

Desmond Tutu – archbishop, human rights activist and South African icon

Written by Stacey Vee

Archbishop Tutu is as famous the world over for his choice words – he is also accredited with coining the phrase ‘Rainbow Nation’ – as well as for his strong stance against apartheid and his many battles for human rights’ causes. He has been described by former state president Nelson Mandela as: “sometimes strident, often tender, never afraid and seldom without humour, Desmond Tutu’s voice will always be the voice of the voiceless.”



Born in 1931 in Klerksdorp in the former Transvaal, Tutu’s family moved to Johannesburg when he was 12 where his father worked as a teacher and his mother as a cleaner. He followed in his father’s footsteps, as a teacher at the Johannesburg Bantu High school, but resigned after three years in protest of the Bantu Education Act. Thus began his studies into theology at St Peter’s Theology College in Johannesburg, where he met his wife Nomalizo Leah Shenxane, whom he has four children with: Trevor, Theresa, Naomi and Mpho. In 1960, Desmond Tutu was ordained as an Anglican priest.

Tutu studied in the UK for many years, frequently travelling back to South Africa to give lectures. He gained international acclaim for his opposition of apartheid, and as a result, his passport was revoked twice by the South African government, and in 1980, he was even jailed for a brief period of time. Desmond Tutu’s message during the apartheid era was always one of reconciliation between all the peoples of South Africa. At the funeral of assassinated SACP leader and anti-apartheid activist Chris Hani, Tutu managed to subdue the 120 000-strong angry crowd, eventually getting them all to chant: “We will be free, all of us, black and white together!”

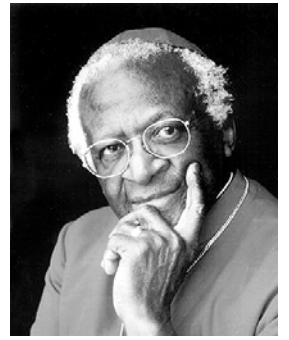
In 1995 and for several years after, Archbishop Tutu was the chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and held onto his seat despite having to undergo treatment for prostate cancer in the US during that time. Apart from the Nobel Peace prize which he won in 1984, Archbishop Tutu has also received the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism in 1986, the Gandhi Peace Prize in 2005 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009.

Today, Archbishop Desmond Tutu is currently the chair of The Elders, a group of elderly world leaders who convene to help tackle some of the most pressing of our time. Other famous Elders include Nelson Mandel and his wife Graca Machel. Other founding members include Kofi Annan, Ela Bhatt, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Jimmy Carter, Li Zhaoxing, Mary Robinson, Muhammad Yunus and Aung San Suu Kyi, who was recently released from 15 years of house arrest in Burma.

Archbishop Tutu has retired from public life as of October 2010. The 79-year-old South African icon had this to say: “The time has now come to slow down, to sip Rooibos tea with my beloved wife in the afternoons, to watch cricket, to travel to visit my children and grandchildren, rather than to conferences and conventions and university campuses.”

His public speeches and commentary will be both sorely missed and fondly remembered by the Rainbow Nation.

Answer the following questions after reading the newspaper article about Desmond Tutu:



1. What does the following phrase mean?

a. "he is also accredited with coining the phrase 'Rainbow Nation'"

b. "He followed in his father's footsteps"

c. "rainbow nation"

2. What did Desmond Tutu fight against in South Africa during the 1980's?

3. List some of the things Desmond Tutu has done to ensure that all South African understand their basic human rights.

4. Why do you think Desmond Tutu retired from public life in 2010?

5. Use a dictionary to find out what these words mean?

a. icon _____

b. international acclaim _____

c. reconciliation _____

d. subdue _____

e. assassinated _____