**8th December 2013**

**Focus Scripture: Luke 1:46–55**

*The national anthem of South Africa,* [*Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nkosi_Sikelel%27_iAfrika) was composed by a [Methodist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodist) school teacher named [Enoch Sontonga](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enoch_Sontonga) in 1897. It was first sung as a church [hymn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hymn), but later became an act of political defiance against the [apartheid government](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa_under_apartheid).

The Afrikkan national anthem, [*Die Stem van Suid-Afrika*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Stem_van_Suid-Afrika) is a poem written by [C.J. Langenhoven](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C.J._Langenhoven) in 1918 and was set to music by the Reverend Marthinus Lourens de Villiers in 1921.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_anthem_of_South_Africa#cite_note-History-2).

The [South African government](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_African_government) adopted both songs as [national anthems](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_anthems) in 1994, when they were performed at [Nelson Mandela](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela)'s inauguration.[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_anthem_of_South_Africa#cite_note-Carlin153-4) They were merged in 1997 to form the current anthem. The new English lyrics of *Die Stem van Suid-Afrika* were modified from the last four lines of the first stanza and to reflect hope in [post-apartheid South African](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_South_Africa_(1994%E2%80%93present)) society. The translation gos as follows:

Lord, bless Africa  
May her spirit rise high up  
Hear thou our prayers  
Lord bless us.

Lord, bless Africa  
Banish wars and strife   
Lord, bless our nation  
Of South Africa.

Ringing out from our blue heavens  
From our deep seas breaking round  
Over everlasting mountains  
Where the echoing crags resound …

*Sounds the call to come together,*  
*And united we shall stand,*  
*Let us live and strive for freedom*  
*In South Africa our land.*

We continue today to looks at Songs of Praise in the Christmas story. Last week we looked at the Benedictus, the Song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, which ended with that beautiful verse, that ‘*God in his tender mercy, will cause the dawn to break from on high and shine light on those who are in darkness and the shadow of death, and guide our footstep sin the path of peace’.*

It seemed appropriate to start this sermon with the South African national anthem. When Africans mourn, they do it through song, dance and music. If you have ever been to an African funeral you will know that it can swing from weeping and wailing to songs of celebration and thankfulness, and dancing of joy. So as South Africans awoke to news of Nelson Mandela's death, crowds began to gather and mourned him through songs of struggle and church hymns. South Africa is a deeply religious country.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu said "God was so good to us in South Africa by giving us Nelson Mandela to be our president at a crucial moment in our history," He said Mr Mandela had "taught a divided nation to come together".

Mandela was baptized in the Methodist Church; His parents were devout Christians. Mandela went on to become the first in his family to attend school. It was a Methodist school. Mandela has consistently proclaimed his commitment to Christ as his Lord throughout his adult life. His fight against racial inequality as well as his leadership in reconciling the white South Africans, Afrikaners, with the black South Africans have reflected the ideals of Christian principles of justice, forgiveness and reconciliation, forming the bedrock for his political and social motivations.

In his autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom, Mandela tells the story of his early engagement with Christianity. “The Church was as concerned with this world as the next: I saw that virtually all of the achievements of Africans seemed to have come about through the missionary work of the Church.” As a result, Mandela became a member of the Students Christian Association and taught Bible classes on Sundays in nearby villages.

Mandela was released from prison on February 11, 1990, after 27 years of imprisonment. “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison,” recalled Mandela, whose radical change in mind-set would affect how he dealt with his opponents.

Mandela was famously quoted, “One of the things I learned when I was negotiating was that until I changed myself, I could not change others.”

A few weeks before he was elected South Africa’s president, Mandela gave a [speech at the Zionist Christian Church Easter conference on 3 April 1994.](http://www.gospelherald.com/articles/49832/20131205/) The church had been founded in 1910, as an act of the oppressed to resist the theology of submission.The Dutch Reformed Church read the scriptures to condone apartheid of course. It was an act of self-assertion on the part of a people who were expected to remain unheard and unseen while they ministered to the needs of others

After reading the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12), Mandela began by praising God for “The Good News borne by our risen Messiah who chose not one race, who chose not one country, who chose not one language, who chose not one tribe, who chose all of humankind!”

He said “Each Easter marks the rebirth of our faith. It marks the victory of our risen Saviour over the torture of the cross and the grave. Our Messiah, who came to us in the form of a mortal man, but who by his suffering and crucifixion attained immortality

who without arms,  
without soldiers,  
without police and covert special forces,  
without hit squads or bands of vigilantes,  
overcame the mightiest state during his time This great festival of rejoicing marks the victory of the forces of life over death, of hope over despair .”[[1]](#endnote-1)

The rest is history and the world mourns the passing of a great man.

