



## Steve Bantu Biko Memorial Lecture

Delivered By Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu

University Of Cape Town - 26th September 2006

### Preamble

Thank you for the great honour you have bestowed on me by inviting me to give this year's memorial lecture. Those who tortured and beat Steve up in gaol and killed him so heartlessly, you will recall that he was driven comatose from Port Elizabeth naked in the back of a Land Rover all the way to Pretoria where he was shackled to a grate and left to expire sitting, in his urine, and left to die a death that Mr Jimmy Kruger said, "Left him cold." Phew! They had hoped that would be the end, the inglorious, shameful end of someone they considered a pretty handful. They hoped he would be snuffed out like you blow out a candle. Annihilated, and that would be that. They were doomed to fail.

It is amazing to think that Steve did not have much time to propagate his teachings and in a way, by rights, should have disappeared into oblivion.

This does happen, despite all appearances to the contrary, to be in fact a moral universe. Right, good, justice will ultimately prevail and in this universe extraordinarily greatness is measured by how much the person has served others, how much altruism they have shown and not by how much they have come to own materially, how much self-aggrandisement has happened. He didn't have a flashy car or a big house. He lived in a ghetto township. He did not even have a university degree and by rights should have been consigned to the oblivion reserved for all non-entities.

But what is the reality? I was privileged to preach at his mammoth funeral attended by diplomats and people from all corners of South Africa. Leah and several of her friends tried to come from Soweto and were assaulted by the police and prevented from coming. Perhaps it was just as well. King William's Town would have found it difficult to host so many mourners. That was a funeral for a national hero not a non-entity. There is a statue erected to his honour in East London, unveiled by Madiba, there was the "Cry Freedom" film and then this series of lectures at this great university. These are not things you do for a nonentity.

And what about those who tortured and killed him and those doctors who colluded with them? They have been consigned to the scrap heap of history, mere flotsam and jetsam. Right and goodness have triumphed even if we still do not have the whole, the true story of how Steve died.

What is more we have here an eloquent example that true greatness lies in having given oneself on behalf of others; Jesus did say, "Greater love hath no one than that a person should lay down his life for others." And the people have said a resounding "Amen" to that and you really can't fool all of the people all the time. They will always know who their leaders are and they will be ready to acknowledge them and to the extent that they can, will reward them, will express their appreciation to them. You cannot buy that affirmation by the people. We know it - the apartheid regime tried to foist its candidates on us as our leaders and the people, i.e. the vast majority, rejected them as but pseudo leaders. Once people have taken you to their hearts as a true, a genuine, leader then nothing anyone tries to do can dislodge the real leader from the hearts of the people.

### Extraordinary Person

Steve was a remarkable young man in his commitment and passion. He was willing to abandon his medical studies when he was expelled from medical school, he was ready to jettison it all because of his all consuming passion to strive for the liberation of his people and their emancipation through appropriate community development and health enhancing projects.



He possessed an incisive and indeed massive intellect. Yes, a charismatic individual who made a unique assessment of why black people were always at the end of the queue, at the bottom of the pile. It was a daringly novel diagnosis, that we were collaborators in our own oppression and subjugation and so he provided the genesis for the Black Consciousness Movement. It really went to the heart of the matter. Language is not merely innocuous, merely descriptive. No, it has the potency to create the reality that it describes and being designated "non European", "non white" was not merely degrading, humiliating, horrendously it had the power of making a child of God doubt that she was indeed a child of God. That is the blasphemous aspect of oppression and injustice. It did not take long after one had been called non this, non the other, for one to take on the identity of a non-entity, to have this demon of self hate, self doubt, of a negative self image gnawing away at one's being. Now that sounds melodramatic, but let me tell you a story.

In 1972 I was Associate Director of the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the World Council of Churches based not in Geneva but in London. I had to travel extensively mainly in sub-Saharan Africa. On my first visit to Nigeria I had to fly from Lagos to Jos in the north. I boarded the plane and the entire crew was black. Both the Captain and 1st Officer were Nigerian and my heart leapt. I grew inches with pride at this realisation that they contradicted all that apartheid South Africa asserted about blacks. We took off smoothly but some time later hit turbulence. Wow! It was scary. You know one time you are up there and then bump, the aeroplane descends and you leave your stomach on the ceiling. To this day I am shocked at what happened next. I really did not know the power of conditioning. I got quite scared because I said, "Hey, there's no white man in the cockpit. Will these blacks be able to land us safely?" Can you believe it?

### **Black Consciousness Movement**

That is what Steve diagnosed in us as our illness and black consciousness was meant to exorcise this demon, to make us realise that as he said, we were human and not inferior as the white person was human and not superior. I internalised what others had decided was to be my identity, not my God-given utterly precious and unique me.

And when I looked inside me and saw this man-made caricature I bridled with anger and hatred and contempt of this false self. I then projected it outwards to those who outwardly looked like me. Before my superior white overlords I quaked with demeaning obsequiousness and before those who looked like the thing I hated and despised I was harsh and abrasive.

