

Aelred Stubbs:

Eulogy preached at the Requiem Mass celebrated for Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe in the Priory Chapel of the Society of the Precious Blood, Masite, Lesotho, on 1 March 1978.

"And Elisha saw it, and he cried, 'My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!'"
2 Kings 2:12

So our dear Robert has been taken home, and we cannot doubt that all the trumpets have sounded for him on the other side. Born something over 50 years ago, his home was Graaff Reinet, that old and beautiful Dutch town in the Karoo. Educated in the Eastern Cape, like most of the great African nationalist leaders, he entered Fort Hare in the late '40s and was a senior contemporary of Chief Gatsha Buthelezi. (I remember him telling me how Gatsha was rusticated for pouring dirty bath-water all over the room of a notorious student 'sell-out'.)

His fiery eloquence as a student leader was still a legend when we arrived at Alice more than ten years later. He was naturally drawn to the ANC, then in its heyday. But he became very critical of the way in which policy in the Congress Alliance was increasingly dictated by whites of a far left political ideology. He was always strongly anti-Communist; his political stance was very much that of the left centre of the British Labour Party. In fact, we can see in Robert an authentic reproduction in African terms of that personal devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ, combined with strong socialist principles which has been the glory of much British nonconformism (and, I am proud to say, of many members of CR — most notably Charles Gore and Trevor Huddleston).

Pan Africanist Congress

The mid-50s was the time of the beginnings of African independent States, and of the Pan African idealism of Nkrumah of Ghana and others. Robert passionately believed in

the ideal of a non-racialist socialist state, and that this could only be achieved by Africans fighting their own battle. So towards the end of the 1950s he formed the Pan Africanist Congress with those ideals in mind. It was to be for Black Africans only. Yet I remember Robert's chuckle as he told me how Pat Duncan, son of a former Governor-General of the Union of South Africa, defeated that intention when he entered Robert's office and said: "Robert, I am joining PAC. I never want to hold any office in the movement; I'll just be one of the rank and file. Can you stop me?" And Robert could not refuse him for he was just as much an African as he was.

Although it by no means committed itself to a non-violent struggle, in fact the one and only campaign of PAC was a completely non-violent one against the hated Pass Laws. Sobukwe himself publicly burned his pass-book and encouraged others to do the same. The campaign culminated in the peaceful march of 20 000 Africans to Parliament in Cape Town under the 23 year old Philip Kgosana, and tragically in the demonstration at Sharpeville where the police opened fire on the unarmed crowd, and many were killed and wounded. PAC with ANC were declared illegal organisations.

Robert himself had already been arrested, and he was convicted of burning his pass and of incitement, and given a three-year prison sentence. He served the first two years in several different prisons, and experienced the degradation of being used as convict labour on farms. The last year he spent on Robben Island. Instead of being released at the end of his sentence, a special Act was passed in Parliament detaining him for another year on the Island "in the interests of the security of the State". This Act was renewed for six years in succession, Helen Suzman being the only MP to protest each time it came up in Parliament.

After six years of virtual solitary confinement his health had deteriorated so badly that he

was released — but not to a normal life. He was banished to Kimberley, an isolated city with which he had no connections, and there he was put under a banning and house arrest order. Before his arrest he had been a lecturer in African languages at Wits. He realised while on the Island that he would never be able to go back to the teaching profession, so he began the study of law. He now got articled to an African lawyer in the township of Galeshewe.

I first met Robert in January 1971. (A St. Peter's student, Stanley Ntwasa, introduced us.) He had been a champion tennis player and one could still see from the way he moved that he was an athlete. Suffering had tempered what must have been his youthful fire and impatience; but the fire itself burned more strongly and clearly than ever. And yet on the surface, what imperturbable cheerfulness and courtesy he invariably displayed! He smiled and laughed freely. When you told him something amusing or surprising, he would open his mouth; "Good God" he would say in that inimitable, slightly drawling voice, and lean back in his chair and *laugh*.

Charity and endurance

Concerning the struggle, he was realistic; but above all he was incurably optimistic, with the optimism of a faith that has been through the fire. Tough he still was, as he merged in conversation with him about informers, yet he himself managed a genuinely friendly relationships with one of his gaolers.* He continued to endure humiliations and disappointments. He was offered a Chair at an American University. Veronica, his wife, who had borne the burden of bringing up the children during his nine years in prison, was unhappy in Kimberley. The hospital authorities where she worked as a nurse treated her in such a way that she resigned, and therefore

*This paragraph has been shortened in accordance with the law.

had no job. For her sake and that of the children he felt that he must accept; it must have been the hardest decision of his life. The Minister of the Interior gave him an exit permit, but then the Minister of Police refused to relax his banning order so as to enable him to travel from Kimberley to Jan Smuts International Airport. So they could not go.

