



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

**“The opportunity of a new
beginning”: Archbishop Desmond
Tutu and the transformative power of
forgiveness**

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The recent loss of Archbishop Desmond Tutu is being sorely felt throughout the world. Tutu's life was devoted to opposing apartheid and racial injustice in favour of reconciliation and forgiveness. We often hear that anger and revenge are deeply ingrained in the human psyche, yet Tutu reminded us that there is also the capacity for kindness, forgiveness, compassion, and mercy. In particular, forgiveness is essential to meaningful human relationships precisely because of the way it creates the conditions for healing. Forgiveness not only sets us free from the toxicity of resentment, it also licences us to be kind and to "give-for" a better future.

Archbishop Tutu defined forgiveness as "the capacity to make a new start. Forgiveness is the grace by which we enable the other person to get up, and get up with dignity, to begin anew. In the act of forgiveness we are declaring our faith in the future of a relationship and in the capacity of the wrongdoer to change."

But Tutu also stressed that forgiveness and mercy are not the same as denial or forgetting. And so, in a later conversation, he explained:

Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending things aren't as they really are. Forgiveness is the recognition that a ghastliness has happened. And forgiveness doesn't mean trying to paper over the cracks, which is what people do when they say, "Let bygones be bygones". Because they will not. They have an incredible capacity for always returning to haunt you. Forgiveness means that the wronged and the culprits of those wrongs acknowledge that something happened. And there is necessarily a measure of confrontation. People sometimes think that you shouldn't be abrasive. But sometimes you have to be to make someone acknowledge that they have done something wrong. Then once the culprit says, "I am sorry", the wronged person is under obligation, certainly if he or she is a Christian, to forgive. And forgiving means actually giving the opportunity of a new beginning.

True compassion for others — even our enemies — stimulates empathy, which in turn releases us from the revenge cycle which perpetuates the hurt of wrongdoing, rather than healing it. As Tutu famously put it, "If you want peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies."

This is Desmond Tutu's legacy. His life powerfully illustrated how it is possible to carry these truths, even in the face of the cruelty and injustice caused by the institutionalised racism of apartheid. And his legacy bears particular importance for those committed to the cause of reconciliation in Australia.

For Tutu's moral and political vision urges us to discover a way of story-sharing that refuses to weaponise narratives, that neither rejects nor silences the "Other", excluding them from the yarning circle or uninviting them from our table. Rather, for a future that is "ours", Tutu's vision calls us to

actively, robustly, and increasingly include others into “our circle”. In stark contrast to the dark vision of history espoused by some philosophers of history, Tutu resolutely held out the possibilities of conversion and cultural healing. Human relationships, and the cultures to which they give rise, are all pregnant with possibility because of metanoia, repentance, a change of heart.

In *The Book of Forgiving*, Tutu and his daughter Mpho held out two simple but powerful truths: “There is nothing that cannot be forgiven; there is no one undeserving of forgiveness”. For Tutu, Forgiveness is fundamental to our wellbeing and the wellbeing of those with whom we share our lives. If all Australians were to take this to heart, it might be the saving grace of our times.

In Australia many relationships are under intense strain. The pandemic has exhausted so many of us. We look ahead to 2022 and can anticipate that even more strain and discord awaits us — not least due to the federal election looming. Desmond Tutu was no stranger to political conflict and profound social discord in South Africa under apartheid. Nevertheless, he was determined to find avenues of healing, peace, and forgiveness. His example and teaching are, without question, worthy of our consideration and emulation.

How, in particular, can we embody Tutu’s commitment to forgiveness, and pay heed to his encouragement that we speak with those from whom we are alienated? Can we be peacemakers who exhibit the dignity, warmth, attentiveness, and good humour that Desmond Tutu displayed? Can we tell our history in ways that include everyone in our reconciling endeavour?

This can be Australia’s own “Rainbow Nation” moment. Can we embrace it?