

But you have not known him; I know him  
- John 8:55

I almost feel like I am obliged to explain why Steve Biko features in this list of Saints and Martyrs of our Time. Unlike all the other subjects featured, Steve was neither a theologian, an ordained minister of the church, nor was he a practicing church person, and he certainly was not known for his spiritual practice. He definitely was a martyr by the brutal means by which he died, and by the testament of his life and witness; by the manner of his death; by the values of his life, and the principles he abided by and then the truth he proclaimed against all odds. But I believe that he features here for more than the above statement suggests. He features because it is rarely known in history that someone can influence the fortunes and mission of the church to the extent that Steve Biko did, without himself making any big claims about his own Christian beliefs. And yet for someone devoid of any external Christian beliefs and on then face of it so hostile to the church as he knew it, it is remarkable that he spent so much of his writing and thoughts addressing the issues of the church, and faith and the Christian religion. That is surely remarkable.

I include Steve in this gallery of saints and martyrs of our time, perhaps because he was “no saint” in the conventional usage of the term. I cannot call him a “saint” if by “saintly” we mean someone devout in all the Christian practice and purity of life. But a ‘saint’ he was as someone who devoted his life singularly to the cause of righteousness and justice for all. Above all his martyrdom impacted on the church in our country to a remarkable degree, and his life and words affected Christian life in our country, among significant numbers of both black and white Christians over a very long time.

Bantu Stephen Biko died in police custody in Pretoria on 12 September 1977. He had been detained by the security police at a roadblock just outside the city centre in Grahamstown on 18 August 1977. From that day he was in police custody, held incommunicado under the notorious Terrorism Act of the apartheid regime. He was transferred to Port Elizabeth where the security police were known to be callous murderers of those in their custody. In truth nobody quite knows what happened to Steve from the moment of his arrest to the time he was declared dead in Pretoria. The Inquest provided some insight into the treatment he received: that he was tortured, that the medical officers who saw him were persuaded by the security police that he was in no need of medical intervention, that, comatose, he was driven from Port Elizabeth lying at the back of the police van, naked bloodied; and that in Pretoria he received no medical attention until he died – a brutal, inhumane and lonely death – at the hands of the security police. Achille Mbembe, the Wits

University social scientist, provides a language so haunting, so evocative to describe the indescribable that I am moved to record it here:

He suffered a terrible death at the hands of a grotesque and brutal power – Biko's captive body locked up, injured, stripped down, chained, the object of mutilation, a human waste that had been utterly disgraced before being lynched. They wanted his death to be the epitome of indignity and abjection, the symbol of derisory and superfluous humanity, in the manner of a slave's death.

The Inquest Magistrate could find no one responsible for his death.

But the people ruled differently. His funeral held in his hometown of King William's Town was a martyr's funeral. It was a Hero's Farewell. The then Bishop Desmond Tutu preached. Thousands converged on the Sports Field where the funeral service was held; many more (in fleets of buses) were prevented, harassed and arrested by the police across the country on their way to the funeral and were thus prevented from making their final journey to the funeral. There was also a large international contingent present – a symbolism unprecedented in the annals of political activism in our country. Bantu Stephen Biko was dead. He was 30 years old.

But his life did not begin and end with his death. Brought up by a widowed mother, the third of three children, Steve Biko knew and experienced the hardship of a hard working mother, knew the privations of a family seeking to make an honest Christian living. He was often moved to tell the tale of his mother's hardship. That had a very deep impact on him. It created in him a mind that understood poverty and realized that poverty was the enemy of human well being. Steve was a cradle Anglican. Brought up in an Anglican home, he understood the church and internalized its practices and teachings. The church became in his time both an anchor of his faith and an interlocutor he debated with throughout his adult life. Steve was from an African home. From traditional practices in his home, and from interactions with the elders he had an abiding understanding of African culture and values, and a consciousness of his African personality. He went to Christian schools both at Lovedale, a Scottish missionary school in Alice, although by the time he got there the Bantu Education system had taken over, and to St Francis College, Marianhill, a Roman Catholic school where his political ideas began, were shaped and matured. Steve always spoke very fondly of Marianhill – for him a period of enlightenment, of an education that opened and challenged, and yet with a strict regime of worship integrated into the schooling system.

