



OPEN HEARTS: Volunteers at Stop Hunger Now Southern Africa pack meals as part of the 67 minutes dedicated each year to assist worthy causes.

PICTURE: MOTSHWARI MOFOKENG

Celebrate Mandela day by working together

Madiba inspired a communal commitment to uplift the most vulnerable

NELSON Mandela is regarded as one of the most revered statesmen of our time for promoting reconciliation and helping to heal a deeply fractured nation when calls for retribution were loudest. It is not surprising that every year on July 18, his birthday, people all over the world celebrate Mandela Day to honour his legacy.

While Mandela is universally lauded for bringing together people from diverse cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, we currently hear more voices suggesting that he had betrayed justice, especially justice to the most vulnerable and marginalised.

The reproach and accusation is that Madiba offered forgiveness without contrition, reconciliation without justice.

The argument is that he preached forgiveness and reconciliation that had betrayed justice.

It is also argued that he had settled for a political compromise with former oppressors, which had paved the way for continued white privilege and black suffering.

What many people tend to forget is that Mandela never considered himself a saint. Neither did he view his work as complete.

In fact, he was well aware of his own shortcomings, as is evident in the final paragraph of his biography, *Long Walk to Freedom*:

“I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter. I have made mistakes along the way.

“But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come.

“But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.”

Here Mandela acknowledges that his work was not perfect, and especially that it was not completed.

He indeed advanced forgiveness and reconciliation. His wearing of a Springbok rugby jersey, his visit in Orania to Betsie Verwoerd, wife of former apartheid architect, Hendrik Verwoerd, the absence of retribution in his vocabulary and logic after decades of incarceration and suffering under apartheid, his institution of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that served as a space where so many concretely offered their forgiveness and their hunger for healing reconciliation – all of this and more bear witness to Nelson Mandela’s legacy of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Nico Koopman

Mandela and so many other liberation leaders, as well as so many South Africans who testified at the TRC, understood the logic of forgiveness very well. This logic was well formulated in the title of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu’s book, *No Future without Forgiveness*.

They knew that forgiveness is only the first word; it is not the last word. Forgiveness is an act of hospitality amidst hostility. Forgiveness shows hospitality to the wrongdoer; forgiveness provides a safe space to the wrongdoer to express and practice remorse, repentance, reconciliation, redress, reparation, restitution, restorative justice. These words that come after forgiveness are the final words.

As a first word, forgiveness paves the way for a life of repentance and reconciliation; it opens the door to a life of restitution and justice.

Although we have seen so much forgiveness forthcoming from Madiba and others, we still hunger for the fruit of forgiveness; we still wait upon repentance and restitution, redress and restorative justice.

Madiba is also accused of settling for a morally wrong political and economic compromise.

This compromise, which paved the way for a relatively peaceful transition towards democracy, entailed, according to some critiques, that political power was given to mainly black people and economic power to mainly white people.

The ever-growing economic divide that still largely runs along colour lines, is used to substantiate this claim.

Mandela, however, settled for a morally acceptable compromise. He understood that this com-

promise, like forgiveness, was not the final word; it was only the first word.

Compromise literally means to promise together (com-promissio). When we make a compromise we acknowledge that the decision that we agree upon is not the first prize for all, or for most, of us. We, however, take this decision and we promise to each other that all of us will work together towards what would be the first prize for all.

And the first prize for all South Africans is articulated in the Bill of Rights of our constitution, namely a life of dignity, healing, justice and freedom for all.

The morally sound compromise that we made under Madiba’s leadership is a joint promise, a communal commitment to jointly work towards the type of life that we envisage in the Bill of Rights for all of us, especially for the most vulnerable.

On Madiba’s birthday we might honour him appropriately if we appreciate his logic afresh. His logic entails a forgiveness that brings forth remorse, repentance, reconciliation, redress, restitution and restorative justice.

His logic entails that we function with compromises that reflects our common, resolute and unstoppable journey towards a life of inalienable dignity and healing reconciliation, embracing justice and responsible freedom for all.

If the fruit of forgiveness is still not seen in South Africa, if the compromise, the communal promise that we have made to work together for a better life for all, does not materialise, the fault is not with Madiba, but with us, individually and institutionally, personally and systemically, who pay inadequate attention to his logic, and who inadequately work for dignity, healing, justice and freedom for all.

The legacy and logic of Madiba inspires individuals and institutions to work for justice – for people, partnerships, perspectives, policies, plans, programmes, processes, procedures, public symbols, publications, performance indicators, practices and protests that advance justice for all.

Madiba’s logic inspires us to prioritise justice and to work urgently for justice.

It might be helpful to remember the words of Martin Luther King jr in this regard: “Justice delayed is justice denied.”

Delayed justice, and thus eventually denied justice, will continue casting a shadow over the foundations for justice that Nelson Mandela have laid.

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