I remember when I was working for Social Services in 1990 as we were getting ready for Nelson Mandela’s release, we had a ‘right- on’ Social Worker in our office, the champion of all worthy causes. She had a badge for everything, especially AA – the anti-apartheid movement. She was looking forward to the release of Mandela but another colleague had a different view. Mandela was a terrorist, on a par with the IRA. Guilty of plotting to kill innocent people. Margaret Thatcher had denounced him as a terrorist. Surely we couldn’t endorse an armed struggle.

We like the rest of the world and especially South Africa, waited with baited breath for whether this man would seek revenge out of bitterness for the years lost to imprisonment. Praise God that was not to be the case and a walk of justice with mercy and forgiveness and reconciliation was opened up for the nation and a witness to the rest of the world.

Imagine therefore if Nelson Mandela had stood on that balcony on the night of his release and spoken the words of Mary’s Song of Praise:

*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour…he has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has routed the proud with all their schemes, he has brought down monarchs from their thrones and raised on high the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty…*

It doesn’t take much imagination to see that had Nelson Mandela used that text on his release, South Africa would have been plunged into a bloody revolution and civil war.

The Magnificat is hot stuff. A radical manifesto that clearly sets out on whose side God is on.

I read about a theologian *Robert McAfee Brown who was* at a “summer course” in Lima, Peru, offered for people who wanted to see how theology and Scripture can be means for overcoming the poverty and oppression and injustice that characterize the villages to which the thousand odd delegates would return to.

Brown wrote:

‘As they leave the hall, they start singing. And what are they singing? Mary’s song.

My wife and I are there, strangers to the culture and partway strangers even to the language. The words they are singing are familiar; we share, after all, the same Scriptures. But on another level the words are brand new, never before heard by either of us. For on the lips of poor and oppressed people, the words are transformed from the whispers of a dutiful maiden into the promise

of a wide-scale victory soon to be achieved.

Those who have every reason to wonder whether God can any longer be called a God of justice and power are singing, “God has shown strength with God’s arm.”

Those who have so often been victimized by arrogant rulers who show no regard for the poor are singing, “God has shattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.”

Those who have been threatened and imprisoned by leaders whose grip on power seems secure are singing, “God has put down the mighty from their thrones.”

Those who have seen their families ground down and destroyed, with no apparent hope of ever rising again, are singing, “God has exalted those of low degree.”

Those who worry about food for themselves and their children are singing, “God has filled the hungry with good things.”

Those from whom the rich take more and more, whether legally or illegally are singing, “And the rich God has sent empty away.”

They are singing of a new order, a new world in which all expectations have been turned around.

Those in power have their spies and informers inside the meeting, of course, and their army (in the guise of the police) outside the meeting. Surely the police, hearing such revolutionary slogans as “Put down the mighty from their thrones!” and “Exult those of low

degree!” should have their guns at the ready as the crowd leaves the assembly hall.

But the crowd understand the wisdom of the serpent as well as the gentleness of the dove. For what can the police, “good Catholics” all, do? All the worshipers are doing is singing a prayer song by a dutiful, demure little Jewish girl who just happens, as far as those in Lima, Peru, are concerned, to be the Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Apparently in the 1980s, the government of Guatemala banned this song" because, unlike 'Away in a Manger,' this prayer was apparently considered subversive, politically dangerous. Authorities worried that it might incite the oppressed people to riot."

In contrast we sing a lot of nonsense at Christmas time - let’s be honest! We sing the traditional carols because it’s traditional. I would get lynched if we didn’t pull out the old, old favourites. John Bell when he came to us last month talked about the Church’s song and picked up on some Christmas Carols. An article by Simon Hill in this month’s Reform magazine also raises the issue: He writes:

‘Some carols are badly written: Presumably ‘we three kings of orient are’ is supposed to mean ‘we are three kings from the Orient’. It sounds like something that Yoda in Star Wars would say.

In the bleak mid-winter imposes a north European landscape on the Palestine. The Holly and the Ivy draws extremely tenuous connections between plants and the birth of Jesus.

Why are Christians so keen to sing songs that aren’t true? What message are we giving out? Take the old favourite ‘Once in Royal David’s City’:

*And through all his wondrous childhood*

*He would honour and obey,*

*Love and watch the lowly maiden,*

*In whose gentle arms he lay…*’

Would he? Mary may not have thought him very obedient after he hung around in the Temple debating theology while his parents frantically searched for him.

Away in a manger is so full of bad theology. Christian theology proclaims a fully human, as well as a fully divine Messiah. Yet this human baby apparently doesn’t cry. Even that isn’t as bad as ‘I love thee Lord Jesus, look down from the sky....’

Is Jesus in the sky - ? Or is he in our midst wherever two or three are gathered. He is calling us to him today, not waiting for us on a cloud. It reinforces the misconception that God is up there and is unconcerned with people’s lives down here.

