

Transcript
Archbishop Desmond Tutu
His keynote address on April 13, 2002, Old South Church, Boston, MA - USA
for Friends of Sabeel North America's Conference:
"Ending the Occupation"

Transcription Prepared by Allison B. Hodgkins, Friends of Sabeel – New England

Opening Remarks: Presiding Bishop Edmund Browning(Ret.)

I could not be more delighted to welcome the Archbishop to Boston and the Old South Church, and to the program that we have planned for this day.

In 1984 I was asked, with about 4 or 5 others, by the Archbishop of Canterbury to go to Namibia to bring his words of solidarity to the Namibian people. The Government of South Africa was treating Namibia just as it treated South Africa and the Archbishop wanted to bring words of solidarity to the people. We were there about 10 days and then we came back to Pretoria. And, that was 5 ambassadors who were related to Namibia in terms of countries that give support to Namibia. And then we went to Johannesburg and had the privilege of a meeting with the then Executive Director of the South African Council of Churches – that was Desmond Tutu. We spent a good part of the day sharing with him the things that we had seen and the things that we had felt. We shared with him the kind of suffering that we had experienced on the part of the Namibian people. We shared with him our concern that there was a real need for justice in this particular part of God's creation and he sat and he responded as we went along and all though our discussion with him, he had this wonderful, beautiful smile. I mean, and you knew that he was listening and you knew that he was understanding everything we were saying, but there was something that he knew that we had not yet come across. And, I remember that when we finished our conversation and we were coming to the end, the Archbishop said: "You know, everything you have said, every need you have pointed out is right on target." He said: "But, please don't forget this is in God's hands. They have hope. And Apartheid will not succeed. It will be brought down." I thought to myself and have thought about it for years afterward, that I had never met anyone that could hold together the jewels of justice and peace... because you can't have one without the other – he has exhibited to us throughout his whole ministry, particularly as he was the Director of the South African Council of Churches, that was the time he really spoke out about the division in South Africa. He had his passport taken away because the South African government didn't want him traveling about the country and finally, after many words from governments across the world they finally lifted that restriction. I know of no one who has worked more toward the issues of justice and peace than Desmond Tutu. So, it is a great honor to say to my dear friend that we welcome him in this place.

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Keynote Address by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "*Occupation is Oppression*"

Thank you very, very much. Thank you again for the very warm words of introduction. Thank you for how much you have cared for us. When you were presiding Bishop, you showed so much solidarity with us in our travail. You supported us you supported sanctions even when it was unpopular in your Church. Thank you. And thank you Naim. Thank you for remaining so passionate and committed under quite devastating circumstances. Now, if you will forgive me if I forget and think that in fact I am, I am supposed to be preaching (laughter) and then behave like the preacher who went on for a very long time in his sermon and after a long, long sermon he said: "What more can I say?" (laughter) And, somebody in the back said: "AMEN!" (applause, laughter)

It is a very great privilege to have been asked to come here. And, I mean, I want you to be able to affirm yourselves. I know now that you are a very shy people – very reserved. But, you know were free in South Africa today because of people like yourselves. People who sometimes - when it really looked like you were trying to freeze over hell – who went on going on. And here are – free! Free because there were people who cared. Who cared even when it looked totally impossible. And so, I want to thank you for that, but thank you also specially for being here. Thank you. Thank you, because you see God weeping over what God sees in the Middle East and other places and says: "Gee Wiz! What ever got into me to create that lot?" (laughter) And then God sees you. God looks down and God smiles and says: "Hey, Don't they justify the risk that I took?" And, God says: "Thank you – Thank you for, for, for proving me right." Because you see, actually God has no one except ourselves – absolutely no one. And, God is extraordinary because God is omnipotent and you know what it means omnipotent- all powerful - but, God is also utterly impotent. God does not dispatch lightning bolts to remove tyrants as we might have hoped he could. God waits for you, for you, for you, for you. Because God says: "You are my partner, and I am as weak as the weakest of my partners."

