

THE TRANSVAAL GANDHI

CENTENARY COUNCIL

109th Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth.

Speech by Sheena Duncan

These are dark days indeed for those millions of people in South Africa who earnestly desire the transformation of our society, the achievement of justice, and who long for peace; – not peace in the debased sense in which the word is so often used nowadays to mean a passive situation in which there is an absence of violent conflict, but peace in the full meaning of the word – Shalom – joy, love and liberation.

All of us are daily made aware of violence escalating around us in many different ways and all of us fear that we may eventually be engulfed in all the tragedy, horror and chaos of civil war such as our neighbours in Rhodesia are suffering now.

Many South Africans believe that violence is inevitable before political, social and economic justice can be achieved. Surveys published earlier this year in Germany by the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute showed that 65,2% of white South Africans believe that there will eventually be a black uprising in South Africa and that 28% of black South Africans in urban areas believe that Africans will never get improvements without fighting and violent action.

The survey among blacks was conducted before the death of Steven Biko and before the bannings and detentions of 19th October last year. That was the latest in a long history of actions taken to destroy all peaceful efforts made by black people to cause the transformation of our society and to attempt to persuade those in authority to negotiate a new dispensation. To many it seemed then that there is no use in trying to use non-violent means to force change and the Government had demonstrated finally and irrevocably that it is not prepared to deviate one inch from its disastrous policies. My guess would be that the percentage of black people who now see fighting and violent action as the only means to liberation is now greatly increased.

I am acutely aware that many black people say that it is always whites who say that they are in favour of non-violence and that they condemn violence in others while failing to acknowledge how much they themselves are acting violently just by being part of the white society and by giving their tacit, if not overt, consent to the tools of violence being used to maintain a false peace. I take this accusation very seriously indeed because I think that it is largely true.

Those who are most vociferous in condemning violence in others keep handguns at home, carry them around in briefcases and handbags and teach their wives to shoot. I cannot see how these things can be consonant with a declaration in favour of non-violence.

I believe that the World Council of Churches errs gravely when it gives money to military organisations but the majority of white Christians who condemn the Council so bitterly and so stridently do not confess their own daily contributions to militarism in our own society or to the Christian Churches' long history of blessing war and violence in innumerable different situations in innumerable different countries. The very words in which some Christians phrase their condemnation are the antithesis of peace and non-violence.

In a paper entitled "Militarism – some theological perspectives" Wolfgang Huber has this to say:

"Militarism is the willing recognition or preference of war as a means for solving problems of international politics. It takes for granted that the application of military force is an acceptable and unavoidable way of clearing up international relations. This agrees with the conviction that military armament and weapon deals ought to extend to all parts of the world; militarism is global.

The effects of militarism on domestic policy are especially apparent where the borders between the military and politics become blurred. This occurs in different forms: officers take over political leadership, or they have the power to force their goals on to politicians; or politicians make decisions in accordance with criteria of the soldier's ethos. Such an expansion of military criteria may be found, for example, where the demand for 'national security' becomes a criterion for decisions in domestic policy; in general this ends in a de-democratization and in a limitation or rather a breach of human rights.

Belonging to the military, whether as a soldier, as a member of military and paramilitary forces or even as a worker in the armaments industry, results in a change in attitudes and behaviour patterns for many people. A majority of them share the opinion that conflicts ought to be solved not by mediation and reconciliation but by force. But to the extent to which the military is accepted as a self-evident element of society, these attitudes are transferred to other members of society.

These attitudes become associated with others; militarism becomes an element of a complex of attitudes pervading one's entire social existence. Attitudes such as nationalism, conservatism, a law-and-order mentality, ethnocentricity, anti-internationalism, authoritarian thinking and behaviour, the rejection of humanitarian attitudes and similar behaviour patterns prevail. . . . Militarism . . . denotes a comprehensive life-style."

Professor Huber was not referring specifically to South Africa but to societies in general but I have not read anything which better describes what is now happening to white South African society.

In his first address as Prime Minister last week Mr P. W. Botha said "We want to co-operate with all peace-loving nations to maintain peace. Peace cannot look after itself, it must be worked for. Peace must be protected and we can rely on our security forces to maintain peace."

Can a situation where order can only be maintained by massive security operations be described as peace and can peace be found if the means we use to work for it are the very antithesis of peace? Many people through the ages have wrestled with this question in many different places.

