

Bishops Diocesan College

Ubuntu Talk

5 September 2024

Play Ubuntu video:

The Tutu Courageous Leadership Course aims to inspire and empower viewers and participants to become more courageously engaged in their lives and in the lives of others by focusing on the core internal and interpersonal qualities needed to take consistent action to heal themselves and society. The primary target audience in South Africa is aged 15-35 years, but the content has been framed for a broader audience and will also be shared on platforms that are accessible internationally.

This video explores of our shared humanity through the concept of ubuntu, which was so foundational to the Arch. It demonstrates how his example of compassion, forgiveness, solidarity, and generosity of spirit flowed from his deep awareness of our inter-connectedness with each other and with the whole of our environment. The video highlights the power of living in a way that honours our own humanity and the humanity of others, including those who are different from us and those with whom we disagree.

Link to video: https://youtu.be/areEQERf_98

Ubuntu and theology

We are well aware that our beloved Arch popularised the notion of Ubuntu during the time of transition from Apartheid to our first democratic government, and especially linking Ubuntu to the process of reconciliation.

The primary association of ubuntu especially within theology is that of reconciliation, forgiveness, the restoration of human dignity and justice as well as the interconnectedness amongst people. The understanding that forgiveness is part of ubuntu is shared by Khoza Mgojo, one of the TRC commissioners and former president of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), who said 'that if you have this, then you must forgive, but not forget'.

The idea of Desmond Tutu that the humanity of both the victims and perpetrators of Apartheid was intertwined reflects the concept of the interconnectedness amongst people. The Arch explains this idea, saying that 'in the process of dehumanizing another, in inflicting untold harm and suffering, the perpetrator was inexorably being dehumanized as well'. Another former TRC commissioner, Bongani Finca, clarifies this concept of interconnectedness as an integral aspect of ubuntu, explaining that a person is a person because of other people, which an individual lives in a community and not in isolation. It is of greater importance within ubuntu to restore communal harmony than to secure punishment:

Ubuntu does not focus on what has been done to you, ubuntu focuses on how we can be restored together as a community, so that we can heal together ... because we can only be fully human when we are human together.

Victims and perpetrators then should assist each other in the process of healing.

This idea of interconnectedness and of restoration is captured in the ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu, that it has the capacity to restore humanity and dignity and ‘of creating a sense of mutuality among people who are alienated from one another’.

In his 2011 book, “God is not Christian” he explains ubuntu as follows:

A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human. A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good. This is based on a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness, you can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – ubuntu – you are known of your generosity.

Ubuntu was a central principle to recover and reconstruct the South African society from apartheid and to build the new Rainbow Nation and many will argue that was it not for this human embracement, bloody racial violence might indeed have occurred in South Africa.

This what the Arch wrote in 1996 in his book, “The Rainbow People of God”:

If we could but recognise our common humanity, that we do belong together, that our destinies are bound up with one another's, that we can be free only together, that we can survive only together, that we can be human only together, then a glorious South Africa would come into being where all of us lived harmoniously together as members of one family, the human family, God's family. In truth a transfiguration would have taken place.

And in this word, “transfiguration” lies a first clue of Tutu’s so-called Ubuntu theology. The public theologian, John de Gruchy (2021:291) links the process of becoming (God’s family) to Tutu’s early conviction (1970s) that “the Transfiguration of Christ is fundamental for the Christian understanding of both personal and societal transformation.” For Tutu, no person is a ‘nobody’ because everyone is ‘made in the image of God’ and has God-given potential to change, and no society is beyond redemption because God’s purpose is to create a new humanity. Tutu was engaged in the “transfiguration of politics”, which was an outflow of his belief in God’s love and justice, being a prisoner of hope “for the transfiguration of people and the world despite every contradiction, all opposition and rejection” (De Gruchy 2021:292).

