

DD 26/10/85 Live to me

# Courage in forgiveness

by Roland Kingwill

Great changes in social and political structures must come, and soon, but such changes alone will not ensure the peace and understanding we so urgently need, and want.

There must also be, on all sides, deep change in manner and motive. Reconciliation must no longer be relegated to the theologians, but must be a real and practical experience in our divided country. It can be, I have seen it happen.

In the University of Salisbury Hall in 1975 there was a lively, almost electrical, atmosphere as a big interracial audience took their seats.

None of us could have foretold, nor expected the astonishing events which were to be triggered off that day. On the platform sat the chairman and a dozen or so others, including the son of the Prime Minister of Rhodesia (as it was then), Ian Smith.

The meeting proceeded smoothly, there were several speakers, some songs, and then Alec Smith was introduced. As he came forward there was a rustle as people sat up in their chairs. He began a little hesitatingly and then said: "I have come to realise that I have a personal responsibility for my country's dilemma.

"It was me, Alec Smith, who was answerable because my selfish lifestyle and insensitive attitude had finally driven the boys to the bush... for my part I am deeply sorry for the thoughtlessness of my past life, and I have committed myself to find a solution for our country, to building bridges of reconciliation and to showing the rest of Africa that black and white can live together. That, under God, there is an answer."

There was warm applause — but young Smith admitted his legs were shaking; he had been deeply moved.

But everyone in that audience was moved and challenged, not least the treasurer-general of the African Council — a man in close and constant touch with the men in the bush. Though a minister of the Methodist Church he had been jailed several times by the government and was bitter.

Alec Smith's speech touched his heart, and opened his eyes to a new road. After that they worked together in many situations and countries. He remained committed to the cause of his people, but worked to achieve their aim in a new way which did not include violence. The joint initiatives of these two men made a real contribution to ending the war.

Recently Frederic Chavanne visited us on the farm, and we recalled how his father, a French farmer in Morocco, decided to put things right with his workers. He called them to his home and apologised for the way he had lived. He told them he knew that alcohol was forbidden them as Muslims.

"It is time Frenchmen like myself ended indulgence which offended men like you. Will you help me destroy the wine in my cellar?" He gave them his key — they carried out the bottles, broke them set fire to the wine and buried the debris.

This simple act had unexpected results. The trust he built with his workers won the attention of an ardent underground nationalist. He came to see Chavanne, their discussion led directly to his reconciliation with moderate leaders in Morocco, and this eventually led to independence without bloodshed.

I have heard Irene Laure speak. She is both eloquent and fiery. She was a member of the French Resistance Movement during the war and a leader of the Socialist Women of France. She had come to hate the Germans with a burning hatred because among other things, they had tortured her son before her eyes trying to force information from her.

She was at a conference in Switzerland when a party of Germans arrived. She refused to stay under the same roof and began to pack her bags. But she was persuaded to stay and after wrestling with her conscience she decided to publicly apologise for her bitterness.

Her sincerity deeply affected the Germans in that audience. Later she was invited to Germany and spoke in many ruined cities of West Germany. She told them of her past hatred, and new found freedom from bitterness.

From this a far reaching healing relationship between France and Germany was begun due in no small measure to the conviction and courage of Irene Laure.

It works. When I asked a neighbour to forgive me for my deep resentment against him because I thought he had cheated me in a business deal — I won a friend. When I apologised to my farm workers for rough handling and dictatorial ways I got from them a response of understanding and trust; which grew into happy relationship.

I began to understand why the Russian Communist leader, Borodin, who planned the Communist advance into China had said: "The Christian doctrine of forgiveness, so often preached, so little practised and seemingly to innocuous, is the greatest stumbling block in the path of Communism."

It is possible that courageous humility by some of us at this time of challenge to our country could lead to peace and understanding of a quality not yet dreamt of.