By the time Steve went to Medical School in Natal in 1965 he was a well-rounded being, acutely aware of the responsibilities that a young Black person in South Africa

carried, with a mind that was as critical as it was curious, and a personality that became legendary as larger than life, affective and charismatic. It was that combination of attributes that transformed Steve from a young and rather awkward man from Ginsberg, a township in King William's Town to a national figure. It was not difficult for Steve to imagine a South Africa freed from apartheid, or black people freed from racial oppression. He could dream of a South Africa in freedom for all her citizens, and a future for all her children. Steve Biko began with a compelling sense of idealism – the ability to imagine what is not, into reality.

Steve Biko was well read. His reading was expansive but also very deep. He engaged with authors from classical literature to then contemporary African literature, from the politics of the then emergent Africa to the civil rights movement in the United States. He wrestled with the ideological battles of European political philosophy and with the challenges of religion in some of the authors like Chinua Achebe. He taught about negritude and about Black Power, and he had an insight into Kwame Nkrumah's Pan Africanism, or of Marcus Garvey and others. And yet he was Afro-centric in his intellectual orientation. He was a fierce debating partner, articulate, but also a good listener. Steve relied a great deal on colleagues and friends. He was never without friends and he depended on friends a great deal to articulate his own ideas because they arose out of the debates. A man of a good life, he was always a social animal who thrived in the company of others.

Biko is acknowledged as the father of Black Consciousness in South Africa. Black Consciousness was a movement of free thinkers, and engaged intellectuals. It begins with the conviction that blackness was a positive and worthy attribute that is God-ordained. It then says that Black Consciousness was a way of life and a state of mind. That "mind" was a revolutionary and free mind that would not allow any system to imprison it; that would challenge prevailing systems that sought to imprison the black person's mind. Consciousness for him had a Hegelian ring to it as the means by which human consciousness shaped one's life-world. Oppression begins, he argued, when a person's capacity for thought is diminished, and the person thus begins to appropriate as one's own other people's ideas and internalize them. Oppression succeeds when the oppressed begin to believe in the power of their oppressors to maintain their stranglehold over them.

This was indeed a revolutionary and liberating idea in that for the first time it located the DNA of liberation not so much in structures, organisations, or in leadership, or in an ideology, but in people – in the capacity of every individual to take responsibility for his or her liberation. Liberation becomes a collective idea where individuals own their right to be free.

Steve could draw on his own faith journey and upbringing to realize that the Christian faith in all its diversity in the black community dictated a great deal of thinking and practice. He identified the church as the key to this liberation ethic. However, to do so a lot had to change. The church was not merely a stumbling block but was a window of possibility, an opportunity that had to be seized. In his view that would only be possible to the extent that the church truly understood and embraced what the Jesus' teachings were about. His spirituality was a spirituality of responsibility. He believed that the church had subverted the revolutionary life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and only a reinvention of Jesus' teachings or their recovery could restore for him faith in the church.

It was not difficult for him to articulate a trenchant critique of the church; it being over burdened by European culture and a denial of the African identity; of its morality that was crudely individualized and internalized; and her refusal to understand the intricate communal nature of African society and an African view of human nature. He advanced a beautifully syncretic idealism about the church that took full account of the primal vision of African spirituality, as John V Taylor puts in in his book by that name. He understood the place of ritual and worship and prayer inasmuch as these were the pillars of traditional religion, but that they could not be abstracted from the real lives and challenges that people encountered in their daily life.