Deeper clues lie in Tutu's work in the 1970s. ...". In the early 1970s, while he was working for the Theological Education Fund as Director for Africa, Tutu spent practically six months a year travelling throughout Africa, witnessing the brutal repression of Idi Amin's Uganda, the overthrow of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia, the Biafran war in Nigeria. In the former Rhodesia, he was detained by security police, who found draft papers on Black theology in his luggage, shouting that his presence is about politics and not theology. In a 1973 paper on Black Theology Desmond Tutu writes that Black theology is concerned with human liberation, that it calls man to "align himself with the God who is the God of the Exodus, God the liberator, who leads his people, all his people, out of all kinds of bondage – political, economic, cultural

For Tutu, Black theology enquires whether it is possible to be black and a Christian, to ask on whose side God is, since it is a theology that is concerned about "the humanisation of man, because those who ravage our humanity, dehumanise themselves in the process". The liberation of the black man "is the other side of the coin of the liberation of the white man". In these words, lay the seeds of his *Ubuntu* theology, and one of the key principles that guided the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which commenced under his leadership twenty-two years later.

Does ubuntu still exist?

Ubuntu has been hailed as a force for transformation towards democracy in South Africa, a force that inspired people of different races and classes to accept each other and to live together, seen as a central principle to recover and reconstruct the South-African society from apartheid and to reconcile the new Rainbow Nation. But now it seems as if the concepts of *Ubuntu* and Rainbow Nation are fading. Most ordinary South-African citizens are caught up between the ideological structures of the past and the ideals of the future – the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', the educated and the uneducated, the rural citizens and urban townships, the informal settlements and the suburban residential areas (Wonke Buqa, 2015).

The Arch was acutely aware of the injustices, inequality and violence in societies and was outspoken about it. Writing about South Africa after the TRC process ended, he said:

Ubuntu underscores sharing – that is why in the past in our communities you did not have individual plates. You ate out of a common dish; you drank beer out of one calabash. This is in fact a two-fold appeal. One of the many recommendations the TRC made was to say the gap between the rich and the poor is wide, is dangerously wide. And we recommended that something ought to be done quickly to narrow this gap. Of course, as we know, South Africa has become notorious for being the worst example of the disparities between rich and poor. And there was a suggestion about a once off wealth tax. And there were many in the white communities who supported it. My appeal is: do you think you might consider agitating for something akin to this? My appeal to our Cabinet Ministers: There is much dehumanising poverty abroad. There are

people in our country who, unbelievably, go to bed without a meal. Your handbook permits you to buy very expensive cars and most of you have done so. In the spirit of ubuntu to show that you care, that you are compassionate, please sell your expensive cars and replace them with slightly less pricey cars – to show you care about these poor people. Your humanity depends on it. Please.

The Nguni term ubuntu is found in different variations in other language groups around sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. 'umundu' in Kenia, 'bumuntu' in Tanzania, 'vununtu' in Mozambique and 'bomoto' in the Democratic Republic of Congo). The basic idea of ubuntu is shared by many indigenous peoples in sub-Saharan Africa under different names. The root '-ntu' is used for a human 'from the Cape to the Sudanic belt'. Ubuntu became associated with the Nguni proverb 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabatu', which is translated as "a person is a person through other persons". We are all interdependent. The quintessence of sayings like this, is that 'one's humanity (humanness), one's personhood, is dependent upon one's relationship with others.

Xenophobia, racism, gang activities, corruption, inequality, nepotism and poverty are not part of Ubuntu and challenges the serenity of the of the Rainbow Nation of Madiba and Tutu. Tinyiko Maluleke remarked that '*Ubuntu should not be this nice thing that people just say anytime they want, Ubuntu should challenge the status quo.*' The appeal to fellow humanity cannot merely "serve as a social lubricant in real situations of conflict which could then obscure real divisions based on class, language, gender, ethnicity, bodily appearances, as well as religious and political affiliations'" (Van Binsbergen).

