

Redeeming the Past: My Journey from Freedom Fighter to Healer

by Father Michael Lapsley

Orbis Books 2012, ISBN-10: 1570759928; ISBN-13: 978-1570759925.

Notes for Aotearoa New Zealand Book Launch – Selwyn Library, Auckland, 22 August 2012

Dr Jenny Plane Te Paa

St John's College

E te rangatira e Michael tena koe, e te whanau whanui i a te Karaiti tena koutou katoa.

Thank you so much Michael for bringing this taonga home in order that we your Aotearoa whanau might accord you the accolades you so utterly deserve as an esteemed citizen of this land but more particularly as a truly exemplary Priest of the Church.

Sure I know you were ordained in Australia and that your religious community of origin was and remains in that offshore island, but your formative childhood years, the crucial years which created in you that deep and abiding yearning for living into and fighting for God's justice, were years where because of your working class parents, your feet were so firmly planted in the soil of this land in the post war era *where all boys had stamp collections and paper rounds and tended to be embarrassed about their father's occupations, where all mothers made sure their children attended Sunday School and Church and secretly longed for one of their sons to become a Priest.*

How unspeakably proud your parents and your siblings must be of you! How unspeakably proud of you are those of us your sisters and brothers in Christ who are profoundly inspired, encouraged and blessed by your extraordinary modeling of Christian witness more especially with and for those who are the least among us.

Thank you, Michael, for gifting us, for teaching us so generously, so selflessly, so utterly simply, the Gospel reminders of which you speak time and again in this truly precious taonga . . . *'I had never made a distinction between human liberation and Christian witness – for me they are one and the same . . .'*

'I began to see that in order to solve my faith problem, I would have to act politically.'

'That compass has always been the Christian Gospel which calls upon us to act on behalf of human dignity and justice, no matter what the consequences.'

'At the heart of that struggle lay an understanding that is also at the heart of the Gospel – self-sacrifice and a willingness to lay down one's life that others may be free.'

And act you surely have Michael - you have never stopped even when it would obviously have been so much easier to have allowed your bombing to still your activist heart.

South Africa looms large once more in our current times – I thought of you as I was simultaneously reading your book and watching the news of the horrific slaughter of South African mine workers by the state police last week. I am sure because of your intimate belonging to your beloved Rainbow Nation, that your sense of what really happened will be far more powerfully informed than those of us limited to *'receiving'* an always sanitized and always politically expedient form of *'the news'*.

Your lifelong commitment to the eradication of apartheid and all of its ugly manifestations across the spectrum of both secular and church institutions knows not its end just yet and possibly not in our lifetime.

I was profoundly touched by your fearless critique and naming of those within the ecclesial household whose disparaging and indeed whose determined rejection of you must have stung like no other barb – and yet in your characteristically pragmatic and superbly politico/theologically nuanced way you have found time and again the perfect rebuttal. I just loved your retort to the bishop of Pretoria who was clearly exercised about your activities, your profile and horror of all, your mixing it with the *'outsiders'*! And fancy that he even considered your public statements to be *insufficiently Christian!*

To which you said perfectly correctly, that *'the prophetic word of God could indeed come through humanists and Marxists'*. You also said that, *'expressing the Gospel message in exclusively Christian language risked inviting some to reject it as irrelevant!'*

This is indeed a superb work Michael! As a teacher of theological students both here and in the world on issues of social justice, on race politics, on gender justice and on theology in the public square, I feel I have just been gifted the best contemporary theological text book imaginable – required reading this most definitely is.

I want however to insist that it be so not just for students but indeed for all in leadership in this beloved church of ours for this is not simply your story Michael, it is the story of Christ-like discipleship.

No, I am not elevating you unduly Michael and that I know is not what you understand me to be saying. But this is most definitely a testament to your absolute devotedness to the call upon your life to be and to do as Jesus.

You have been and you still are reassuringly *'ordinary'* Michael – that ordinariness comes through in the humility of this extraordinary narrative you have so carefully and yet so openly crafted – I was so touched by how candid you have been in sharing your own moments of changing self-awareness both before and after your bombing.

'I suppose I had to put away some of the feelings, so my life then was something of a 'head' journey, whereas since the bombing it's been more of a 'heart' journey – a project to reclaim the gentleness that I had to leave behind. So yes, I have softened since I was bombed, and I identify with other people's brokenness in a way I could not possibl[y] have done had I not been broken myself'. Page 105.

And so inevitably the yearning to exploit that 'brokenness' of yours for the sake of the Gospel and thus in a perfectly logical almost predictable way has emerged the Institute for the Healing of Memories (and I say predictable, only because this is you, Michael). You speak of moving from freedom fighter to healer, of how the bombing was for you like a *'refining fire that gradually brought you to clarity – of finding a way of using your brokenness as a tool for healing others'*.

Having had the privilege of working often in the context of theological education in South Africa I share with you a healthy measure of concern for the future of that indescribably beautiful and powerfully challenging nation state – awash with the worst vestiges of tribalism, still deeply affected by the residual complexities of its shame-filled apartheid past, and because of that, still somewhat uncertain of its political identity within the context of the continent and beyond in the international arena.

You provide us, your devotees as readers, Michael, an exceptional insight into the political intrigues of the entire region – all of which are being played out with varying degrees of chicanery in both secular and church contexts!

This is at once a history book, a political manifesto, a theological treatise, a very Aotearoa New Zealand biography of one so ordinary and yet as I insist, Michael, you are without equal, you are therefore at once, also one quite spectacularly extraordinary!

In closing then as I must, and by way of urging every one here present to buy at least one book for yourself and one to give, let me point you toward the delicious humour, which pervades this text – I want especially to read from the chapter entitled 'Disability – Accepting Brokenness'.

'Just after I returned to South Africa (after my bombing) Archbishop Tutu invited me to dinner. I was still learning to be effective with my prostheses, so at that stage if I was holding a cup with the right one and then tried to do something with the left, there was a danger that it would fall. Sure enough when Tutu poured coffee into my cup, it slipped pouring coffee all over the archbishop. He asked me if I wanted to go home, I said actually I would prefer another cup of coffee.'

Brilliant Michael – he taonga tino nui tenei, no reira e te rangatira, te tuakana nga mihi, nga mihi, nga mihi pau te kaha!