We used to laugh as we heard the story of the man who answered the telephone and when he heard his white boss' voice, would hurriedly pull off his cap. And yet this same person would be harsh as he excoriated his fellow blacks. You know how the black mine clerks treated the black mine workers, screaming at them to the delight of their white bosses. You recall the brutality of black constables to their own in order to curry favour with their white superiors. Or how someone perhaps to whom you had given a tip would say thinking they were praising you, "Oh, you're my white boss, ungu umlungu wam, o lekhoa laka" or how black domestic workers would declare proudly that they did not work for black employers - this even if they would be paid more. Frequently of course they were right because there were no greater exploiters of blacks than their fellow blacks. Or you would see how abominably badly we often drive in black townships because fundamentally we do not respect one another. We used to do things we would never dream of doing in town, like stopping at an awkward point at a street corner - oh, and our taxi drivers, they have usually taken the cake.

Well, why do I use the past tense? The fact of the matter is that we still depressingly do not respect one another. I have often said Black Consciousness did not finish the work it set out to do.

Why have we lost our deeply African reverence for life? Just look at what happens with say a car hijack. The scared owner hands over the keys and for no earthly reason he/she will be shot dead in cold blood for the sheer hell of it; utterly gratuitously, wantonly.



Is it not horrendous to an African, even before Black Consciousness came on the scene, for what ever reason for an adult man to rape a 9 month old baby? What has come over us? Perhaps we did not realise just how apartheid has damaged us so that we seem to have lost our sense of right and wrong, so that when we go on strike as is our right to do, we are not appalled that some of us can chuck people out of moving trains because they did not join the strike, or why is it common practice now to trash, to go on the rampage? Striking municipal workers empty trash on the streets, other strikers break shop windows, loot and trash the premises? Even our students on strike will often destroy the very facilities they need for their studies. What has happened to us? It seems as if we have perverted our freedom, our rights into licence, into being irresponsible. Rights go hand in hand with responsibility, with dignity, with respect for oneself and for the other.

Can you tell me why we think it is okay to litter? Many of us will chuck a banana/orange peel, a paper wrapping on the ground next to a dustbin. Why? Why are we so unmindful of our environment . Of course many of us still live in poverty and squalor. But you know how, although we were poor long ago, we used to be proud of our surroundings, sweeping even the street. There are many neighbourhoods that make you proud, where people have cultivated lawns and planted gardens and it is all so beautiful and people who don't care are the first to want to sit on those lawns and they will often litter and leave their trash behind. We must tell those who do this that littering is a crime but it is also a sin. We despoil God's creation of which we are supposed to be stewards, caring for it on behalf of God.

There should be things we consider infra dig, below our dignity to do. Most, no all of us here, would not even consider picking up an apple that we were eating if it fell into a dustbin. It should be so with all the bad things we are tolerating, people urinating in public places, etc. There are shops and offices which it is a pleasure to enter. The shop assistants are courteous, friendly, smiling and eager to help as also certain offices - but there are others where they think they are doing you a favour. There are municipal, provincial, government offices which you go to only because you really can't help it. They behave as those others used to behave in the old pass offices - they are rude, inefficient and thoroughly unpleasant. Why, oh why, when it is as easy to be efficient, friendly and courteous? It is because we don't respect one another and, we don't because we don't respect ourselves first. We despise ourselves, we really hate ourselves and project it on to others.

During our struggle against apartheid we refused to obey unjust laws because rightly we wanted to make South Africa ungovernable. We have achieved our goal. We are free. South Africa is a democracy. We have an obligation to obey the laws made by our own legislators. We should be dignified, law abiding citizens, proud of our beautiful land, proud of our freedom won at such great cost. We should not devalue it. We should not abuse our children, our womenfolk.

We are generous, compassionate, caring people at our best. We give the highest praise when we say, "Yu, unobuntu, ona lebotho", this is someone who cares about others, who is generous and hospitable, who respects others, as she hopes and expects they will respect her.

Hey, we have a wonderful country. We have produced outstanding people. The best memorial to Steve Biko would be a South Africa where everyone respects themselves, has a positive self image filled with a proper self esteem and holds others in high regard.

Hey, we are wonderful people. We have given the world a splendid example in our relatively peaceful transition showing that former enemies can at least be colleagues. We have shown Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Rwanda, Burma, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of the Congo that you can have had a violent past and a peaceful present and future.

We have given the world the most admired statesman in Madiba, we have produced a Steve Biko too - the world has marvelled at our capacity to forgive, to walk the path of forgiveness and reconciliation, to be magnanimous and generous. We must take seriously the cry of those who say in the past we were not white enough, today we are not black enough, even if they are wrong. We must take seriously their perception to try to change it. We must beware the dangers of ethnic strife. See what it



has done in Rwanda, Burundi, Bosnia, Kenya, DRC. So let us hear the cry of those who complain about a Nguni-ocracy and even of a Xhosa-ocracy. Many a truth is uttered in jest.

Let us oppose xenophobia, we who were welcomed by countries that were ready to run the gauntlet of the wrath of the South African Defence Force and let us be magnanimous in victory, let us act sensitively in the matter of name changing and not appear to gloat and to ride roughshod over the feelings of others. Let us build up a groundswell of consensus to support any name change and not leave many filled with impotent resentment. Let us try to use name changes as opportunities for nation building.

For you know what, we are indeed a scintillating success waiting to happen.