How to Be a Human Being
A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Isaiah 11.1-10; Romans 15.4-13; Matthew 3.1-12

When Nelson Mandela came to Britain 13 years ago he described himself as an ‘unemployed pensioner with a criminal record.’ Yet what he had achieved is one of the great feats of the twentieth century.

Isaiah chapter 11 promises that in the midst of Israel’s despair one shall arise who represents a future beyond the people’s imagination. This is what it says about that figure: ‘The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.’ Those words have a particular resonance in view of the tributes laid in the last few days at the feet of Nelson Mandela. And look at what Isaiah goes on to describe – beyond anything anyone would believe possible: ‘The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together.’ How about that for a portrayal of the new South Africa? No one truly believed a peaceful transfer of power was possible in South Africa. That was the doubt on which the credibility of the Apartheid regime rested. Everyone knew the Apartheid policy was indefensible and unjust. But it was propped up by the assumption that the alternative was a bloodbath. Nelson Mandela embodied the hope of a different future. Hope is living a different future until that future becomes a reality. Nelson Mandela was the living embodiment of Advent hope.

We all know the new South Africa is no picnic. We know that inequalities abide, economic change is slow, and the present government leaves something to be desired. But as one observer commented, ‘It says the wolf would lie down with the lamb; it doesn’t say the lamb would get a whole lot of sleep.’ What we must remember is that the wolf lay down with the lamb – the calf and the lion and the fatling lay down together. That is nothing short of a miracle. And it’s impossible to imagine it could have happened without Nelson Mandela. It’s hard to think of any global achievement in our era to match that.

And the reason we celebrate it in an act of worship like this is that it wasn’t simply a political sleight of hand. It wasn’t a corralling of coalitions and a seizing of a timely moment with a dramatic gesture or calculated manoeuvre. It was done by encouraging and persuading and inspiring antagonists on all sides of the argument to be better people. And we honour Mandela today not by putting him on a pedestal and seeing him as a one-off but by imitating him in responding to our own and our world’s crises by seeking to be better people ourselves.

I want to look at five moments in Mandela’s life where he could have gone a different way – where most of us would have gone a different way – but by keeping an Advent imagination he showed us how to be a human being.

The first is his joining the freedom struggle. Mandela was well qualified, intelligent, and well connected. He could have navigated the political realities of South Africa in the forties and fifties and got through unscathed. He knew the dangers and the downside of the armed struggle. But he knew only one way to live, and that was to put his personal interests to one side and face the consequences of his convictions. He didn’t keep his head down. He stood up and was counted. He showed us how to struggle. Is that you? Is this a moment when you can see clearly a choice
between right and wrong and you know deep in your heart that you can’t keep your head down? Is the Holy Spirit speaking to you right now?

The second moment is Mandela’s trial for sabotage in Pretoria in April 1964. He could have found legal anomalies. He could have looked to dodge the shadow of endless incarceration or merciless execution. But at his trial, instead of mounting a sophisticated defence, he simply made a speech. The speech lasted several hours and concluded with these words: ‘I’ve fought against white domination, and I’ve fought against black domination. I’ve cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It’s an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it’s an ideal for which I am prepared to die.’ Mandela showed us how to face fear. We’re all going to die. Do you want to end your life clinging to the edge of the cliff of existence, eking out a few moments more as desperately as you can? Or is there something or someone you’re prepared to die for, and by dying lay down your life to show the worth of the life of others? Is the Holy Spirit telling you right now that there’s something that’s worth your whole life?

The third moment is Mandela’s 27 years of imprisonment, a season he must have feared would never end. During those years he engaged in an intense debate with his fellow prisoners, men like Govan Mbeki, as to whether a shared future in South Africa would ever be possible. Mandela came to the firm conviction that hatred imprisons the one who hates, that there’s no freedom that is not freedom for everyone, that oppressors become the subject of the ones they oppress. It was in those incarcerated years he turned his convictions into a state of mind. Mandela showed us how to be in conflict but keep our dignity: how not to let bitterness get the better of us. He often visited his prison cell on Robben Island in the years following his release. Perhaps his visits were an act of renewal to recall the convictions that he’d learned there. I wonder in what ways you’re in prison. I wonder whether your response is to blame, to recriminate, to cast around for guilty parties and oppressors and explanations. Mandela could have done that. But he discovered there was no future without forgiveness. There was no joy that was not shared joy. There was no freedom in simply swapping others’ oppression for his own. If you’re in prison right now, is the Holy Spirit leading you to think of this time in your life as a storehouse of wisdom for challenges to come?

