

Seeking Justice

By Annemie Bosch

Seeking justice has been very much a part of our lives in South Africa - both during Apartheid and currently in our 'New South Africa' as well. Compared to many of my friends, and countless people whom I do not know, but know about, I have experienced the cost of working for justice only in a very small way. This does not mean that I experienced it as 'small' - but mentally I knew and know that it was and is absolutely insignificant in comparison with that others had to bear.

I believe it is true that, when good and evil clash, someone gets crushed in-between. And someone who must have known, said that those working for justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace, are the "in-between-people". Inevitably they are the ones who get crushed - as Jesus got crushed between the ultimate Good and Evil.... The difference is that he was forsaken so that we, whatever we have to suffer for justice or for our witness, would never be forsaken (again).

And this suffering (as we learnt in South Africa) can take any imaginable form -- it can be gross, undeserved and unbearable physical abuse, murder, arranged traffic accidents, the disappearance of family members, imprisonment, solitary confinement, detention without trial, banning, home arrest, the burning down of property, the curtailing our freedom of movement, of association or of any other kind of freedom, discrimination on any level, exclusion from the group you belong to or want to belong to, isolation and being pushed to the periphery, or simply being ignored, humiliation, economic injustice, name-calling, giving your words a content you never tried to express or even thought of, purposely quoting you wrongly, using pictures of you in the press and on TV, which will give those who see them the wrong idea about you -- the list is endless.... Each one of these will leave their mark. Each one can lead to bitterness and to the seeking of revenge... We are, however, reminded that the revenge is God's - and bitterness is the poison we swallow in the hope that those who made us suffer, will die. This kind of reaction can only lead to more violence, more anger and more injustice -- because violence ALWAYS begets violence. Only God can liberate us through his love and forgiveness and give us the grace to forgive in our turn.

Sometimes we think it is too difficult to forgive - but lets consider this again. When David officiated at the wedding of our only daughter, he said about marriage, that there would inevitably be differences and misunderstandings between husband and wife. When this happens they may hurt each other - so they would have to learn to repent and ask for forgiveness - but, being forgiven, he said, was the most difficult thing we can ever experience, the most humbling thing. This is because if someone forgives you, it implies that there is absolutely nothing you can say or do which can ever change the pain you have caused or the harm you have done. The only possibility of restoring the relationship is if I say: "I forgive you!" and mean it. What holds true for husband and wife also does so for any other relationship.

So, forgive, we must -- and to be forgiven we sorely need. In some way, however, being forgiven is at the same time liberating AND binding.... We will forever be bound to those who have forgiven us. What a beautiful bond that is! And that bond is part and parcel of living for and seeking for justice.

To my mind, the kind of justice God wants us to work for is love made visible. His justice is not like the justice of the world - it is not primarily (or maybe not at all) retribution or punishment on those who are unjust. But justice is overcoming evil with love - which is not a sentimental feeling, but which involves strong and unequivocal non-violent action. This kind of resistance and witness against evil inevitably leads to some kind of suffering. Both those who suffer directly as a result of an unjust system or in any imaginable way, through the cruelty of people, as well as those who suffer because they call for justice. All need to be comforted and healed. But not only these two categories need healing. Perhaps those needing healing most, are the perpetrators of injustice.

Immediately after the first free and fair election in South Africa at the end of April 1994, Desmond Tutu, repeatedly called out "We are FREE! We are FREE! White and Black, we are free!", arms thrown wide into the air. And to the multitude in Soweto where I was privileged to be, he stressed the fact that also the perpetrators of injustice needed healing. We all know there is no power on earth or in heaven that can overcome evil, nothing that can heal us, excepting love. If you, in any way, have committed injustice, you are a broken, guilty and needy person. You need to be healed as much as, or more than those whom you harmed.

Here in South Africa, the first free and democratic election ever, which ended formal Apartheid as policy, was followed by the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which demonstrated something of this other-worldly justice - a justice which could and did bring some healing. Only by forgiving can we be healed. And only by telling the truth about the unjust actions and words could a person be given amnesty by the TRC. Amnesty, however, is not enough. Some who were given amnesty still suffer(ed) much because of reliving over and over again, what they had done... even if those they had ill-treated had truly forgiven them. Ultimately they can only be liberated from the torture of their guilty conscience by whole-heartedly accepting the forgiveness that God offers.

We must be patient with ourselves, for all this implies a long process - both when we try to forgive or try to accept forgiveness. We must give ourselves time. Waiting with open arms and hands, hearts and minds for the Holy Spirit to heal us, is the only way we can become whole again. And if we are whole, even during the process of being healed, we should strive to work for peace.

I believe that the most important peace-brokering happens when grass-roots people, and those who rub shoulders with us from day to day, observe the way we live and how we treat people with respect and humility - especially those who differ from us in every possible way. This, I believe, is and has all along been, my calling. I pray that God will use me where and how He knows best.