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Speech: No Future Without Forgiveness

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No Future Without Forgiveness

1. Great privilege-thanks-this is a great Cathedral congregation under superb leadership of the Dean and Canon Bridges outstanding preachers. I don't have to tell you.
2. I have been speaking about TRC and reconciliation and forgiveness for quite a bit.
3. Had you asked people before 1990 what they expected would happen in SA, then most would have said they expected SA to be overrun by the most awful, bloody catastrophe and racial conflagration. It did not happen, instead there was the remarkably peaceful transition marked by the scenes forever etched on our consciousnesses-by lines of South Africans of all races going to vote, most for the very first time. I was 62-Nelson Mandela was 76. The disaster did not strike us. Then they said ' Ah, you wait until a black led government is in charge, then we will see the most awful orgy of retribution and revenge when the blacks so long downtrodden would get their own back from the whites so long the top dogs. It didn't happen. Instead, people were amazed by the process of the TRC when perpetrators of some of the most gruesome atrocities received amnesty in exchange for the truth, when victims demonstrated a remarkable magnanimity in forgiving those who had manhandled them so viciously. Perpetrators and victim

sometimes embraced in a remarkable act of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation.

I thought to give a few vignettes illustrating some of this. Nelson Mandela spent much of his adult life fighting apartheid. He was frequently on the run from the police and proved elusive for a very long time so that he was known as the Black Pimpernel. He spent very little time with his new young bride Winnie and they had hardly any family life to speak of. She brought up their two daughters virtually single-handed. She too was constantly harassed by the police, detained, banned and eventually banished from Soweto to another part of the country where she didn't know the local language, to increase her isolation. He was eventually captured and tried with others for high treason in the Rivonia Trial basically he and the other black co-accused were on trial for wanting to be recognized as human beings with inalienable rights. That must have appalled them and given them deep resentment at the travesty of justice which could sentence them to such inordinately long and heavy sentences-life imprisonment and they had run the risk of getting the death penalty. That must have incensed them to no end at the blatant fundamental injustice of it all.

On Robben Island they were serving terms of hard labour, they worked in the quarry where the dust and glare played havoc with their health

and eyesight. Today you are asked not to use flashes in taking Mandela's photos because his eyes were damaged there. It was no Sunday School picnic. They slept on a cement floor on small felt mattresses. It was possible to have come to this place with white hot anger at a miscarriage of justice in the Court and that anger and resentment could have multiplied and festered and poisoned your entire being. It is possible and not unreasonable for Mandela to have been consumed by anger and bitterness nursing grudges and just waiting to get his own back.

Had Mr. De Klerk when he met Nelson Mandela encountered an embittered man who was hell-bent on revenge, then it is almost certain that the courageous initiatives he was to announce on February 2nd 1990 would have been stillborn and the negotiated settlement might never, almost certainly would never have happened and the miracle we all acclaim as a peaceful transition would never have been. There would have been no future except that foretold in the grim predictions we mentioned at the beginning. Instead, mercifully for us Mr. De Klerk must have been blown over by the magnanimity he encountered, the generosity of spirit, the absence of a lust for revenge. So it is not to theorize when we say there is no future without forgiveness that this was no namby pamby thing for religious people but that it did belong in the realm of real politik.

And he did demonstrate some remarkable examples. At his inauguration as President his white jailor attended as a VIP guest of the New President. That was a kind of defining gesture of someone the world has come to admire, no more as an icon of forgiveness and reconciliation. Throughout his presidency he would carry out some remarkable such gestures. He invited to lunch Dr. Percy Yutar, who had been the prosecutor in the Rivonia Trial, where Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment and Dr. Yutar had demanded the death sentence. Instead of gloating and vilifying this man, here he was eating lunch with him as an honoured guest at the Presidency.

And then he invited the spouses, mostly widows, of past political leaders and the vast majority were white and they would have been Afrikaner political leaders who had been our oppressors to tea. The widow of Dr. Verwoerd the high priest and chief architect of apartheid was somewhat indisposed and could not come (Maybe she didn't want to come as the guest of a black man even if he was President). Most people would have said 'Well that's that' but not Madiba. He then asked if he could visit her and when she agreed he flew a distance of at least 400 miles to have tea with her. He charmed her and most Afrikaners so that they were eating out of the hand of this former terrorist.

Now we don't have to be too smart to think what horrors would have befallen our land had Madiba advocated revenge instead of forgiveness, retribution instead of reconciliation, peace instead of continued hostility and the armed struggle- there would have been no future. Our land would have lain in dust and ashes.