The fourth moment is his release from prison in February 1990. BBC correspondent Mike Wooldridge vividly described the surprise of everyone that he walked from the prison rather than being driven by car. But his long walk toward the crowds and the cameras mirrored his long walk to freedom and that of his people. By walking he echoed that his freedom wouldn’t come without the freedom of his people. He reiterated the solidarity he’d shown throughout the previous decade when he’d refused to be released unless his release coincided with political change. And he showed he knew that this was not on its own a victory, but part of a long journey to be made by everyone in South Africa and made up of simple, slow, but methodical steps. He might have felt he’d done enough by giving up 27 years of his life. But he knew this was the beginning, not the end.

In his speech that day Mandela said, ‘Our march to freedom is irreversible.’ In other words, it was not to be rushed, or snatched, like something that was ephemeral or in doubt. He knew time was on his side. That’s the essence of Advent – to know time is on your side. On the strength of that he reached out not just to his own constituency but to the whole population. He said, ‘We call on our white compatriots to join us in the shaping of a new South Africa. The freedom movement is a political home for you too.’ And even more, he described his arch-opponent, President F.W. de Klerk, as a ‘man of integrity.’ What an extraordinary statement of magnanimity towards a person who, together with his predecessors, had kept Mandela in prison for all those years. Mandela showed us how to make time our friend. He knew it wasn’t about him, and his personal pain or disadvantage. I wonder what the Holy Spirit is telling you in this moment. Who is your adversary? Do you, deep down, know that time is on your side? Can you find it in your heart to match the magnanimity of Mandela?
And finally, the fifth moment is when Mandela came to power, as the first president of a democratic South Africa in May 1994. He portrayed ‘a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world’; he recognised that his people needed not just justice and peace, but ‘work, bread, water and salt.’ But most importantly, now he was in the impregnable position of president, he demonstrated that forgiveness and reconciliation and healing and partnership were not just devices or slogans to secure the transfer of power: they were truths that he was going to live by till his dying day, and write upon the soul of his people. Generosity was to be his investment in his people’s future. Inclusivity was to be his vision of his people’s wisdom. His nation would never be so rich that it would not be impoverished by the neglect of the gifts of any of its children, and it would never be so beautiful that it would not be tarnished by any strand of racism or discrimination or diminution of any of its citizens. The last fear of the oppressors was quashed. The last scraps of plausibility of the Apartheid lie were exposed. A black man stood on the podium of power – and the country was not destroyed, and the white people were freer than ever before, with the nation and the world for the first time as their friends. Mandela showed us how to live. I wonder what the Holy Spirit is telling you in this moment. I wonder if once you had high ideals and now you look back and see them behind you in tatters by the roadside of your years. Mandela stood on that podium with his ideals as clear as at any moment in the fifty years since he’d joined the freedom struggle. Is the Holy Spirit telling you that the secret of your vocation, the clue to your destiny, the heart of your integrity, is likewise really very simple?

Isaiah concludes his prophecy by saying perhaps the most extraordinary thing of all. ‘And a little child shall lead them.’ Nelson Mandela was, by the standards of the world, a little child. He believed in things like forgiveness and fairness and reconciliation and hope that few but little children hold dear. But he was right. And he did lead us. As Jesus taught, anyone who wants to enter the kingdom must become like a child. And there can’t be much doubt that Mandela entered the kingdom.

Nelson Mandela showed us how to be a human being. To follow him means to ask ourselves these questions. Is it time I stopped keeping my head down? Is there something or someone that’s worth my whole life? Can my time of imprisonment be a storehouse of wisdom for responsibilities to come? Can I find it in my heart to be magnanimous to my adversary? And have I lost sight of the simple calling that gives my life meaning?

Thank God for Nelson Mandela, a man who embodied Advent hope. Thank God that through him we saw what it means to be a human being. Maybe, through his life, we can see better how we are each called to be human beings too.