

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
“Christ’s Unlimited Patience”
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 14
Christian Scripture: I Timothy 1:12-17
Sunday, 15 September 2019



The year was 1962. The context was almost a decade of unarmed, and therefore non-violent, protests against a heavily militarized white supremacist police state. A lot had happened in South Africa the previous two years.



In March 1960, South African police gunned-down almost seventy unarmed protesters in what was known as the ‘Sharpeville Massacre’. The Apartheid regime banned virtually all liberation movements, including the African National Congress (ANC), led by Albert Luthuli.



The regime had already imprisoned the ANC’s leaders, among them Nelson Mandela, during what was known as the ‘Treason Trial’, wherein all were acquitted. [All democracies need to protect the system of checks and balances and the division of power between branches of government. At the time, the judicial branch in South Africa was not as compromised by white supremacy as was the rogue executive branch and an impotent legislative branch.]



At the end of 1961, the Nobel Committee awarded the ANC's President, Albert Luthuli, the Nobel Peace Prize for his non-violent stance against white supremacy. But by 1962, the situation deteriorated with most of the leaders of the anti-apartheid movement either jailed, exiled, dead, or, like Luthuli, essentially under house arrest. In 1962, not only could Luthuli not leave his little hamlet of Grootvlei (where I first ministered a church), but not more than three people could ever meet with him at one time. By mid-1962, the regime promulgated the Sabotage Act that effectively legislated a 'social death' upon Luthuli. The government made it illegal to quote and to publish his picture. Luthuli was gagged and quarantined.

At this time in 1962, a young twenty-two year old artist named Ronald Harrison in Cape Town painted a picture.



It was of Christ on the cross. St. Luke's Anglican Church in Cape Town featured Ronald's painting which became the object of everyone's immediate attention. "Under most circumstances, an exhibition of Jesus on the Cross would not have been regarded as especially remarkable - but this painting was different. To begin with, the figure hanging from the cross was black, but it wasn't only that. What really drew gasps of surprise from visitors was that the face of this 'Black Christ' bore a remarkable resemblance to Albert Luthuli," the ANC President and recent Nobel Peace Prize winner whose picture it was illegal to publish.¹ "There was something familiar, too, about the two Roman soldiers guarding Christ's figure; one had the face of the South African Prime Minister, Hendrik Verwoerd; the other was easily recognizable as the Justice Minister, John Voster".²

¹ Oakes, Dougie. "The Incredible Journey of South Africa's 'Black Christ'", *Readers Digest*, December 2003, p. 30.

² Oakes, "The Incredible Journey", *Readers Digest*, December 2003, p. 30.

The Apartheid regime went bananas and unleashed an angry response. One, it ordered the artist arrested. Two, it ordered church authorities to remove the painting from public view. Later, the South African Censor Board ruled that it was offensive to religious sensitivities. In short, the painting was deemed treasonous *and* heretical. The South African regime could not be oppressors, and the Christian savior could not be Black.



Ronald Harrison stated that by painting the 'Black Christ', he wanted "to show that God's Kingdom was open to everyone - Black as well as White". Ronald paid a horrible price for the proclamation of the gospel. The Apartheid regime arrested and tortured him terribly. Fortunately, the painting was smuggled-out of South Africa by Scandinavian diplomats and it toured Europe, raising funds for the anti-Apartheid struggle.



“Knowing about the painting and its significance, Luthuli expressed a desire to meet Ronald. With the help of the Norwegian Embassy and at great risk, a clandestine meeting was arranged. Ronald was smuggled from Cape Town to Durban [about 22-25 hours away) under the cover of darkness”.³ Ronald met Luthuli in Groutville, under a corrugated iron shack designated to be the rendezvous site.



Ronald remembered, “A deep strong voice said, ‘Hello, my son’. I stammered some greeting in return as he grasped my hands with his, a

³ Couper, Scott. *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press), 2010, p. 164.

distinct energy seemed to course through my body [...]. Then, suddenly, like a new-born baby entering the world for the first time, I burst into tears. I cannot explain whether it was the magic of that moment [...], but the next thing I knew two strong arms had wrapped themselves around me and once again a strong comforting voice said, ‘It’s alright to cry my son...It’s okay...I can see that you have already endured so much...It’s okay...’. I felt the strength of his compassion flow into my trembling body”.⁴



I interviewed Roland Harrison in 2006 before he died. He remembered more of what Luthuli said to him: “Luthuli said, ‘The road that lies ahead, is very, it’s going to be very very...it’s a stormy road... you have to travel soberly’. He says to me, ‘You’ve done something that very dangerous...But, you were very very brave. You should feel very proud...You caused such a fervor...What you have actually done is

⁴ Harrison, Roland. *The Black Christ: A Journey to Freedom* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2006), p. 66-67.

you have highlighted the plight of the Blacks now with this, this is what you have done’’.⁵



When I view the two soldiers in the painting, I see Psalm 14. The Roman soldiers are the South African Prime Minister and Minister of Justice who sought, by the barrel of a gun, to deny indigenous Africans, and all people of color in South Africa, most of the land of their birth and to prevent them from having a say in the decisions of their government. Psalm 14 is a lament about sin in South Africa *and* the United States; both countries at one time were white supremacist states and both today are very racist and still very unequal. When we see the Roman soldiers, we can hear the Psalmist cry, “Do all these evildoers know nothing? They devour my people as though eating bread; they never call on the LORD” (Psalm 14:4). The Psalmist concludes by forecasting justice: “You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge. Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad” (Psalm 14:6-7)!

⁵ Couper, Scott. *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010), p. 164.



With the figure of Luthuli on the cross, the epistle reading is remembered. In Paul’s first letter to Timothy he states, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his *unlimited patience* as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory, for ever and ever (I Timothy 1:15-17).

Two things strike me about these scriptures. One, Jesus came into the world to save sinners, which we all are. Albert Luthuli wished to liberate all South African, White and Black. Whites needed to be free from their hate and the stain of sin and Blacks from their oppression. Luthuli was never anti-White.

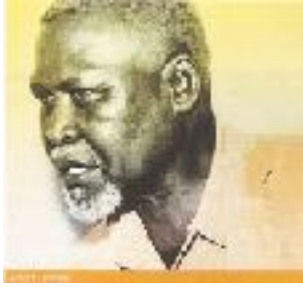


He prayed for those who oppressed him, just as Jesus prayed on the cross, “Father, forgive them. For they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Second, the characterization of Jesus Christ possessing ‘unlimited patience’ is amazing to me.



For in 1952, ten years before he met Ronald, Luthuli published his most famous statement entitled “The Road to Freedom Is Via the Cross”. In that statement he confided, “In so far as gaining citizen rights and opportunities for the unfettered development of the African people, who will deny that thirty years of my life have been spent knocking in vain, patiently, moderately, and modestly at a closed and barred door? What have been the fruits of my many years of moderation? Has there been any reciprocal tolerance or moderation from the government [...]? No! On the contrary, the past thirty years have seen the greatest number of laws restricting our rights and progress until today we have reached a stage where we have almost no rights at all [...]”.⁶

⁶ Luthuli, Albert. “The Road to Freedom Is Via the Cross”, *South African Studies*, Vol. 3, (London: Publicity and Information Bureau of the African National Congress, n.d.).



Luthuli was patient until the end of his life in 1967. By his and others' faithful struggle and sacrifice, and God's grace, he was certain that justice would one day be attained. Luthuli possessed Christ's 'unlimited patience'. He believed that with much struggle, justice-seeking, and effort, evil doers will repent and the oppressed shall be set free.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, "Amen".