Steve Biko was one of the major proponents of Black Theology in South Africa. His blend of Black Theology, though, was no mere political theology, but it was also an integration of theology as viewed from the perspective of African cultures and values. It had a spiritual content. That Christianity he brought into Black Theology was a Christianity drawn from African culture that was liberating enough to understand better God's purposes and the challenges posed for those who were oppressed. Black Theology therefore pointed the way towards a religion of emancipation. In some way this hermeneutic was no different from what African Americans in the Black church, found the roots of their faith, their humanity and ultimately their liberation in the very ethic of slavery whose purpose was to deny their humanity, but through which the negroes found their humanity restored. This was no mere sentimental religion but one that transformed not just in sentimental terms but by way of political and spiritual liberation their entire lifeworld. Black Theology then provided the church with a renewed sense of purpose about itself and the Lord of Salvation.

But in Steve's understanding none of that would have any meaning if it were merely theoretical propositions. It needed to be rooted in the life of the church and it had to transform societal structures. In other words it had to inform the quality of faith practice of Christians. It meant that the church who to be in the forefront of resistance against all that demeans human nature, and black people had to resist any form of oppression, and that they had to take responsibility for their own liberation. In so doing they would be executing the divine mandate and mission of the faith they profess, because in his words God was not in the habit of coming down to sort out the chaos and confusion we have caused about human relations. He has entrusted that task to those of us who are of faith. It was for that reason that Steve spent so much time and effort articulating what the church could become and devoted so much to training of clergy and young people in the church.

If then black people were to be agents of their own liberation, and if the church was to be an instrument of human emancipation, it was necessary that the question of FEAR be addressed. Steve Biko found that the basis of the black people's oppression was less the power of the white oppressor than it was the effects of fear, debilitating and psychotic fear - fear that paralysed black people. Fear, began when the missionary religion sought to instill fear with their images of Hell and divine retribution. He reasoned that black people became Christian out of fear. I argue that black people were amenable to that grip of fear because in African traditional systems as well, the idea of appeasement of the gods was not unheard of and the regime of rituals in African culture bore a striking resemblance to those set out in the Holiness Code in Leviticus. Leviticus, however, also had a large store of justice, freedom and respect especially for the weak that could be missing in African traditional religion. However, in the case of Christianity the intermediary role of the ancestors was not there and as such fear and the consequences of disobedience could be unrelenting. Then he argued that oppression also worked through fear. The oppressor instilled so much fear that there was no alternative, and one had no choice but to obey or comply. Either way, Steve argued that such obedience was superficial because it was not founded on any real conviction and could not form a lasting foundation for faith practice. He insisted that, "we must remove completely from our vocabulary the concept of fear." But fear is not just irrational as to be denied. It is true and deeply felt. People do experience fear and in certain situations that is what happens in life.

However, Steve's point was different. Fear had to be confronted, with a higher and a more abiding purpose. It is that truth that must will out. It is fair to say that Black Consciousness introduced a generation of young black men and women who had banished fear or whose responses to the situation of oppression could not be

dictated to by fear alone. Yes, they were angry also; but it was neither their fear nor anger that defined them, but their determination to be free is what drove their consciousness. To the extent that they dared to challenge the system, they were truly free. Fear denies freedom. That is the essence of being human. Prof Cornel W du Toit of Unisa (*The Legacy of Stephen Bantu Biko: Theological Challenges*) in a perceptive essay on *Black Consciousness as an expression of radical responsibility* brings Bonhoeffer and Steve Biko into dialogue. He quotes Bonhoeffer's *ETHICS* about the intricate relationship between freedom and obedience:

Obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is arbitrary self-will. Obedience restrains freedom; and freedom ennobles obedience ... Obedience knows what is good and does it, and freedom dares to act, and abandons to God the judgment of good and evil. Obedience follows blindly and freedom opens eyes. Obedience has its hands tied and freedom is creative" (2008:233).

Fear had to be recognised, acknowledged and challenged. In that way it becomes no mere obedience, or a cancer that gnaws at the human personality, but that it becomes an ethic of freedom, and a renewed epistemology of being.

