

**Address by the
Most Reverend Desmond Mpilo Tutu,
Archbishop Emeritus Cape Town and Nobel Prize
Laureate at the Sixty-first World Health Assembly**

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Thank you, Mr President, for that introduction. Madame Director-General, your Royal Highness, your Excellencies, Honorable Health Ministers, delegates from around the world and friends,

What a wonderful, wonderful privilege and a very great honour to address you. You must be looking out for miracle. You must be looking for a miracle because I am preacher, and you have placed the preacher with a captive audience, you have given the preacher a podium, and you have expected the preacher to be brief. Now that would be a miracle!

You know this reminds me of the story about a little boy who went to church with his mother. At the front of the church there was a lamp. It was red. After a great long while of waiting and waiting for the preacher to stop, he the little boy asked his mother, "Mommy when it [the lamp] turns green, can we go home?" I hope you won't feel like that little boy.

It is a great honour to be here, especially in this year when you mark the anniversary of the founding of WHO 60 years ago. The World Health Organization is the world's health agency and guardian of the right to the highest attainable level of health for all people.

You know, when I came here, I was not feeling too well. In fact, I felt like death warmed up. And then I arrived here at the WHO, and the WHO lived up to its reputation because I was seen by a doctor. I was seen by the Director of Health and Medical Services, Dr Pascale Gilbert-Miguet, who treated me and here I am before you today! Let us give her a nice clap. I can say to you all that I am a lot, a lot better. And if in the course of my address I may sound intelligent, you must know that it is due to the contributions of Father Ted Karpf. When I am not bad, it is probably Ted's words you are hearing.

It is an auspicious year since it is also the 60th anniversary of the signing of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As it happens it is also the 30th anniversary of your own Alma-Ata Declaration on Primary Health Care and the 7th anniversary of the Abuja Declaration pledging 15% of the national budget to be earmarked for health by African Heads of State.

Thus there is no shortage of significant subjects about which we could confer together. I received a letter from Consumers International that urged me to raise the issue which her Royal Highness refers to, that of childhood obesity. They claim that worldwide 22% of all children under five years old are overweight. And somebody in the World Council of Churches said that they wanted to mention the dire consequences of children living with AIDS. They gave me T-shirt, and asked if I can wear it? But it doesn't go well with purple. I have an embarrassment of riches.

But as I have mulled over a possible topic, it struck me quite forcibly that in many ways it would in fact be somewhat presumptuous of me to talk to you about health issues when you are the professionals and have a plethora of experts you could call on who would have the specific data relating to your area of interest.

I thought it would be less presumptuous and more appropriate if I were to speak in the area of my own competence – the spiritual, the religious or ethical sphere. I would be likely to speak with a bit more confidence and perhaps a modicum of authority.

Reflecting again on your history and Constitution, the fullness of the right to health is still incomplete. Health not only encompasses the physical, mental and social well-being, but must be inclusive of spiritual well-being. I will try to explain:

I have a favourite book of cartoons by the late Mel Calman of the London *Observer* newspaper entitled, "My God". One shows God somewhat nonplussed and saying, "Oh dear, I think I have lost my copy of the Divine Plan!" Looking at the state of the world we might be forgiven for wondering if God ever had a plan at all. There are devastating floods in one part and destructive droughts in another. Couldn't God have organized things better so that there was enough water for all everywhere? Then there are all the man-made disasters of tyranny and oppression, an endless doleful catalogue of woe.

There are the long lines of bedraggled refugees from natural and man-made disasters. We have the casualties of racism, ethnic strife and xenophobia – and isn't awful, awful to read about what is happening in my own country? And staring us in the face is the looming catastrophe of climate change and ecological degradation signaled by tsunamis, cyclones and hurricanes.