Mahatma Gandhi would have answered these questions in the negative. During his lifetime he forged a creative instrument for fundamental change. This instrument has many elements each of which is essential to the whole. He showed the way to a constructive rather than a destructive resolution of human conflicts and thirty years after his death his influence can be seen and felt wherever men struggle to understand and to follow his example in the conflicts in which they are engaged.

There are many who maintain that his "experiments with truth" as he called them, only had relevance to the particular situation in India at a particular time and in a particular struggle. I believe that this criticism is due to a misunderstanding of the nature of satyagraha and a failure to regard it as a whole. Too often critics pick out one or two of the elements involved without grasping that each is absolutely necessary to the whole and that one cannot be used successfully and truthfully without all the others.

Basic to an understanding of what Gandhi called "the force which is born of truth and love" is the concept that ends and means are inextricably part of one another. In her book *Conquest of Violence*, Joan Bondurant begins her preface with these words:

Point not the goal until you plot the course,
for ends and means to man are tangled so
that different means quite different aims enforce.
Conceive the means as end in embryo.

Later she quotes Krishnalal Shridharani describing the means as the end in process and the ideal in the making.

For Gandhi the means is the end and the end is the means. Peace cannot be achieved by violence and non-violence is both the means and the end.

For him ahimsa, non-violence is not in his own words "merely a negative state of harmlessness but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer. But it does not mean helping the evil-doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence . . . Without ahimsa it is not possible to seek and find truth. Ahimsa and truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them . . . Ahimsa is the means; Truth is the end. Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so ahimsa is our supreme duty. If we take care of the means we are bound to reach the end sooner or later. When once we have grasped this point, final victory is beyond question . . ."

And again "Truth is the end, Love a means thereto. We know what is love or non-violence although we find it difficult to follow the law of love. But as for truth we know only a fraction of it . . ."

Of suffering . . . : "Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek sub-

mission to the will of the evil doer, but it means the pitting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire . . ."

"Suffering injury in one's own person is . . . of the essence of non-violence and is the chosen substitute of violence to others. It is not because I value life low that I can countenance with joy thousands voluntarily losing their lives for satyagraha, but because I know that it results in the long run in the least loss of life, and, what is more, it ennobles those who lose their lives and morally enriches the world for their sacrifice."

"Non-violence cannot be taught to a person who fears to die".

"Just as one must learn the art of killing in the training for violence so one must learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence."

"Truthfulness is the master-key. Do not lie under any circumstances whatsoever, keep nothing secret, take your teachers and your elders into your confidence and make a clean breast of everything to them. Bear ill-will to none, do not say an evil thing of anyone behind his back, above all 'to thine own self be true' so that you are false to no one else. Truthful dealing even in the least, little things of life is the only secret of a pure life."

Those quotations from the Mahatma contain the essence of his philosophy as he formulated it during his life time of striving to understand the Truth which for him is God. Because he believed that full understanding of Truth cannot be attained by man he saw the necessity of loving the opponent, of attempting to win him over by persuasion, of protecting him from injury, of refusing to triumph in his defeat and of finding ways to allow him to save face when he is defeated. It was Gandhi's perception that, because it is impossible for man to know the truth, there must be constant and humble reassessment of demands and openness to the opponent's point of view. Civil disobedience, passive resistance, strike action, marches and sit-ins were all used only within this context because without it they too can become unacceptable coercion which distorts the end desired.

He believed that **nothing** can force a man to do anything against his will, that only individual liberation can free a man to serve society and that such service is an essential ingredient of non-violence.

His teaching was essentially formulated in action and that action sought the means to exercise power and influence to effect change without injury to the opponent, with constant adherence to truth and non-violence and with constant stress on the dignity of labour, self sufficiency and willingness to sacrifice and suffer while offering, out of love, support and reassurance to the opponent.

What is the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's life and teaching to our present situation in South Africa. I do not know the answer to that question. I only know that as a Christian, I have been helped by him to an understanding of my own faith and I believe that for each one of us he showed in his own life the solution to our conflicts and demonstrated a power which lies within the grasp of us all.

When we have failed I do not believe that it is due to any fault in his teaching but to our own fault for being unwilling to subject ourselves to the necessary discipline and for being incapable of loving as we ought.

If we can only learn from him then indeed "final victory is beyond question." □