Steve Biko had been put under banning orders in 1973. He was banished to his mother's township home in Ginsberg. He had abandoned his medical studies a year before in order to concentrate on his political activism. He had joined the Black Community Programmes, a project inspired by the SPROCAS publications of the Christian institute and the South African Council of Churches. Back home in King William's Town he continued that work, and brought around him a group of very devoted and active young men and women who had a singular commitment to make a difference in life. Among them was Malusi Mpumlwana (now a bishop in the Ethiopian Episcopal Church), Thenjiwe Mthintso, now an ambassador, Thoko Mpumlwana and Mamphela Ramphele. They provided for the people of King William's Town, young and old, a difference of lifestyle, a cell of activity and energy and dedication to a cause. They endeared themselves to many in the communities where they served, and soon had a lot of influence in the surrounding communities.

But it was also a time of repression. Many of Steve's comrades were regularly arrested and detained, and tortured, and many were killed. Steve found himself not only becoming an interpreter of events, he also had much to do with keeping up the spirits of the people, to continue to inspire many and served as a counselor to parents and young people caught up in the struggle. Steve continued to write though generally published through others or by non-de-plume, but he needed the outlet that Donald Woods in the *Daily Dispatch* so readily made available to him; to debate and ask some profound questions about the conduct of the struggle for

liberation. Inevitably many young activists began to go into exile and to train in guerilla warfare. Some came back only to be arrested and tortured. A number of Steve's comrades were arrested about this time. He features as a defence witness at the Trial of the SASO 8 in 1975 through to 1976, and Mthuli ka Shezi had been murdered at Germiston, and Mapetla Mohapi was murdered in police custody. The tension and stress were unimaginable at this time. He continued to lead and guide the projects that the BCP had developed in the area. He formed partnerships with some key spiritual advisers in Fr (later Bishop of Grahamstown) David Russell in King William's Town, Donald Woods at the Daly Dispatch in East London and Fr Aelred Stubbs CR. To them he could pour out his doubts and frustrations. They were, if you like, white people one could trust because they understood the pain of being black and the excitement and pride in and about blackness that Black Consciousness was seeking to engender. As it turned out much of his latter thinking was given 'voice' by these sparring partners.

But Steve's voice did not depend upon the agency of benevolent interpreters. He had the ability to write, and write well. He was never a systematic writer of tomes and tracts. And yet much of what he wrote and published as Frank Talk in the SASO Newsletter and addressed to the black campuses has become a singular testament to his thinking under the title *I Write What I Like*". But Steve's voice was actually to be found, even as a banned person, in the testimony he gave at the SASO/BPC Trial, and in interviews with countless overseas journalists. In other words Steve spoke and behaved like the free man he believed himself to be. He defied and unbound himself from the shackles of the apartheid system. However, Steve's loudest voice was to be heard in countless black townships in the length and breadth of the country, and in the youth revolts following June 1976; in their determination by school children and workers to be free and to fight with all their might against the apartheid system.

And yet Steve Biko knew that the system sought his demise. He was aware that with everyone around him being systematically eliminated, his own turn at the scaffold was coming. Steve was the 43<sup>rd</sup> person recorded as having died in police custody. He was definitely not the last. Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission it has become known that there were countless men and women who had disappeared without trace, who were found to have been murdered by the security police, in places among others at their notorious Vlakplaas, in Pretoria West. That is quite apart from those who were murdered in police and Defence Force raids in neighbouring states, or others kidnapped in the neighbouring countries and many more who were arrested and executed. He was undeterred in his pursuit of unity

among the liberation forces, and he was arrested on a mission, in contravention of his banning orders.

For Steve Biko spirituality was never direct, or unerring. It was always dialectical. That proceeded by way of a direct attack on the Christian church as a social and controlling institution. He sought, I think, to free Christ from the control of the institutional church. He believed that the Christ of the church had been domesticated, and marshaled to serve the political interests of the colonial church. He therefore argued that the Christian Church was far too important to be left to professional theologians. Theology for him was not and could not just be for the specialists, but for every thinking Christian. And so, he indulged in theology, and he took that challenge to church leaders and to theologians and to ministers of the church. In other words the interpretation and the language of the church had to be made accessible to the ordinary people, and the ordinary people had to own the power to make the church what it could become.