And you would be particularly aware of the devastation caused by disease – TB, malaria, HIV/AIDS, river blindness, polio, cholera, infant mortality, maternal illnesses referred to so eloquently by her Royal Highness, many fuelled by poverty – children dying of easily preventable diseases if they could but get the inexpensive vaccination/inoculation; many illnesses resulting from a lack of clean water, proper sanitation and decent housing. There is also evil when we refuse or become immobilized by bureaucracies or corruption to provide the needed-remedy to heal the nations.

We must never forget that, as government leaders, we have a calling to dispel ignorance, restore justice and defend liberty. We have this calling to ensure peace and build good health. Much disease and heartbreak is preventable if governments had the political will – the 15% Now campaign seeks to urge African Heads of State to honour their pledges and so prevent unnecessary deaths of eight million of their citizens.

Then there are those leaders playing havoc with the well-being, the health of their people. In these places, even the children are enlisted into ranks of soldiers. Likewise, parents watch helplessly as their children succumb, either because medication is rendered useless because of lack of electricity and so of refrigeration, or they are held up at check points and may fail to reach the hospital in time, if

at all. Dear friends, health cannot be de-linked or separated from the killing effects of living under the bonds of terror, oppression and tyranny. The times are thoroughly out of joint. Evil is real and rampant.

In our Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, we were devastated by the stories of atrocities committed. “We gave him drugged coffee and shot him in the head. Then we burned his body. It takes 7-8 hours for this to happen and so whilst it was taking place, we had a barbecue and drank beer.” You wondered what could have happened to the humanity of those perpetrators that they could sink so low. We could burn a human being here. We could burn a human being and barbecue. We could burn a human being and drink beer. We realized of course that it bore witness to the fact that you and I, all of us, have this horrendous capacity for evil. Those who supported Hitler did not have horns and tails. They were human beings like you and me, often even prominent, respected members of their communities. Yes, we all have the capacity to sink so low.

But wonderfully, wonderfully, that turned out not to be the whole story, nor indeed the most important part of the story. Wonderfully, exhilaratingly, there was another, a glorious side. We witnessed extraordinary exhibitions of magnanimity as victims of the most ghastly atrocities, people who should have been consumed by bitterness and a lust for revenge, we witnessed how they spoke words of forgiveness, of generosity to their tormentors in public and embraced them then, and we realized then that, yes, we have a capacity for evil, but, wonderfully, exhilaratingly, as I said before, we have this amazing capacity for good.

Early this year we of this group, called the Elders, visited Darfur – the descriptions do not tell half the story of the awfulness that we found there. We had a meeting with the internally displaced people and staggeringly, staggeringly they could laugh – what an amazing example of the resilience of the human spirit in the face of daunting conditions. The Muslim men wore white costumes – and they were spotless. I looked around the squalor wondering where did they get the water. It all testified to the wonder of the human spirit, the capacity to laugh, to cling to dignity and self respect, to refuse to see oneself as a victim, or to be pitied as one.

And then, and then we were impressed by another feature of that depressing landscape – the wonder of the remarkable humanitarian workers. These were citizens of different lands most of whom could have led safe and comfortable lives in their homelands. But no, here they were, some returning more than once in this bleak place, so utterly insecure, where they ran the risk of being abducted; and woe betide the victim if it was a woman – running the gauntlet of sexual violation and worse.

And yet, and yet, and yet here they were as they were to be found in so many other parts of the world which was hurting – either through natural or man-made disaster. There they were with an amazing dedication and commitment making you feel proud to be human. And many of those you represent are found in this glorious company of humanitarian workers as doctors, nurses, ambulance workers as they are, having offered themselves as part of the world, offering themselves as part of those treating the human disaster. Wow, what a fantastic array of goodness, of compassion, of caring; continuing the Divine project of healing a broken and wounded world; making whole that which is alienated and hurting.

All of you, all of you, including those fantastic people who are part of NGOs around the world; all of you in the healing enterprise are God’s collaborators in making this a better world – more compassionate, gentler, more caring, and more sharing. In the tradition of Abraham there is a notion that God deliberately made the world imperfect, so that God could enlist us all in the business of making the world perfect.

