

# Steve Biko: After Ten Years

N. Barney Pityana is a clergyman in the Church of England. As a close friend and colleague of Steve Biko he was invited to preach this sermon at Notting Hill Methodist Church, London, on the 10th Anniversary of Biko's death. Pityana and Biko were contributors to the formative collections of essays *Black Theology: The South African Voice* (Basil Moore ed., published by C. Hurst, London, 1973).

*"May he defend the cause of the poor,  
of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor"*  
Psalms 72:4

We are gathered here this afternoon to remember a great South African. We come here to dedicate ourselves afresh to those values that he lived for and later so tragically died for. Bantu Stephen Biko died a painful and a horrible death. But such was his commitment that even in death he was a political rallying point. Today we make our tributes many thousands of miles from King William's Town and in time some 10 years after he was murdered. Time and space are so finely collapsed into one as we stand here together in solidarity to shape the future of our land. The presence of friends and comrades: those who knew him in life and others who were moved by his death to open their eyes to the true extent of the horror, brutality and inhumanity of the South African totalitarian regime. Sadly, it had to take the life of so fine, so promising and so young a patriot for the world to listen and yet fail to hear the cries of the oppressed and what responses are forced out of the powerful

Western nations, are only muted and dilatory. So it was when millions of Jews were incinerated by Hitler and some 40 years later the lessons are still to be learnt. It was Steve who, recalling the words of Aimé Caesaire, said that Hitler was not dead; he was alive and well in his bunker at Union Buildings Pretoria and his minions have fashioned a frightening Gestapo force in the torture chambers of the security police . . .

What then, is the legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness? Understandably its greatest or deepest manifestation has been best expressed in those hidden and unquantifiable virtues that make people human. It has infused Black folk with a spiritual fibre, a mettle and a fighting spirit which Mahatma Gandhi and his satyagraha would have valued. It is the inner soulforce that is invincible and without which we could never withstand the psychological onslaught that apartheid so ruthlessly inflicts upon us. The oppressed people of South Africa are not vanquished people; they are struggling and fighting people. Witness the recent strike by the Mineworkers: those who are marginalised and maintain a precarious existence far from their own families and other support systems; who are weak and vulnerable as against the powerful mine bosses, who have no law to defend them and can only look to the support and solidarity of their union to defend their interests. With odds stacked against them they took militant action and today the stature and esteem of the workers and their union have never been higher. Tested to the limit even weak people can act in defence of their rights.

Secondly, it is my considered opinion that Steve would have found the prevailing mood of discord among Black people most unfortunate. Black Consciousness prides itself with its capacity to bring people into active participation in struggle regardless of their ideological positions. To do so requires sensi-

tivity and an overriding commitment to the absolute of liberation to the extent that strategically we could appreciate our need of allies. In Black Consciousness, the struggle could be lifted above the particularities of the moment or of organisations or personalities. It is not without significance that Black Consciousness was again and again defined as "a way of life; an attitude of mind". It is the fibre or material that we take with us onto battle. The danger, indeed the obscenity, can be seen in the extent to which the system has been able to drive wedges through the forces of change. It is our task once again to discover our unity in struggle. An obscenity paralleled only by the attempt by the Botha regime to link the freedom of Nelson Mandela to the release of a captured South African invader and mercenary in Angola or with the release of Soviet dissidents. It is not for nothing that Steve was detained on his way back from a risky mission that sought to bring together elements that had become entrenched in ideological divisions in the Western Cape. It is now common knowledge as well that he was anxious to bring Black Consciousness closer to the heartthrob of the peoples' movement through dialogue with the African National Congress.

Finally, Black Consciousness has made sure that Black South Africa is never without its own leadership. During that time many Black people were trained and had experience of leadership, planning, strategising, mobilising and yet drawing closer to the broad masses of people in their suffering and pain and frustrations. Arguably, one can hardly find a notable leader in South Africa today who has not been through the Black Consciousness mill: whether in church, the trade union movement, progressive professional organisations and other community associations. One can think no further than Cyril Ramaphosa, Aubrey Mokoena, Frank Chikane, Zwelakhe Sisulu to name only a few. One must not underestimate the psychological value of

this. Until then leadership was remote and ideas seemed to owe more to the guilty conscience of the white liberal establishment than to the concrete experience of the oppressed people themselves.

Let us give thanks to God for Steve's faithful apostolate in life and in death. He held high for our people the hope in human values and the triumph of the human spirit. He encouraged us not only to rise above our limitations but that we must never collude in our own suffering. It is very rare that one lives prophetically what one teaches. He did.

*"You are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can't care anyway. And your method of death can itself be a politicizing thing. So you die in the riots. . . . So if you can overcome the personal fear for death, which is a highly irrational thing, you know, then you're on the way." (Steve Biko, I Write What I Like, p. 152)*

He died like he lived so that many young Blacks may no longer fear death but may love life. Today in the streets of our townships that is being demonstrated whenever they confront the might of the apartheid forces.

What happens when you have no king to crush the oppressor as the psalmist says? It is simple: the people "crush" the oppressor. It is a word that echoes liberation. That is the message.

*Steve Biko (1946-1977) was a young black political leader who was killed in police custody in South Africa in September 1977. This murder brought the callous reaction "Biko's death leaves me cold" from the Minister of Justice. In October 1977 as a result of the protests following Biko's death the South African government banned the major Black Consciousness organisations, the staff of the Christian Institute, leading journalists and community organisers.*

*At his funeral Bishop (now Archbishop) Desmond Tutu called him "a young man completely dedicated to the pursuit of justice and righteousness, of peace and reconciliation. A young man completely dedicated to radical change in our beloved land". (Oration at Steve Biko's Funeral, in D. Tutu, Hope and Suffering, Skotaville, Johannesburg, 1983).*

*Biko's own writings are collected as Steve Biko I Write What I Like, Bowerdean, London, 1978.*

