

From the Pastor

I was intrigued last week as I watched the concert in London's Hyde Park in celebration of Nelson Mandela's ninetieth birthday. I became aware that there was such a difference between this man of peace, joy and reconciliation and the "elected" leader of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe. Both men spent years in prison for fighting against the white rule in their respective countries. Both men were eventually released and went on to be legitimately elected to the highest office in both Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Mugabe was elected Prime Minister of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe in 1980 and then President in 1987 and has ruled the nation ever since. While the early years of his leadership were encouraging with his call for reconciliation between warring factions, it soon became obvious that he did not have the skills or the character to deal with this deeply divided country. There emerged many stories of violence and intimidation toward those with whom he disagreed. He was the "strong man" who ruled through fear, reprisal and murder.

Nelson Mandela was released from his prison on Robben Island in 1990 having served a twenty-seven year internment. After his release Mandela began a campaign for a multi-racial South Africa based on the principles of reconciliation and forgiveness. In 1993 he received the Nobel Peace prize and in May 1994 he was inaugurated as the President of South Africa. While South Africa continues to struggle with crime, poverty, Aids and a myriad of other social issues, the foundation of reconciliation between races, cultures and clans will in time bring prosperity and healing to that nation.

Mugabe's political philosophy is deeply flawed and already judged by history because it is rooted in the ancient truth that "violence always begets violence." The perceived "strong men" in our world are convinced and try to convince us that we live in a world of fear and revenge and violence is the only way to make us safe. Many will agree the present situations in Zimbabwe, Israel, Iraq and Afghanistan show clearly that violence seldom brings security, rather it gives birth to further acts of violence.

The wisdom of Nelson Mandela's approach to political stability is the belief that human beings have the capacity and the will to forgive those who have deeply hurt them. It also recognizes that there is no other way. When the hate and anger toward the person who has treated me and my loved ones so cruelly begins to dissipate, I seek to fill that space with something else and forgiveness is really the only thing that is up to the task. The "strong man" will tell you that forgiveness and the desire to be reconciled with your enemy is weakness. That it is better to burn with murderous thoughts and to sacrifice your life and the life of your enemy on the altar of revenge, but is that what most people want?

True forgiveness is neither cheap nor easy but it is essential to our health and healing. Nelson Mandela is a symbol of the person who enters the dark cave of prison and emerges, holding in his hands, the truth about how we can live together. He wrote, "*If there are dreams about a beautiful South Africa, there are also roads that lead to their goal. Two of these roads could be named Goodness and Forgiveness.*"

Christopher