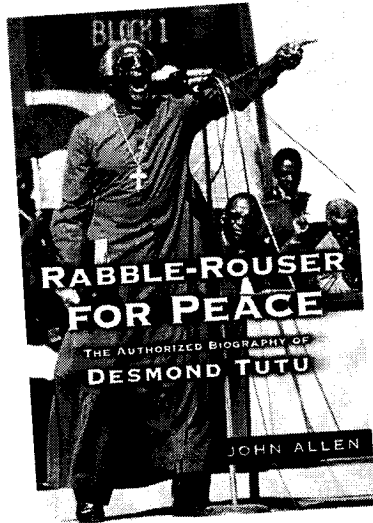


Rabble-Rouser for Peace

The Authorised Biography of Desmond Tutu
John Allen



What a privilege to read this book, but how difficult to do it justice in a review. I read it through enthralled. This book affected me – bringing it all back. It is about “the above mentioned Bantu” (p80) – the focus on the godly struggle against the evil of the Apartheid madness in all its harsh cruelty, continuing through to the ‘great change’ and the ongoing witness. It provides a perceptive sweep through critical years of our history – through the life and ministry of the deservedly most renowned church leader in the history of our country, and into the wider world.

What is it about this man Desmond Mpilo Tutu – this “township urchin” (his term), this sickly child, that makes him so remarkable, publicly and within? ‘All seasons’ apart, he was the man for our times, and still is. Yet this book is not hagiography. Well done John Allen – I want to call him ‘honest John’. For not only is the book impressive for the painstaking unearthing of previously hidden documents, letters and exchanges,

but also for the candid portrayal of inspiring light and shadow in this extraordinary person (p371).

Passion

What is it about this man? What struck me afresh, coming through the pages of the book, is Desmond’s sheer passion. It also came to me reading about his early life and even into his early ministry as teacher and theological educator, that, unbeknownst to him or anyone, God was quietly at work preparing to call forth his prophet. He was gifted by God’s gift of a big heart – with warmth, compassion, and with that passionate reaction to ill-treatment done to others. God’s righteous anger, and compassion, was in his heart, and I want to add, in his gut. The Xhosa word for compassion is ‘imfesane’ – the umbilical chord. These qualities led and drove him – he could do no other.

“Lord, I am ridiculed and scorned all the time because I proclaim your message. (yet) your message is like a fire burning within me. I try my best to hold it in, but I can no longer keep it back” (see Jer 20.7-10).

Many of Desmond’s gifts are well known and appreciated: his amazing sense of humour – whether just for the joy and fun of life, or in the healing ways he has of dissolving tension. He is described as “poking fun at racism, yet sharply clear about the evil of it”. Humour is God’s gift indeed. What a balm. Amidst

all the pain and demands of his calling, he delights in life, and enjoyed his ministry.

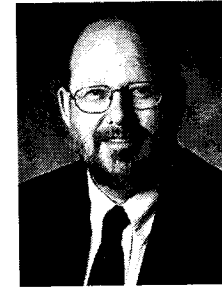
One of his less publicly known qualities, but experienced by many, was/is his gift of affirming people. Desmond affirms people in a personal way. He includes them.

In this review, space prevents any attempt to comment on all phases of Desmond’s ministry, whether for example, as General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, or his time as our Archbishop. Nor do I intend to comment here on those changes in Church and society for which he has so passionately striven, such as the inclusion of women in the ordained ministry, and the inclusion of persons of same-sex preference as equally ‘one of us’ enjoying God’s gift of faithful relationships in the discipline of love. I leave all that to the reader.

There is so much else that must remain incomplete about this review concerning those who enabled Desmond to become and be who he is. I am thinking of the role of Leah his wife – rock of support and loving critic. And the role of the Community of the Resurrection Fathers – so formative. Once again, the reader will discover.

I do however feel constrained to share just one comment from Antjie Krog concerning his unique role in the whole Truth and Reconciliation Commission process. The TRC without Tutu was unthinkable: “whatever role others might have played, it was Tutu who is the compass. It is he who finds language for what is happening” (p370).

The secret source of Desmond’s consistent impact over all these years, is



Author John Allen is a member of our Cathedral congregation.

the grace of a persevering commitment to the discipline of prayer – that daily feeding upon the very life of God in Scripture and sacrament. This was *his* compass. He was not someone accountable to any party or group. In the final analysis he acted from intuition – an intuition rooted in his spirituality. This was the source of the fire of his witness, and growing moral authority. Buti Tlhagale, now Catholic Archbishop of Johannesburg,

likened his instincts to those of an Old Testament prophet. Perhaps the most eloquent testimony to Desmond’s historic role in our country, is that expressed by Njabulo Ndebele, Vice-chancellor of UCT, who speaks of his “considerable moral authority” which has left “an indelible mark on the national character of South Africa”.

Bishop David Russell

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