


From the Gospel: A manifesto for our times – Fr Carlo Calleja

For Christians, love is stronger than hate, light than darkness, life than death

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 3 min read



Detail of a painting depicting Jesus reading at the synagogue at Nazareth. Photo:
<https://commons.wikimedia.org>

Third Sunday in ordinary time, Cycle C. Today's readings: Nehemiah 8:2-4a.5-6.8-10; 1
Corinthians 12, 12-30; Luke 1:1-4.4:14-21

Upon hearing the news of Desmond Tutu's passing last Boxing Day, I returned to his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*. I wanted to bask once again in the contagious goodness of this formidable prophet of our times.

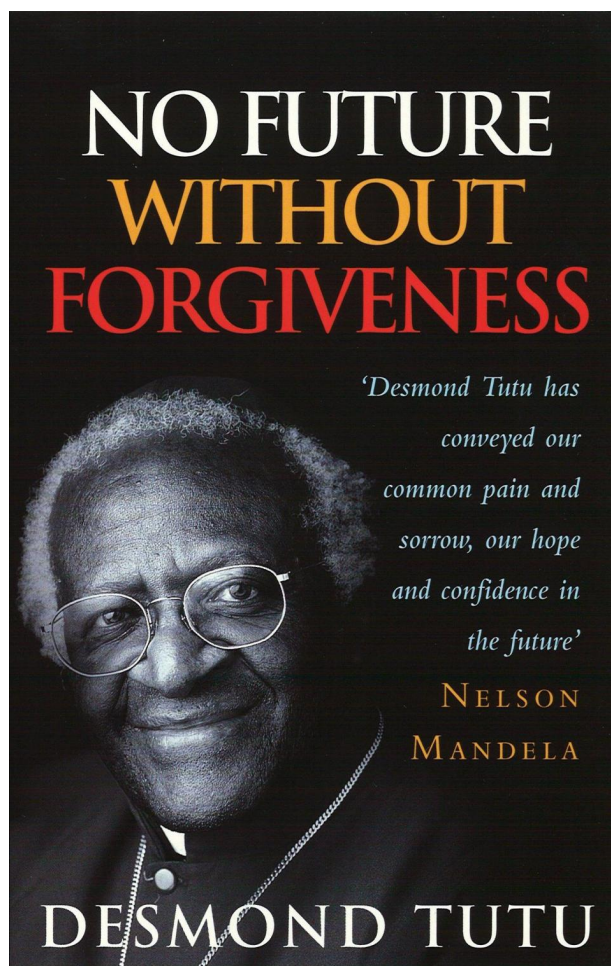
The book is an inspiring autobiographical account of the years Tutu spent on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Some passages are heart-wrenching, especially those that describe in graphic detail how the black South Africans were dehumanised during the apartheid. Other parts are deeply moving, such as where we read of the healing of wounds that the South African archbishop witnessed over the years.

But what stayed with me most was his sense of hope. That, and his conviction that truth will bring liberation not only of those who were oppressed but also to the oppressors themselves.

Tutu's victory of justice encapsulates the point of today's gospel.

Often called Jesus's mission statement or manifesto, just at the beginning of his earthly mission, Jesus stands up to read in the synagogue at Nazareth. Applying to himself the words of the prophet Isaiah, he announces that he is the one anointed by God to bring justice to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of justice of the Lord. And if those words were not powerful enough, Jesus concludes with his own comment that really shocks his listeners: "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing".

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Archbishop Desmond Tutu's No Future Without Forgiveness.

A cynic would lament that despite Isaiah's prophecies and Jesus's promises, the world is still plagued by suffering and injustice. But someone like Tutu understood the deeper meaning. The first healing that Jesus brings is that of our hearts wounded by sin, rescuing us from our own oppressive pride and healing our vision blinded by self-centredness.

“ *The first healing that Jesus brings is that of our hearts wounded by sin, rescuing us from our own oppressive pride and healing our vision blinded by self-centredness* ”

Tutu did not present himself as the messiah who would himself bring justice or overturn the social order. He was a firm believer that if there is anything that must be destroyed for peace to reign, it is not the sinner but the sin that gnaws at the heart of many.

“Despite all the evidence that seems to be the contrary,” Tutu affirms, “there is no way that evil and injustice and oppression and lies can have the last word. For we who are Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are proof positive that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death, that light is stronger than darkness, that laughter, joy, compassion, gentleness, and truth, all these are so much stronger than their ghastly counterparts.”

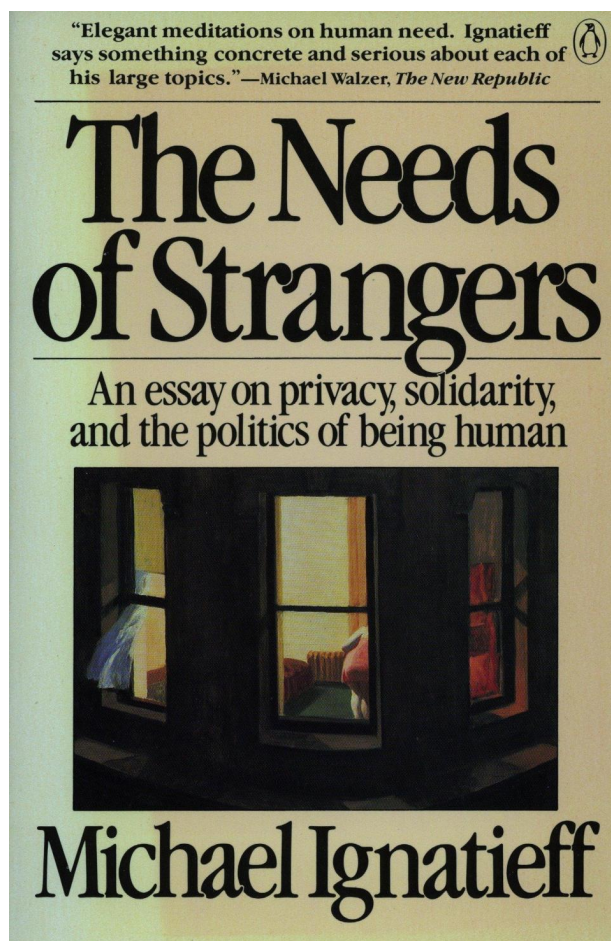
Unless we allow Jesus's words to pierce our heart and transform us, they remain inert.

In his classic work *The Needs of Strangers*, Michael Ignatieff argues that there are some needs in society that can and must be satisfied through politics and rights talk. However, there are other needs, he insists, that demand of us personal engagement, such as respect, friendliness and care. These are qualities no welfare system can ever provide.

Institutions that cater for the disenfranchised among us already bring into realisation Jesus's liberating words thanks to the sterling work of dedicated experts in the field. Strategic policies for poverty reduction and social inclusion are often published. Effort is made to restore dignity to our sisters and brothers residing in prison. Programmes are designed to empower people with disabilities. Yet we cannot sit back and abdicate of our responsibility simply because there is a system that takes care of people in need.

On this day dedicated to the Word of God, Jesus's words compel us to first allow ourselves to be healed, liberated and restored by him so that we, in turn, can then do so with others in a tangible way.

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The Needs of Strangers, by Michael Ignatieff

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