On Holy Saturday 1993 Chris Hani communist, at one time he wanted to become Roman Catholic priest, the charismatic leader, attractive and hugely popular was assassinated. He was idolized especially by the militant youth. I was devastated and wept like a baby because I too loved him dearly. He would almost certainly have succeeded Mandela as President. Our country has never been closer to an almighty explosion and conflagration. The black youth especially were ready to go on the rampage to avenge his killing. Nelson Mandela and lesser lights like yours truly went on the TV and radio having been asked by President De Klerk and appealed for calm, pleading that people should not take the law into their own hands. He could have done the opposite and exploited the white-hot rage in the black community and lead an orgy of gory revenge. I don't think our country was ever closer to the edge of the precipice as then. He averted the much-feared bloodbath speaking about forgiveness and reconciliation. And as a consequence here we are ten years later after that disastrous assassination.

Let me give one more example. Amy Biehl was an American Fulbright Scholar who had been very active in the anti-apartheid struggle. She went to do research at the U.W.C. with an almost exclusively black student body. One afternoon, she drove a black friend home to one of the black ghetto townships. As she was returning to town, a mob of stone throwing and stick wielding youth saw her. They shouted out the slogan of one of the liberation movements, "1 Settler 1 bullet". They killed her gruesomely stabbing and stoning her to death as she tried to escape on foot. The leaders of this frenzied mob were apprehended and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. They applied for amnesty. Amy's parents Peter and Linda Biehl from California attended the Amnesty hearing and supported the granting of amnesty. Peter said to me they acted in the fashion that their daughter would have approved. They visited the homes of the young men who had killed their daughter and embraced their parents. They came quite frequently to that township passing the spot where their child had been killed and they did this several times. They were spending more time in SA than in California. That was not all-they started the Amy Biehl Foundation which operated income generating projects such as a bakery and skills training, to try to rescue the township lads from the consequences of poverty, deprivation, violence and crime. They could so easily have become

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embittered and wanted the killers punished and not to have anything to do with the community that had produced those frenzied killers. Now they were part of helping to shape a different future for several young people and other members of that community.

“No Future without forgiveness” is not just a glib smart slogan. It happens to be the truth whether we are thinking of an intimate relationship between 2 persons or several within a community or between ethnic groups and nations. Can you imagine how many broken marriages there would have been had there not been this mechanism to deal with the number of times we hurt or upset one another? There would be no future for such relationships without forgiveness. Starting from family, insignificant things like not appreciating each other, saying thank you etc to far more serious challenges to the relationship.

God had to find a way of dealing with our frequent infractions of his law, our rejection of His love, our resentment of our essential vulnerability as creatures wanting the invincibility that properly belongs only to God. God had to find a different method than cleaning up the slate to start afresh as God did with Noah’s flood. God found that way was through forgiveness, which means giving the other the opportunity of a new beginning. When we fail God does not exclaim “Good riddance to bad rubbish”. God picks us up

dusts us off and says, "Try again." And as we stumble and fall so many times we get that opportunity to begin again.

Forgiveness means bringing good out of evil, love out of hate, light out of darkness, so eternal life stems from the Cross instrument of an excruciating death, the Amy Biehl Foundation from the gruesome death of a young woman. Forgiveness is not pretending that things are other than they really are- forgiveness can be confrontational telling it as it is, looking the beast in the eye. Forgiveness is letting go of your right to retaliation. It is like opening a window to let the fresh air rush into a dank closed room, it is drawing the curtains apart to let the light stream into a dark room.

For us, it is based on the African concept *ubuntu* the essence of being human-that a person is a person only through other persons, that my humanity is caught up in yours. I am fully me only, if you are all you can be. Anger, resentment, nursing grudges corrode, subvert the summum bonum, the great good of the African worldview communal harmony and they eat away at the very vitals. To forgive is not being altruistic; it is the best form of self-interest. You know what happens to your blood pressure when you are caught in a traffic jam, "How come they let all those morons drive a car?" To forgive is good for your physical health as it is for your spiritual health. When you don't forgive, you shut tight the channels that

would enable you to be forgiven in your turn; you can't appropriate God's forgiveness when you are clogged up with unforgiveness.

And so in the Middle East they will go inexorably on-suicide bomber provoking harsh reprisal going against the biblical injunction of an 'eye for an eye' because of collective punishment and as sure as anything there will be a suicide bomber to avenge the latest Israeli reprisal ad infinitum or NI or Rwanda. **Is it not clear that without forgiveness there is no future?**