

Nelson Mandela: an appreciation



As the end of life approaches, one's thoughts turn inevitably to what lies ahead and also to what has gone before, to the experiences that made that life what it was. It is not only the departing individual that ponders such things, but friends and foes of that person, too. This is what seems to be going on today in South Africa and beyond. The harsh reality that Nelson Mandela is rapidly approaching the end of his extraordinary life is beginning to hit home, and we have started looking back over the time during which we have been blessed with this incredible man.

The collective memory of February 1990 is particularly strong: the whole country came to a standstill to welcome this man back into our community, even though many of us did not know what he looked like as he had been kept from our sight for so long. Despite his unfamiliarity to so many, 'Madiba', his clan name by which he is fondly and popularly known, managed to lift the whole country, inspiring us and filling us with hope and vigour. Words will never be able to describe fully how he changed South Africa. It was as if he took all of us up a mountain so that we could have a transformative experience like that of Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration. Not only was it a comfort to have him released from prison and back in Soweto, it was also an extraordinary blessing to have him navigating South Africa through the troubled political waters of the 1990s. As a country we were hit by and traversed huge storms that could have pulled us into a dreadful civil war.

His influence was felt particularly in April 1993 after the assassination of Chris Hani. The popular leader of the South African Communist Party was assassinated on his driveway in front of his young daughter. This led to unprecedented violent protests that only Mandela could control or curb. He displayed excellent and magnanimous leadership, and had an authority that obliged both young and old to listen. Before, during and after his presidency, he made us feel proud of ourselves as a country. Despite our painful and divided past, South Africans experienced for the first time the apostle Peter's sentiments at the top of that mountain: 'Master, it is good for us to be here.' (Luke 9:33)

Full Story: South Africa:Coming down the mountain

Rampe Hlobo SJ