Criticisms of ubuntu are that it is a globalised construct by southern African intellectual elite (politicians, academics, theologians and managers) and that it is deeply disconnected from any original or authentic contemporary form of village life and world-view, or on precolonial rural life. It is more prophetic and utopian in the sense that it endeavours to rectify social ills in urban, globalised southern Africa. Although South Africa is lauded for its liberal constitution and progressive views on issues such as abortion and gay rights, none of these positions can be directly traced to the notion of ubuntu. Some of the most dedicated adherents of ubuntu would be uncomfortable with some of the rights that are defended by the bill of rights/the constitution. The narrative around Ubuntu hardly addresses the increasingly globalised and sophisticated outlook of its subjects. In an ever-shifting global world the people of the narrative have become less influenced and subject to the grip of the narrative (Bernard Matolino & Wenceslaus Kwindingwi, 2013)

Can white South Africans (or white people in general) live up to ubuntu? In a 2002 study¹ the question 'What is ubuntu?' was posed to groups of South Africans of African descent (SAADs). It was possible to distinguish between two clusters of answers. The answers of the first cluster all define ubuntu as a moral quality of a person, while the answers of the second cluster all define ubuntu as a phenomenon (for instance a

¹ Christian Gade (2002) from the Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University from Denmark

philosophy, an ethic, African humanism, or, a worldview) according to which persons are interconnected. The concept of a person is of central importance to all the answers of both clusters, which means that to understand these answers, it is decisive to raise the question of who counts as a person according to SAADs. Some SAADs define all Homo sapiens as persons, whereas others hold the view that only some Homo sapiens count as persons: only those who are black, only those who have been incorporated into personhood, or only those who behave in a morally acceptable manner. In summary it was suggested that people should be careful not to over-romanticize our understanding of ubuntu, and that in post-apartheid South Africa SAADs' exclusive ideas about the nature of ubuntu are ethically illegitimate.

Another argument is that just as Black people have been dispossessed of their land, Ubuntu has been dispossessed of its deeply radical demands for ethical historical and social relations among people". The Kenyan theologian John Mbiti interpreted the notion of ubuntu as a philosophy of mutual personhood by translating "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" as "I am because we are". Mbiti's humanist translation of ubuntu however obscures the fact that the African belief of the person is a social being who is always becoming, in contrast with Western notions of personhood, expressed in the saying "I think therefore I am" and the focus on the importance of the individual. To be a person amongst people (Abantu), someone should continually uphold the personhood of others. While then notion ubuntu is thriving in post-apartheid narratives, misusing the name for software, businesses and books and philanthropic programs, we inhabit a country where we strive for ubuntu without Abantu.

Have white people in South Africa removed themselves from the African notion of ubuntu, have put themselves outside the circle of those who are considered to be persons . Can white people then have the right to invoke the notion of ubuntu?

Until there is a true reckoning with the reparations Ubuntu demands, Black and white South Africa will continue to live worlds apart as Abantu and abelungu. White South Africa, nixolisa ngani? What are you atoning with?" (Chigumadzi², 2022).

For me personally, this process of becoming fully human, becoming a person, is tied in with the process of transfiguration. I am fully aware of my "imposter" presence as a White, middle-aged, Afrikaans-speaking male at the DLTFL, an entity that strives for societal healing under the vision – *nurturing the courage to heal*. My being in this space is that of a human, being transfigured.

In her most recent poetry collection "Pillage", Krog (2022:68) writes a praise poem, lamenting the death of Desmond Tutu as "this conscience" that was not afraid to stand on his own while "lies and insults struck him". She describes Tutu as follows:

single-handedly he coined a language of us-ness
for a deeply divided country

² **Panashe Chigumadzi** (born 1991) is a Zimbabwean-born journalist, essayist and novelist, who was raised in South Africa.

he wanted us to be enraged by injustice
he wanted us to assent to the modality of caring
he wanted us to live in solidarity with sharing
he wanted to bind us together in embracing clusters
he wanted to build shelters with us
he wanted to raise great and mighty roofs with us
he wanted to recreate us in frameworks of humanity.

Then Krog (2022:69) laments:

we have failed him, honour him, Desmond Mpilo Tutu
we, in our despair, mourn him, Desmond Mpilo Tutu
for he is dead now – this conscience.