

# Meet a husband, a priest, a nation's conscience

BY KEVIN RITCHIE

A little over 800 years ago, the king of England, Henry II, uttered the now immortal phrase, "Who will rid me of this troublesome priest?"

Taking him at his word, four knights went off and killed Thomas Becket, Henry's former close friend, whom he had appointed archbishop of Canterbury to get his own back on the church of Rome.

At the time, Henry never banked on Becket upholding the tenets and values of the church, even above his own life.

Fast forward to the present and meet the 20th and 21st century version, a troublesome priest who has managed - with singular success - to get up the nose of successive, polar opposite South African governments.

It is not too hard to imagine PW Botha and FW de Klerk, or even Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki echoing Henry II's fury at any time during their tenure, for like Becket, Tutu has lived his faith in the fullest possible way, never letting personal prejudice or affectation stand in the way of what he has perceived to be an offence against the teachings of Jesus Christ.

In the process, he has exasperated those closest to him and those furthest from him. He was detested by apartheid's supporters as the most visible and vocal opponent of that evil system of repression during the cauldron of the 1980s. Today it appears little has changed.

He took on the world's living saint, Nelson Mandela, over the "grave train" of the new ANC elite after the miracle of the Rainbow Nation (Tutu's own phrase); he has seriously got on the wrong side of Thabo Mbeki,

first over the TRC and then Aids; and, up to a couple of weeks ago, he was fast becoming an object of hatred among those on the far end of the political spectrum who want to see Jacob Zuma become the next president.

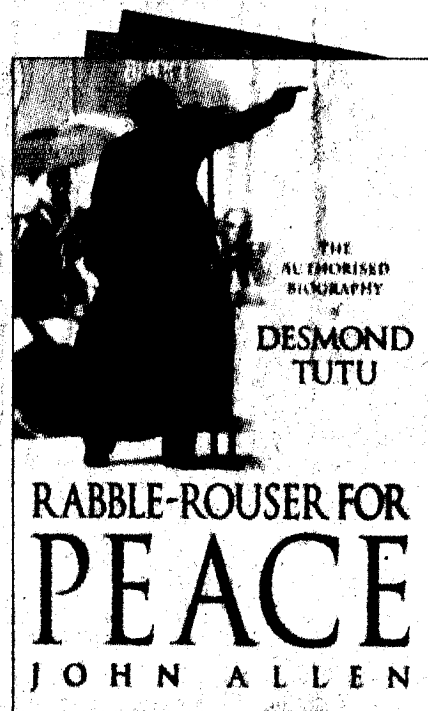
His offence? To have the temerity to call on Zuma to renounce all claims to the presidency because of his lack of contrition for having had unprotected sex with a woman young enough to be his daughter, while ostensibly leading the country's moral regeneration campaign.

Zuma's supporters responded by attacking Tutu in a puerile and *ad hominem* fashion, posing a very real threat to the future culture of public discourse in our still young democracy.

But, as has often been the case, Tutu has received help from an unexpected quarter. This time it was Mbeki who waded in, using the same blog he had used to castigate Tutu a scant two years before ... but this time to publicly laud him as a national hero.

It's nothing new for our favourite cleric, as John Allen reveals in his excellent biography of the man. Tutu has had to battle every step of his career: as a young pupil suffering from tuberculosis, as a young man wanting to become a teacher and then as a young husband and father wanting to follow his calling to become a priest.

Even after he was ordained, he was dogged by doubts; his alleged inability to manage his finances, ignoring the fact that he and his



faithful wife had five children to feed off a black clergyman's salary which was noticeably lower than any of his white counterparts.

At every step in his life Tutu has had to overcome obstacles, each one increasingly difficult. In truth, they would have been insurmountable to any one with an iota less faith than he has had his whole life.

He has been called almost every name under the sun, his faith has been thrown back in his faith by those who should have known better, he has been accused of personal aggrandisement and careerism, he has faced death threats that have ranged from the surreal to the truly sinister.

But, as Allen correctly notes, Tutu has been blessed - and vindicated. He has been able to live long enough to see his life's work unfold in his lifetime, an opportu-

nity that was denied both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

How best do we remember this avuncular man of God? His peals of good humour ringing out from Grand Parade on the day Nelson Mandela was released? His spontaneous tears at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? His humility and his ardent pleading to FW de Klerk, PW Botha and Winnie Mandela? His courageous stand against the enrichment of the elites or the disaster that is taking place before our very eyes across the border in Zimbabwe? Do we remember him for his stand against the government's intransigence on HIV and Aids?

The truth is that we remember him for all of this and a whole lot more that would otherwise never have been remembered or retold had it not been for a man of Allen's unique skill and standing. A former journalist on *The Star*, he spent almost 30 years at Tutu's side, through his turbulent archbishopric, through the landmark Truth and Reconciliation Commission and then at Tutu's side, when he retired and took up a professorship at Emory University in the US.

Allen is uniquely qualified to write about Tutu and he does so with great empathy, but also great honesty, avoiding the trap of writers who know their subjects too intimately and end up glossing over the warts of their subjects and producing hagiographies.

Tutu's warts are laid bare, his personal foibles, the embarrassment that his son Trevor caused the family, his financial worries, all of it.

Thanks to Allen's skill, he does not emerge from this treatment diminished in any way. On the

contrary, this exceptionally human man is made all the more human, all the more admirable and all the more deserving of this nation's love and unequivocal gratitude.

It's fitting that as this country shares his 75th birthday this month, that we have a book of this nature to better understand not only this amazing life, but also to remind ourselves of our past. Tutu not only lived through our history, he also played a major role in shaping it.

At an age when most people would have settled down to the usual retirement pursuits, Tutu appears not to have stopped.

Like Nelson Mandela, Tutu's life seemed to develop yet another lease when he officially retired from the archbishopric, his peacemaking skills extended to the rest of the world.

We need look no further than his telling the former archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, that he was ashamed to be an Anglican after the world's Anglican bishops had rejected a proposal to reconsider the church's attitude towards gays and lesbians.

He didn't stop there: he tore into Carey's successor, Rowan Williams, for being too accommodating of conservative Anglican leaders working for the expulsion of North American Anglicans tolerant of homosexuality.

Desmond Tutu is more than a national hero, he has become our national conscience, an enduring icon, a constant in an ever changing often venal society.

Allen has written a book that will make sure we never forget to appreciate Tutu's contribution to this country, nor his unique yet paradoxically typical South African upbringing.

■ *Rabble-Rouser for Peace* is published by Random House at R245.