He did that by reclaiming history and reinventing the tools of analysis – and in that way take control of the intellectual system of knowledge and understanding from those who used it only to undermine and subjugate. I have made the point elsewhere that notwithstanding all else one cannot deny that Steve Biko's political system was based squarely on spiritual foundations. By that I understood "spiritual" to be humanist, concrete, holistic and wholesome. His insight was that the fullness of human nature that could only be realized by the extent to which being human took account of the concrete and material in context and history. "Being human", therefore, was a foundational ethic for Steve Biko. He argued that a fully alive human being was a human being truly free. A free being cast aside fear; and one who lived one's life without fear could direct the course of one's future. He stated that the objective of the struggle for liberation was to give, in time, to South Africa "the greatest gift possible – a more human face."

What was to be derived from spirituality and from Christ was not so much pietism but radical transformation of self and the world. The late Fr Aelred Stubbs CR has come to the conclusion that whatever Steve's own doubts about the church and about the Christ of the church were, he had a vision of a Christ of liberation, a redeeming and compassionate God. Stubbs says that Steve had become "an authentic (if unconscious) disciple of the Jesus of Nazareth." This is a theologically difficult concept to sustain. My point is that Steve Biko was never an unconscious disciple of the Jesus of Nazareth, but rather he sought to unshackle Jesus Christ from the clutches of the colonial church. He shared with the Christ of history that it was God's will that the people of God be freed from oppression and from racial

subjugation. His Christian anthropology also substantiated his view that at the heart of all spirituality is this idea of a free and full humanity. A new humanity could not be created out of slaves and out of a slave mentality. To be free slaves had to rebel against slavery and enslavement. Only the wholly free can go out of Egypt at the Exodus, to worship God. It has been said that in Black Theology, Steve Biko found a praxis of faith he could live by without betraying any of his principles.

Consistent with his hermeneutic of the self, Steve Biko also had to contend with the extent to which his own self-understanding would portray what he taught. As the clouds gathered he had to examine closely what he himself believed about life and about death. Steve stated his credo forcefully and implicitly, "It is better to die for an idea that will live than to live for an idea that will die." That idea is what shaped his approach to dealing with those who sought to subdue him either by some psychological ruse or by physical means. He resisted, and for him resistance was not just driven by courage, but that it was a political obligation. It was a Manifesto of Life. Shortly before he died he said the following: "You are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can't care anyway. And your method of death can itself be a politicizing thing..." To live life to the full, therefore, means that one lives without fear and takes charge of one's own destiny. For him, a liberatory spirituality meant that one had to abide by the ethic that there can never be a struggle without casualties. It therefore meant for him that life in the struggle had to be based on a profound acceptance and understanding of the value of life and a willingness to sacrifice one's life in order for the life principles one believed in to live. One had to have confidence in the rightness of one's path and its probable outcomes, and yet to live with the fact that, like Moses, one may never see that final end. In other words one's life was sacrificial.

Fr Aelred Stubbs CR ends his memoir on Steve Biko by examining whether Steve could be called a martyr in the understanding of the church. Stubbs suggests that the testimony received at the Inquest about Steve's last days in captivity indicate that he was a person wholly without fear or bitterness; that his captors were never able to vanquish or subdue his spirit of resistance. That Steve had labeled himself a selfless revolutionary' meant that he was disciplined to the end and never betrayed any of his principles. Although there is no direct evidence and one can hardly make a claim to that effect, that while it is not known whether Steve did or would have forgiven those who tortured him unto death, he never withheld forgiveness from them. He truly dealt with them according to what they deserved. Finally in Fr Aelred Stubbs CR's book Steve was a martyr of hope. He gathers this from Steve's entire life of selflessness, the service he rendered to the communities he served, and the love he

bore not just to his family but also to those who were his comrades and fellow activists. Steve hardly did anything for himself, without due consideration to others.