That's just, that's just a small, little preamble. But I would like, actually to say thank you God for me. Thank you God that you made me – me, to celebrate who you are. Because, you see for God, you are the best thing that God ever created. You, you: a masterpiece in the making. And so, how about giving yourselves – hey you – Why, lets give ourselves a warm cheer! I mean, come on! (applause) I, I, I did that once with a lot – a few young people, 2,000 young people. I said lets celebrate who we are and lets give ourselves a warm hand, and, and they did quite a decent thing. And then I said: "how about giving God a standing ovation" and they nearly took the roof off. And without thinking, near the end, I said: "thank you!" (laughter)

I would actually have preferred that the title ... the title here is 'Occupation is Oppression.' Now, I would like for us to have changed that and said – give peace a chance – for peace is possible. You see, we are bearers of hope for God's children in the Holy Land. For God's people the Israeli Jews, and God's people the Palestinian Arabs. We want to say to them: our hearts go out to all who have suffered as a result of the violence of suicide bombers and the violence of military incursions and reprisals and express our deepest sympathies to all who have been injured and bereaved in the horrendous events of recent times. We want to say to all involved in the events of these past days –

peace is possible. Israeli Jew, Palestinian Arab can live amicably side by side in a secure peace. And, as Cannon Ateek kept underscoring, a secure peace built on justice and equity. These two peoples are God's chosen and beloved, looking in their face back to a common ancestor Abraham and confessing belief in the one creator God of *salaam* and *shalom*.

I give thanks for all that I have received as a Christian from the teachings of God's people the Jews. When we were opposing the vicious system of apartheid, which claimed that what invested people with worth was a biological irrelevance – skin color – we turned to the Jewish Torah, which asserted that what gave people their infinite worth was the fact that they were created in the image of God. Thus, on this score, Apartheid was unbiblical, evil without remainder and therefore, unchristian. And when our people groaned by virtue of the burden of racist oppression, we invoked the God who addressed Moses in the burning bush, we told our people that our God had heard their cry, had seen their anguish, and knew their suffering, and would come down, this great God of exodus, this liberator God as in the past to deliver us as God had delivered Israel from bondage. We told them that God was notoriously biased in favor of those without clout; the poor, the weak, the hungry, the voiceless, as God had shown when God intervened through the Prophet Nathan against King David on behalf of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. Or, as God intervened through Elijah on behalf of Naboth, against King Ahab and Jezebel when they confiscated Naboth's vineyard and caused Naboth to be killed. And, this God never abandoned us. For when we were thrown into the fiery furnace of tribulation and suffering caused by Apartheid, this God would be there with us as Emanuel – 'God with us.' Just as God had been there with Daniel and his companions. That this God rejected worship, which did not change the lives and conduct of the worshippers. To make them care especially for the widow, the orphan and the alien. Those in most societies who are among the most vulnerable and least influential. That this God preferred obedience to sacrifice, to doing the truth, to showing mercy rather than sacrifice, making justice flow like a river, walking humbly with God. And this God called on God's people always to remember, to remember that they had been aliens and slaves and this memory would galvanize them and inspire them to be in their turn compassionate and generous with the alien in their midst. We would invoke the Jewish scriptures that have asserted that this was God's world and despite all appearances to the contrary, God was in charge. That this was, therefore, a moral universe. There was no way in which might would ever be right. That injustice, lies, oppression could never have the last word in the universe of this God. That oppressors and dictators and those who flouted the laws of this moral universe would, in the end, bite the dust.

