"We are ashamed of that part of our history but it is our history nonetheless. And it stands there recorded in our National Archives... The records are crucial to hold us accountable... They are a potent bulwark against human rights violations. We must remember our past so that we do not repeat it."

Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu, a transcending figure in South Africa’s liberation struggle, died on 26 December 2021 at the age of ninety. Like the medieval St Thomas Beckett, he was also a "turbulent priest," much hated by secular authority. Archivists will
remember his stirring keynote address to the 2003 Cape Town CITRA Conference on Archives and Human Rights. In many respects, this conference charted a new course for the ICA and led to the establishment of the section on Archives and Human Rights.

Desmond Tutu was born in Klerksdorp in the old Transvaal Province and suffered from several serious childhood illnesses, including polio. Despite his parents’ modest circumstances, he managed to get a good education and trained to be a teacher, one of the very, very, few occupations open to educated blacks in the 1950s. While he was teaching, he met and married his wife Leah, and the couple had four children. The imposition of apartheid restrictions on black education was one of many factors that decided him to become a priest. However, he gave most of the credit to Father Trevor Huddleston, an early critic of apartheid, for awakening his sense of faith and of mission.

After training at South African seminaries, the Anglican Church sent him to King’s College London, for post-graduate studies. Returning to South Africa he advanced rapidly up the Church hierarchy and was elected as General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. The SACC was a major critic of apartheid and in this role Tutu’s criticisms of the repressive policies of the government earned him the title of “Public Enemy Number One.” Tutu not only attacked the National Party Government from podiums and pulpits, but he worked practically on the ground to alleviate human suffering and uplift the poor. He showed much physical courage in facing down riot police and in calming rampaging mobs. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984.

In addition to his moral and physical courage, Desmond Tutu had a delightfully wicked sense of humour that he deployed to defuse tense situations and to gently mock the pompous and the oppressive. One of his most famous remarks was:

“When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the Land. They said, “Let us pray.” We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible, and they had the Land.”

He was installed as Archbishop of Cape Town and head of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa in 1986, an office he held for ten years. He faced down apartheid State President PW Botha who removed his passport to prevent him rallying anti-apartheid sentiment overseas. During the fraught years leading up to the first democratic election in 1994, Tutu strove to reconcile blacks and whites as well as various factions within black communities that were involved in violence against each other.

As democracy dawned, his term as Archbishop of Cape Town was coming to an end and the new President, Nelson Mandela, appointed him to head the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the TRC. In this role he sought to bring about national reconciliation despite opposition and controversy from right and left. Who can forget the pictures of “The Arch” weeping as he listened to the most harrowing testimony?

My first face to face meeting with Desmond Tutu was when he visited Pietermaritzburg as Archbishop of Cape Town. I listened to him preach in a packed cathedral and I managed to
persuade the Bishop of Natal to bring him to Macrorie House Museum. This was a small Victorian house museum dedicated to the memory of a Nineteenth Century Anglican Bishop. The museum reflected a schism in the Anglican Church dating from the Victorian era and it was an appropriate place for Tutu to pray for reconciliation. His manner with the staff and the committee was so gentle and inclusive. I remember how the gardener was totally awestruck and Tutu was very sweet to him. The young man said he would remember the encounter for the rest of his life.

This encounter gave me a small entrée to his office some years later when I approached him to ask if he would be the keynote speaker at the 2003 CITRA conference that was to be held in Cape Town. He graciously accepted the invitation and agreed to talk about the experiences of the TRC and the importance of records for their work.

The theme of the CITRA conference was “Archives and Human Rights”, and the archbishop was one of the most prominent exponents of human rights in South Africa, with a worldwide reputation. He had not given up campaigning with the advent of democracy. As the gloss dimmed on the South African democratic experiment, Desmond Tutu became one of the most vociferous critics of corrupt politicians and devious practices. Time and time again he reminded the nation of its ideals and of those who had suffered and sacrificed to build a democracy. Sometimes he managed to shame venal politicians into changing their conduct, or at least hiding their misdoings a little better.

Internationally, he was one of the founders of the group of Elders, including former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, Former US President, Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela’s widow, Graça Machel, and former Irish President, Mary Robinson. The group was founded to mediate in difficult conflicts, reduce tensions and avert violence. Tutu was also a supporter of Palestinian rights, but carefully distinguished between the people of Israel and the policies of their government.

Let us conclude with his own words,

“I wish I could shut up, but I can’t, and I won’t.”

Long may we archivists keep the record of his voice and try to uphold his legacy.

Graham Dominy, Retired National Archivist of South Africa and member of ICA/SAHR, 28 December 2021