

When I was a teenager, about 16 or 17, I was lucky enough to witness Archbishop Desmond Tutu deliver a Eulogy. It was not lucky that the 25 year old son of our minister had died from liver cancer, but I now count myself lucky to have experienced listening to Desmond Tutu.

I must confess, I did not count myself lucky at the time. Partly because I was very sad at the loss of Dave, who ran our youth club at the church, but also because in my youthful innocence and the conditioning that was my childhood, I was angry that this man who mixed politics with religion and called for economic sanctions against my country, could speak with love about a young man that I felt he barely knew! Looking back now, I have come to realise that is the very crux of this man of God. Responses to him were sharply polarised, as were mine. He was simultaneously loved and hated, honoured and vilified.

Born in a black township or 'location' outside Klerksdorp in South Africa in 1931, he was raised by a school teacher father and mother who was a domestic servant. He was baptised in the Methodist church but at a young age became a server at an Anglican Church. One of the most influential people in his young life was Trevor Huddleston, who apart from serving as the Bishop of Stepney in London was an ardent anti-apartheid activist. The Arch, as Desmond Tutu is affectionately called, was always drawn to a life of service to other. Initially he wanted to become a doctor but his parents could not afford to send him to university. So he settled for teaching and later was sponsored toward ordination. In order to be a teacher of theology in South Africa, he later studied at King's College of London.

I could continue with many facts and figures about his life, which while interesting and moderately inspirational, isn't really the main message to take away from this man who has so far lived a full and colourful life. If I could use three concepts that resonate with me about him, it would be that he is passionate about righting the wrongs of social injustice, he is passionate about the role of forgiveness in being able to move on and he feels very deeply and personally.

He has been described as a spokesman for his people, a voice for the voiceless. In his younger years, much of his energy was invested in the rights of the black people of South Africa. He believes in non-violent protest and all that he has done in his life has revolved around ensuring that all people are accorded their basic human rights. In a post-Apartheid world, he has focused on many other causes such as gay rights, the ordination of women, the Iraq war and Israel-Palestine Conflict. His influence has been felt in many parts of the world.

In his role as chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he worked tirelessly to give everyone a voice and to find a way to respond to the various human rights abuses that had been committed by both the state and the anti-apartheid activists. Through confession, forgiveness and restitution, The Arch saw a way to bring people back from the brink of civil war to a place where hopefully they could build a new country.

And in all of this life that he has led is his deep faith in a God that sees us all as his children, each one perfect and worthy of his love. Bishop Desmond Tutu has dedicated his life to making that the reality on earth. And if you are wondering how you can possibly make a difference to people the way he has, I will leave you with a quote from the man himself: "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."