And in our struggle against Apartheid, some of the most outstanding stalwarts were Jews: the Helen Suzmans, the Joe Slovos, the Alvie Saches. As in this country in the Civil Rights movement, Jews almost instinctively, as a matter of course, had to be on the side of the disenfranchised, of the discriminated against, of the voiceless ones fighting injustice, oppression and evil and given their religious traditions, their history. I have continued to feel strongly with the Jews. I with many other Nobel Peace Laureates. I, after taking counsel with the then Bishop of Jerusalem, am a member of the Board of the Shimon Peres peace center in Tel Aviv. I am a patron of the Holocaust center in Capetown. I believe that Israel has a right to secure borders, internationally recognized, in a land assured of territorial integrity and with acknowledged sovereignty as an independent country. That the Arab nations made a bad mistake in refusing to recognize the existence of sovereign Israel and in pledging to work for her destruction. It was a short sighted policy that led to Israel's nervousness, her high state of alert and military preparedness to guarantee her continued existence. This was understandable. What was not so understandable, what was not justifiable was what Israel did to another people to guarantee her existence. I have been very deeply distressed in all my visits to the Holy Land, how so much of what was taking place there reminded me so much of what used to happen to us Blacks in Apartheid South Africa. I have seen the humiliation of the Palestinians at the road blocks and recall what used to happen to us in our motherland, when arrogant, young white police officers would hector, and bully us, and demean us when we ran the gauntlet of their

unpredictable whims – whether they would let you through or not. When they seemed to derive so much fun out of our sullen humiliation. I have seen such scenes, or heard of them, being played out in the Holy Land. The rough and discourteous demands for IDs from the Palestinians were so uncannily reminiscent of the infamous pass law raids of the vicious Apartheid regime. We saw on those visits, or read about things that did not happen even in Apartheid South Africa. The demolition of homes because of a suspicion that one or other family member was a terrorist. And so, all paid a price in these acts of collective punishment. Seemingly being repeated more recently in the attacks on Arab refugee camps. We don't know the exact truth because the Israelis won't let the media in. What are they hiding? But perhaps, more seriously, why is their no outcry in this country at the censorship of their media. For you see, what now is going to happen is that you will frequently be being shown the harrowing images of what suicide bombers have done, which is something we all condemn unequivocally. But you see, you don't see what those tanks are doing to the homes of just ordinary people.

On one of my visits to the Holy Land, I drove one Sunday to a Church Service with the Anglican Bishop. We went past Ramallah. I could hear the tears in his voice as he pointed to the Jewish settlements and I thought of the desires of the Israeli, Israelis for security, and the anguish of the Palestinians at the land they had lost. The occupation [unclear] said, "they are nothing, they count for nothing." And that pain, and the many humiliations that have been suffered is fertile soil for the desperation of suicide bombers. I have heard Palestinians pointing to a residence. I was walking with Cannon Ateek whose father was a jeweler. And as we walked in Jerusalem he pointed out and said: "our home was over there. We were driven out of our home. It is now occupied by Israeli Jews." And then I recalled how many times people of color would point in South Africa much the same way to their former homes from which they had been expelled and which were now inhabited by whites. My heart aches. I say why are our memories so short? Have our Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten the humiliation of wearing yellow arm bands with the Star of David? Have my Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten the collective punishment? The home demolitions? Have they forgotten their own history so soon? And have they turned their back on their profound noble and religious traditions? Have they forgotten that their God, our God, is a God who sides with the poor, the despised, the down trodden? That this is a moral universe? That they will never, they will never get true security and safety from the barrel of a gun? That true peace can ultimately be built only on justice and equity? We condemn the violence of suicide bombers. And if Arab children are taught to hate Jews, we condemn the corruption of young minds too. But we condemn equally unequivocally the violence of military incursions and reprisals that won't let ambulances and medical personnel reach the injured. That wreak an unparalleled revenge, totally imbalanced, even with the Torah's law of an eye for an eye – which was designed actually to restrict revenge to the perpetrator and perhaps those supporting him. That it is the humiliation and desperation of an occupied and hapless people which are the root causes of the suicide bombing. And the military action recent days – I want to predict with almost absolute certainty – will not provide the security and the peace the Israelis want. All it is doing is intensifying the hatred and the resentment and guaranteeing that one day a suicide bomber will arise to wreak revenge. Israel has three options: to revert to the stalemate of the recent status-quo bristling with tension, hatred and violence. Or, to perpetuate genocide and exterminate all Palestinians. Or third – which is what I hope they will chose – to strive for peace based on justice based on withdrawal from all the occupied territory. And for the Palestinians to be committed too and say so loud and clear at every opportunity that they too are committed to such a peace. We in South Africa had a situation where everyone thought we would be overwhelmed by a blood bath. The blood bath did not happen. We had a relatively peaceful transition. And, instead of revenge and retribution, we had a remarkable process of forgiveness and reconciliation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. If our madness, if our intractable problem could have ended as it did, then we believe it must be possible everywhere else in the world. For South Africa is yes, an unlikely candidate, but South Africa is this beacon of hope, beacon of hope