He was by now a man so deep in the love of God that the disappointment, for Veronica's sake, must have been sharp and cruel. Their last chance of making a normal, healthy and happy family home had gone. But at the same time, I can't help thinking, he allowed himself secretly to smile with God, who had allowed Jimmy Kruger to pay him this supreme compliment.

"The Prof."

It confirmed him as the true father of the younger generation in the struggle. Until they were banned, all of them would at some time pay a pilgrimage to "The Prof.", as they all called him. When his mother died at his elder brother Ernest's home in Umtata, Robert was given special permission to travel down to Umtata, and then to proceed by car to Graaff Reinet — a journey which took him right through the heartlands of the African resistance. By this time Steve Biko was banned. Robert's route lay through King William's Town, so despite the vigilance of the System the two met again — for the last time on this earth. In so many little dorps on their route PAC members had gathered, just for a glimpse of him. It was more a royal progress than the journey of a silenced captive to a funeral. At Graaff Reinet 3 000 came to pay tribute to the mother of such a son. At length, after years of struggle and anxiety, he qualified and was admitted to practise as an attorney. At last he would be able to be

free from financial anxiety. But in practice he found that most of his clients could not afford to pay more than a token fee, and Robert of course was completely unable either to ask them to pay more than they could afford, or to take in wealthy clients. So he remained a poor man; though, through the generosity of Andrew Young and other friends in the United States, he had the satisfaction of securing a good education for his children — albeit at the cost of losing their consoling and enlivening presence at home. Sometimes one was almost glad of his house arrest restriction, for it forced him to be home by 7 pm. His lawyer's office was more like a doctor's consulting room; each day it was crowded right up until he had to leave, with clients waiting patiently to see "The Prof." Deprived of the political leadership he was so wonderfully equipped to give all of us, he yet exercised an extraordinary pastoral ministry through these last years.

The last stage

And then last year, the Master whom he had served with deepening devotion called him on to the last stage of the Way. He became seriously ill. Cancer of the lungs was diagnosed. He was permitted the choice of any hospital; he chose Groote Schoor in Cape Town. While he was there, waiting to be operated on, Steve died in detention. Veronica rightly decided he must not be told until after the operation. But Robert later narrated how, while under sedation but still fully conscious and waiting to be wheeled into the theatre, he saw the headline in a paper which someone had left in the corridor. Some weeks later he was discharged and we were hopeful, if not of a full cure, at least of some years of remission. His presence was not only a source of joy to so many who could physically meet him but also a symbol

of unconquerable hope to all engaged in the Gospel struggle for freedom for Southern Africa. It was not to be. From the beginning of this year we have known it was only a matter of time, and we must rather be grateful that he has been spared a longer period of suffering. He died on the morning of Monday 27 February at about the same time I suppose as twelve of his faithful PAC followers were preparing for yet another week of their trial in Bethal under the Terrorism Act. Zeph Mothopheng, the number one accused was a specially tried and trusted friend and comrade. It was also the feast of that most Anglican saint, George Herbert, who like Robert rejoiced to call Jesus Master and himself "the least of God's mercies".

History, during the second half of this century, is moving so fast that the 20 years ago when Robert was at the height of his brief political career seem more like 200. Yet the witness of the last silent 18 years has established him indelibly in the memory and heart of the people he lived and died to serve and set free. It is true that since he set out on his journey there has been an irreversible change in the tone of the struggle. He may prove to be the last of the great leaders to be an explicit, worshipping Christian (he was a lay preacher of the Methodist church). That is why the text with which I began this eulogy sprang unbidden but irresistibly to mind.

With what tremendous authority, therefore, he gives, with what a humble bowing of the head yet lifting of the heart do we receive for the last time his characteristic valediction "God Bless". With what penitence and renewed hope, and above all gratitude, do we pray at this Mass that he may hear the welcoming words of his Master and ours: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord!"

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand

Location:- Johannesburg

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DOCUMENT DETAILS:

Document ID:- A2618-Aa22-3

Document Title:- Tribute to Robert Sobukwe

Author:- A Stubbs, SA OUTLOOK

Document Date:- August 1978