Fr Stubbs then calls him a Martyr of Hope. It is the hope that was his life ethic. He lived a life never in despair or fear, and he was faithful in the belief that evil can never triumph and that truth must prevail. He also held out a hand of reconciliation to the oppressors whom he believed would be liberated by the freedom of the black people. Then, Stubbs concludes, that Steve Biko would be venerated as a true martyr of Christ among and in the hearts of countless men and women of faith among the oppressed for whom the light of liberation was never dimmed. This was “the Christ whom maybe could not consciously be often in communion with because of the disfiguring disguises with which the Church had distorted him – the Christ nevertheless of the poor and the oppressed, whose compassion he displayed, and whose passion for righteousness it was to drive him to his death” (2004: 242). In the Book of Revelation we are told that “Be ye faithful unto death and I shall give you a crown of life.” What made Steve Biko such a powerful and infectious representative of the faith was, in Millard Arnold’s words that “he had an uncomplicated vision; an intrinsic appreciation of the essence of the struggle confronting black people.” That is the reason Fr Aelred Stubbs CR makes a bold call that he can be recognised as a martyr of hope.

It will be noticed that the text cited above was being used as a peg with which to hand the thoughts that follow. I trust that the outline of Steve Biko’s life and work and sacrifice is expressive of that radical knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ as the Son of God whom the world denied.

To conclude, Fr Albert Nolan OP ends his book *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* with an examination of what radical freedom entails for a transformative spirituality for our times. He says that radical freedom is itself an imitation of Christ. There could be no representation of absolute freedom than the one that Jesus of Nazareth displayed. It is to the extent that mystics imitate the life of Christ that they reach to the depths of Christ’s own spiritual being. That has to be done with absolute dependence upon God, trusting that God takes charge of one’s life, but it also means dedication to freedom in every aspect of one’s life. To be radically free is to be open, transparent and fearless. The immediate outcome of living Christ’s spirituality is freedom – to be free of earthly attachment, or materialism, or any of the egos and ideologies that imprison the mind, and take hold of one’s freedom to think and to act according to one’s conscience. In particular, says Nolan, the discovery of freedom from guilt, is the greatest freedom of all “Our wrongdoing can never be held against us. We are forgiven. We are free”, is a most liberating

discovery ever. Nolan described this as being “free to speak out without fear, to stand up and be counted, to laugh and to cry without inhibition, and to be as humble and playful as a child. It also frees us to give of our lives for others (in totality) – if need be.” (2008:182).

In his book, *LIVING FAITH: How Faith Inspires Social Justice* Curtiss Paul de Young tells how mystic-activists have been inspired by faith to seek a transformed world. Faith for them was not just a matter for pronouncement, but an embodiment of constant challenge and adjustment. It is that one’s own life is challenged by one’s faith, and that that life challenges others in like manner. “As mystics,” he says that

... they experience God in direct life-refreshing ways through peak experiences and spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and fasting. As activists, they engage directly with societies plagued by injustice, offering prophetic life-giving messages of hope and actions for social change. A lived faith is essential for the development of faith-inspired activists in the twenty-first century (2007:138)

de Young concludes his call on mystic-activists of the future to learn from these examples of a life lived by faith to bring to birth the vision of a better world for Christ, building a more just and reconciled world. But he goes on to assert, however, that such mystic activists will have to find God at the margins of history among the poor and deprived and engaged that struggle for a better future for Christ’s sake. In reality though, they will also find the Christ “in the shadows and palaces “ of the power and privilege “waiting for activists to dismantle the very structures that lock society into the evil of institutionalized injustice and deprivation” (149). By so doing they will liberate the God of idolatry and restore the God of faith to God’s rightful place in the hearts of God’s own people.

It is my faith conviction that there is a place in our world today more than ever before for those mystic-activists who will dismantle the false gods of our age and restore all God’s people to full humanity.

N Barney Pityana  
 Cathedral Church of St Michael & St George  
 GRAHAMSTOWN  
 Lent V, 6 April 2014.