

The Mandela I know

“When a deep injury is done to us, we never heal until we forgive.” – Nelson Mandela

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to specially thank the South African High Commissioner to Nigeria, His Excellency, Mr Bobby Moore, and indeed, the people of South Africa, for inviting me to speak on this historic day when the world remembers one of the greatest men to ever emerge on the African continent - a global giant who left positive footprints in the sand of time.

Nelson Mandela was an outstanding champion of human freedom and liberty, an anti-apartheid crusader who sacrificed the best years of his life to secure the emancipation of his people from the degradation and humiliation of inferiority status imposed on them by a wicked, hateful, abominable and lawless regime.

As we all know, Mr Mandela was not just a revolutionary leader; his record of philanthropic commitment to not only South Africans, but to citizens of many other nations around the world was quite exceptional.

He taught the world the meaning and essence of humility, forgiveness, acceptance, perseverance and tolerance not through precepts but through an incredible force of personal example that probably has no parallel in human history.

As a prisoner at Rhodes Island, Mandela brought to bear on his terrible and negative experience, exemplary and positive qualities of discipline, endurance, patience, hope, fortitude and remarkable stoicism.

The Nobel Prize winner who became the first democratically elected President of the Republic of South Africa at the age of 77, he retired after only a single tenure in office in 1999, setting a challenging example to other depraved African leaders who turned their offices into imperial bastions of maladministration, oppression of their own people and corruption.

Madiba's quest for comprehensive emancipation that encompassed political, mental, economic and physical dimensions led him to embark on charitable engagements, raising stupendous sums of money for schools, hospitals, sporting activities for the benefit of the desperately deprived black communities of South Africa.

His hunger for the freedom of South Africa, somehow, became the hunger for the freedom of all irrespective of their tribe, colour and religion. He took on a campaign that set the leadership bar for African leaders and Africa's leadership.

I am a beneficiary of Mandela's mentorship. I would say that God specially created the great man to tutor and shape me into responsible, industrious

and disciplined man with a commitment to the welfare of my people and to humanity in general.

I recall my personal interactions with him especially during our national struggle to force President Olusegun Obasanjo to drop his plan to amend the constitution of the Federal Republic and secure an extension of his tenure of office. Disturbed by the details, Mandela placed a call to President Obasanjo and told him in clear terms that whatever his plans were, it was neither desirable for Nigeria nor Africa. That intervention, proved strategic to the leadership question in Nigeria at the time leading to elections in 2007. As the say, the rest is history.

As a politician and businessman, I met Mandela on several occasions. I must confess here that he inspired me a lot. He introduced me to the leaders of the great African National Congress (ANC), with whom I have maintained a very robust relationship. Through him, I met with President Thabo Mbeki, who is now a dear friend and a brother. I also met President Kgalema Petrus Motlanthe, former National Secretary of ANC who held sway for six months following the decision of the ruling party to ask President Mbeki to step aside.

Of course, I met President Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa who is now tasked with the responsibility of leading the great vision that Mandela had for South Africa. Nothing can demonstrate the level of intimacy I enjoy with Mandela's family than the warm treatment I get

from the matriarch of the house, Gracia, each time I visited. She always ensured that I lacked for nothing and that I felt at home.

The bridge Madiba built that connected me with South African political gladiators is still sustained till date. I am still a strong member of the ANC family, just as I am still an ally of former and incumbent President of the country. Only few months ago, I undertook a trip to South Africa and visited the three ex- Presidents. I particularly spent a quality time with my friend, President Mbeki who was then giving cold hands to political activities in his party, ANC. I reminded him of the political philosophy of Madiba. And that did a lot of magic. That sentiments I expressed steered him out of his earlier disposition. He saw the need to join forces with ANC for the campaign. Of course, that decision played a big part in ANC triumphing at the poll.

I make bold to say that I learnt at Mandela's feet. During one of our meetings, he told me that he wanted Cyril to be his deputy but the party leadership thought otherwise. One thing he told me that he did was that he respected the decision of the party because party is supreme. I imbibed that education and have lived by it in my political pursuits in Nigeria.