Mary’s song of praise, the Magnificat, has been compared to "an aria in an opera or a duet in a musical," as it "stops the action of the Gospel in order to celebrate the greatness and covenant faithfulness of God." Yes, "God is great," Mary proclaims, but wonder of wonders and "equally important – and harder to believe for many in our day – God is good". The Magnificat, is like an "overture" to Luke's Gospel in which Luke sounds important themes that will appear again and again. In Luke's Gospel, the emphasis on women, the marginalized, and the Holy Spirit are all evident in the birth narratives, including the one we read this week. Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit, gives voice to those who are lowly, like the shepherds to whom the angels later announce the birth of Jesus. What a powerful text for every heart, hungry for good news!

Sadly at this time of year there can be a lot of sad news. Suicides, breakdown and breakups, accidents, binge drinking and mishaps at Christmas parties, family tensions.

It can be a pressured time when things come to a head. For those who have lost loved ones this is the loneliest time of the year. And in a world that glorifies materialism, those who are struggling financially may find it to be most disappointing. There is a stark contrast between those who have and those who have not.

Relationships can often be under strain. A five year old girl was trying to say the Lord’s prayer but couldn’t say ‘trespasses’ so she prayed ‘and forgive us our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us’.

Can you rejoice when life is not good? Can you be joyful even in the midst of long waiting and keen awareness of suffering?

As the child who had never before been to a Christmas service said when asked what it was like, "I want some of that `umphant.'" "What's that?" the child was asked.

"You know, it's what those people were singing about--`O Come all ye faithful, joyful and try umphant' I'd like to try some of that `umphant.

So how can you survive the season? How can you rejoice at Christmas? How can you keep your umphant!

There was the usual article in the paper the other day about surviving Christmas: written by a good doctor it included the following advice:

**Drink in moderation**

**Don't fan the fires**

The fire brigade is busy at Christmas time – all those candles and wrapping paper. Don't cook when you're drunk – both increase the risk of fires.

**Stop the stress**

Christmas is meant to be the best day of the year. So it's hard not to fall into the trap of setting huge expectations – meaning you'll feel horribly stressed and underwhelmed. Traditionally women bear the brunt of Christmas work but giving everyone a job, from clearing up before the event, to wrapping presents and preparing the vegetables, to laying the table and keeping children entertained, helps share the responsibility.

If you are going to stay with relatives or friends, discuss beforehand who will do and pay for what, as well as how long you'll be there. Every family has their own Christmas traditions (which they'll follow obsessively), so work out the day's timetable before the children rip open their presents.

**Don't overspend**

Studies show that people prefer presents that mean something to them and show the person who bought it knows what they like.

**Don't fight with your spouse**

Be considerate and give yourself some time together that isn't shopping, wrapping or cooking.

**Enjoy eating**

People often worry after the event that they've eaten too many saturated fats and too much sugar. They probably have, but this is Christmas.

**Think of others and you'll feel better yourself**

There's a body of research showing that if we do good things for other people, it makes us feel happier. So invite a friend or relative you think might be lonely for a drink, or, if you want to be deliriously happy afterwards, for Christmas lunch. Do some charity work or help out at a Christmas community meal for older people.

Of course there was no mention about going to church or rejoicing in the Christmas message and the hope we have through the birth of Christ – but this is secular Britain.

Mary of course had Elizabeth as her cousin and close friend to support her. In difficult times hopefully we help one another work things out. Sometimes, we just sit in the dark quiet and wait, together, trusting in the promises of God, listening for a word from God like Mary and Elizabeth did. Sometimes life can be cruel and hard and then faith is faith – trusting God to work things through – that one day will come deliverance.

You may not feel like rejoicing at the moment. Pray that God may give you the generosity of spirit,– to rejoice in the signs of God’s liberation and work **in others**.. Rejoice for others and wait patiently for the day when others will rejoice for you – because that day will come – because God is faithful and God is good, as Mary’s magnificat proclaims. Rejoice in God. He is what ultimately maters. This life will pass way, what is eternal will last. My soul tells out the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked on me with favour…

It echoes the words of Nelson Mandela… The Good News borne by our risen Messiah who chose not one race, who chose not one country, who chose not one language, who chose not one tribe, who chose all of humankind!”

Archbishop Oscar Romero, who championed the cause of the poor and oppressed of El Salvador in the 1980s and paid with his life, said this:

No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need of God – for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God, Emmanuel, God with us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God.

If you anticipate Christmas being a difficult time – May you find a genuine Christmas – may you know the abundance of God.

1. - See more at: http://www.gospelherald.com/articles/49832/20131205/nelson-mandela-biography-christian-values.htm#sthash.4DoNWkFs.dpuf [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *From* Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World

   Eyes *by, copyright © 1984 The Westminster Press. Used by permission.)* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)