

One New Book for the Preacher

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RABBLE-ROUSER FOR PEACE: THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF DESMOND TUTU by John Allen. New York: Free Press, 2006. 396 pages.

In infancy he was stricken with polio. In his youth he was hospitalized for eighteen months with tuberculosis which he barely survived. As an adult he experienced numerous attempts on his life, including one with a sharpened bicycle spoke at a crowded airport and another when his car was run off the road and he was beaten, but the command to kill him was not carried through for some inexplicable reason. Nearly thirty years ago in the heated season of escalating resistance and oppression, he drew up his wishes for his own funeral. His middle name is Mpilo, meaning "Life," and for Desmond Tutu it is no small wonder.

John Allen is a South African journalist who has known Tutu for thirty years and served as the director of communications for the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He has observed Tutu up close during his nearly impossible work to heal a nation emerging from its long struggle against apartheid. Allen has had direct access to Tutu, his family, his acquaintances, his detractors, his enemies, as well as volumes of diary entries, notes, sermons, school records, police records, and correspondence. Written in a journalistic style, this book recounts details of people, places, and events down to the hour, and through this precise specificity emerges the fascinating and complex story of how Tutu rose from being a sickly boy in the impoverished margins of South African society to a towering international advocate for peace in his country and for the world.

Preachers, I imagine, will be interested to read about how early on young Desmond had no intention of becoming a minister. After spending a year and a half in the hospital with tuberculosis as a teenager, he wanted to go into medicine and applied to medical schools, but his family could not afford the fees. It was a community of Anglican monks caring for him during his long illness and a specific mentor who recognized his potential for ministry and helped him find his way into seminary as a second option. Like many a seminary student, he struggled with Greek, he worried about money and uprooting his family, and he was well into his academic studies before he began to discern his calling to serve God through the church.

Tutu didn't imagine his becoming a giant political figure either. So accustomed was he to living in the racist society of South Africa that it was not until Tutu went to England to study for ministry that he began to realize how oppressively wrong the severe segregation of apartheid really was. Until then much of life and religion had been left unquestioned. His growing sense of call to serve the church paralleled his rise as a political figure proclaiming a more just homeland. Events along the way, from the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 through the increasing turmoil of the 1970's and 80's, urged him onto the national stage.

Allen gives us a portrait of a very complicated human being whose brave convictions were pulled out of him by complex circumstances in church and society.

An extreme extrovert with an incredible sense of humor and profound love for people, Tutu spends hours daily in silent devotion and meditation regenerating his personal resources. He is a man of great laughter and flowing tears. He can stir up a crowd to the brink of an uprising and then tell them they need to act nonviolently. He advocates nonviolence but refuses to say violence is never a necessary means of action. He served a large white congregation in Johannesburg preaching from a black African hermeneutic, trying to move them gently and pastorally toward a more just social order, but he also let his anger lead them into uncharted seas of political change. The book's title, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, is a perfect summation of his seemingly contradictory qualities. Ironically, the Nobel committee chose Tutu because they believed him less controversial than other potential South African choices for the award, and then his winning of the Nobel Peace Prize emboldened him to further rabble-rousing.

Allen's eyewitness account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an amazing testimony to the Christian understanding of repentance, restitution, and forgiveness. There were many victims of apartheid who wanted nothing more than to punish those who had violated them, and there were violators little interested in being forgiven. Tutu was the one who held firm to his conviction that apartheid had damaged whites as well as blacks and insisted, "There is no future without forgiveness." He figured out how to use people's anger and to drain the violence out of it, thus making room for hope. By his persuasive Christian convictions the whole country moved a long way to restoring humanness to all people of every race.

During a time when our world is falling apart at the seams by warfare that is largely religious in nature, Allen's portrait of Desmond Tutu and his amazing South African story provides hope for people of faith truly to live the gospel. Tutu's life, like the lives of many unlikely biblical prophets, reflects God's working through him to move a nation toward justice and reconciliation. By a daily meditative ritual of emptying himself to nothingness, Tutu practices becoming a vessel which God can fill to the brim. As Tutu once told a priest who questioned his views, "God's gift of forgiveness is gracious and unmerited but you must be willing to appropriate the gift."

Tutu's remarkable journey through life and faith is one worthy of every preacher's attention. He is a very complicated human being, with ordinary gifts and flaws, but one through whom God has done extraordinary new things. Desmond Mpilo Tutu lives indeed for the sake of the gospel.