing', burning to death, a young man accused of collaborating with the White police. Tutu could easily have been killed.

But African culture, even when not at its best, can still recognise a man of God, and listen.

I don't think any of us would be surprised if, in a few year's time, the Anglican churches remember Desmond Tutu with a special day, or that he will join the growing list of African saints such as Janani Luwum whom we commemorate. But Desmond Tutu would be the first to acknowledge that he was far from perfect, because none of us are.

The gold that we offer our King is often tarnished, the incense not the best, the myrrh – well, perhaps we have difficulty in sourcing it. That doesn't release us from our responsibility to do our best with what we have. And when we do, like the magi we'll be rewarded with the joy of worship. Moreover, those who travel through life with us will also catch a glimpse of him, if only through a crack in the stable door.