It may be recalled that recently I made an attempt to contest to become the Deputy President of the Nigerian Senate. I however withdrew from that contest as soon as the party's decision was

conveyed to me. I stood down because having learnt from Mandela the dictates of party supremacy, it would amount to a betrayal of my learning to go against the party's consensus.

I also believe that as an evolving democracy, one with a history of military adventurism with the attendant destruction of political ethos and institutions, Nigeria will fare better if politicians, irrespective of their party affiliations, respect party supremacy. That way, we will be able to build a political culture that derives its powers from the party manifesto and programmes.

Today, South Africans are enjoying a political culture that developed out of Mandela's love for his party, the ANC, and his respect for its decisions. That is what it means to give your people a voice and a future. Shouldn't we be asking for more 'Mandelas' for Africa?

When Mandela left his abode in prison and became a president, many expected him to use his official powers as president to enact revenge and payback those who set about to destroy his life and his family. He had it in his powers to do so. He could have used the South African police or military to deal with those who saw him as an enemy because of his guts and imprisoned him. He could have used the South African secret police to eliminate them. It was within his powers to also go after their businesses and asphyxiate them economically. It was also possible that some of those persons had

prepared themselves for exile. The world watched as he put out a raging fire and calmed the storm by publicly declaring his forgiveness for past misdeeds against him and against the South African people. Instead, he opted for peaceful co-existence.

Ladies and gentleman, we must all know why the world still worship Mandela today and will quite certainly do so for eternity. Nobody would have believed that he would allow his predecessor and erstwhile leader of the apartheid regime, Mr Pieta Botha to live peacefully and die a natural death in South Africa. Even Botha himself, I'm sure, would be shocked that he was handed such forgiveness.

I doubt if there is any other African leader that would have been so large hearted. It goes to show how Mandela lived a practical Christian life. He showed that with forgiveness, you would achieve more than any weapons could. He left us with the understanding that forgiveness frees you to pursue more noble and worthwhile objectives.

For this singular act, the world loved him more. He placed South Africa on the global map and the world was attracted to South Africa. He was awarded the Nobel Prize winner for Peace because of this rare demonstration of love. You will recall that his funeral attracted leaders from all parts of the world. They came in honour of a man who, with a single act, changed the story of South Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Africa needs more of his type. Unfortunately, however, Africa of the post-Mandela era does not seem to appreciate the meaning that he brought to life on the continent.

Today, Africa is replete with leadership that is neither visionary nor forgiving. From one country to another we are seeing a return of the sort of leadership that irked Mandela. Mandela opted for only a single term in office. He voluntarily opted out of a second tenure. Out of office, he became more powerful and more significant as a global force than he was while in office. With that, he demonstrated that one does not necessarily need an endless term of office to positively impact on his society or to remain relevant.

Today, we are seeing African states being gradually torn apart because of one man's decision to retain power even when his leadership has lost all relevance to his people. We now see a growing tide of nationals rising up to chase their leaders out of power. It tells me that somehow, we have lost the significance of Mandela's mission in politics. His mission was to liberate and not imprison the people. If leaders in Africa cannot liberate their states and people from oppression, corruption, hunger, poor infrastructure, insecurity, disease, homelessness, poverty of the mind and of the pocket and lack of education, at least, they should not compound these problems.

Africans have suffered so much under visionless

and oppressive leadership that the people are looking forward to another Mandela to give them hope for tomorrow. Therefore, on this day, my family and I remember Mandela with nostalgia. I remember the times we shared at his home. I remember the warmth, the joy, the reception by his family and I pray that his soul continue to rest peacefully with God.

As we begin to implement the Nigerian mandate from the 9th Senate of the Federal Republic, I pledge myself, my family and my constituents to be guided by those eternal principles that Mandela lived by and ultimately bequeathed on humanity. I make a pledge to work for the peace and progress of Nigeria. I pledge to work for the peaceful co-existence of all Nigerians irrespective of their tongue and colour. I make a pledge to work for the common good and greater unity of our country. After all, those are the tenets Mandela lived and died for. And they are the core values he taught everybody that had the fortune encounter him. One of the many admonitions of Mandela that I engraved in my heart is his counsel that “We must strive to be moved by a generosity of spirit that will enable us to outgrow the hatred and conflicts of the past.”

Thank you for your kind attention.