for the rest of the world. If it could happen in South Africa it can happen anywhere else. If peace could come in South Africa then surely it can come in the Holy Land.

Sometimes they ask: "Does this mean you are pro-Palestinian?" And my brother Naim Ateek has said what we, that we used to say too: I am not pro this or that people, I am pro justice. I am pro freedom. I am anti-injustice, anti-oppression any and everywhere that it occurs. But you know, as well as I do that somehow the Israeli government is placed on a pedestal where to criticize them is immediately to be dubbed anti-Semitic. As if the Palestinians were not Semitic. (applause) I, I have not been even anti-white despite all the suffering that that crazy group inflicted on our people. NO! How could I be – if I wasn't even anti those who did that to us – be anti-Jew? Because that is actually the term that ought to be used Are you anti-Jewish? Not anti-Semitic. And then, you would have to say the same thing to the biblical prophets – because they were some of the most scathing critics of the Jewish leadership of their day. We don't criticize Jewish people. We criticize, we will criticize, when they need to be criticized the government of Israel. They said the same to us, I mean when we said to them: Can you explain to us how it comes about that you can collaborate with the Apartheid government on security matters, how you could prolong our oppression. And they would say you're being anti-Semitic. I said: "tough luck. Really tough luck." And when we raise similar questions about the treatment of Palestinians when we were visiting the Holy Land in the time that Cannon Ateek was speaking of, they put up, they painted graffiti just outside St, George Cathedral in Jerusalem: 'Tutu is a black Nazi Pig.' We come from there.

People are scared in this country to say wrong is wrong. (applause) Because the Jewish lobby is powerful – very powerful. Ha, Ha, Ha ha! So what? So what! This is God's world! For goodness sake this is God's world! The Apartheid government was very powerful, but we said to them: Watch it! If you flout the laws of this universe, you're going to bite the dust! (applause) Hitler was powerful. Mussolini was powerful. Stalin was powerful. Idi Amin was powerful. Pinochet was powerful. The Apartheid government were powerful. Milosevic was powerful. But, this is God's world. A lie, injustice, oppression, those will never prevail in the world of this God. That is what we told our people. And we used to say: those ones, they have already lost, they are, they are going to bite the dust one day. We may not be around. An unjust Israeli government, however, powerful will fall in the world of this kind of God. Because we don't want for that to happen but those who are powerful have to remember the litmus test that God gives to the powerful – what is your treatment of the poor, the hungry? What is your treatment of the vulnerable, the voiceless? And on the basis of that, God passes God's judgment.

We should put out a clarion call. Let's, let's make a clarion call to the government of the people of Israel. A clarion call to the Palestinian people and say peace is possible! Peace based on justice is possible! And we are meeting today, and we will continue going on, calling for this, for your own sakes Israeli Jews, for your own sakes Palestinian Arabs. Peace is possible and we will do all we can to assist you in achieving this peace which is within your grasp, because it is God's dream that you will be able to live amicably together as sisters and brothers, side by side because you belong in God's family. Peace! Peace! Peace!

(applause – standing ovation)