When we were fighting against the viciousness of apartheid, we helped to sustain the morale and the hope of our people in what seemed an unequal struggle by reminding them, “Hey, ours is a moral universe”, that there was no way in which wrong, evil, injustice, oppression could ever have the last word. “Hey”, we would say “this is God’s world and God is in charge.” Sometimes you wanted to whisper in God’s ear, “God we know you are in charge – but why don’t you make it more obvious?”

Yes, wrong, evil will **not** have the last word. Goodness compassion, love, justice, laughter, caring these are what will prevail, will triumph over their ghastly counterparts. Tyrants, dictators, perpetrators of injustice and oppression may strut about the stage as if they were invincible cocks of the walk. But as sure as anything, they will get their come-uppance; they will bite the dust and do so ignominiously. That is the verdict of history – the tyrants, the despots, the upholders of apartheid, etc. etc. – where are they now? No, no, we will not gloat.

It is evident from generations of witness that there is no situation that cannot be transformed. There is no person who is hopeless, that is without a hope and a remedy. There is no set of circumstances that cannot be turned about by human beings and their natural capacity for love. It is essential that the world see such ideas are put into action through the promises of the WHO, on behalf of all people, communities and nations. For we need each other to become truly free, to become human, and enjoy the spiritual well-being of our creation in relationship to God and each other.

When we review the right to health, we cannot help but notice that its global scope contains the hopes and aspirations of all the peoples of the world. It also calls upon the WHO to guard and guide the nations – the Member States, as you call them – protecting their citizens and guaranteeing the right to health for all people. It is a sacred and solemn covenant – a promise that you are called upon to undertake. Let me thank you for your tenacious commitment and what this means in the lives of the more than six billion residents of this planet.

And I am indeed grateful, as we all are in Africa, that your Director-General has already become a partner in creation with God by addressing the monumental health concerns of Africa and the health of women and girls as critical to your priorities. Imagine, imagine if you will, that the cradle of humankind – because of disease, conflict and destruction – is precariously placed to become its final burial ground? We cannot lose Africa! As we often sing in our houses of worship: “God bless Africa. Guide her leaders. Guard her children. Grant her peace.”

It is a godly coincidence that nearby the World Council of Churches is also celebrating its 60th anniversary. Together WHO and WCC share a common mission to the world, protecting and restoring body, mind, and spirit. It is important that this is also the 40th anniversary of the Christian Medical Commission, whose values and experience in primary health care informed and shaped the 1974 WHO Guidelines for Primary Health Care, which were reaffirmed at Alma-Ata.

You see, we – faith and health – have been together a very long time. Health is not only freedom from suffering and illness, but according to your Constitution: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” These words enshrine the fundamental reason you are here and suggest something of what we share in our commitment to the world, together. Perhaps it would be good for us to include the recognition that there is an intrinsic relationship between God and humankind, which can be acknowledged as “spiritual well-being”? Perhaps one day this notion of well-being can be included in the WHO definition of health?

You are the guardians of the dream of “Health for All”. You have the opportunity and responsibility to lead the world into a healthy place. You are the enactors of justice: justice in the

distribution of a country's wealth for health; justice to meet the Millennium Development Goals; justice to save the lives of your people, and enable them to prosper and build healthy nations! God is watching. The people are watching. You are commissioned to go to wipe the tears away from all faces and bring forth lives filled with strength, and purpose which will make for peace.

I have sometimes imagined that when God looks down at the mess we have made of things, that God might wonder, "Whatever got into me to create that lot?" and God weeps. And then God looks again at you and all those others who want to help God change this world to make it a better world and, hey, a smile begins to break over God's face like the sun shining through the rain and God says, "Ah, ja, ja that is why I created them, they are vindicating me." And a little angel, have you noticed, the little angel? This little angel goes and wipes the tears from God's eyes.

And God says, "Please help me – please help me to realize my dream; that all my children will know that they are sisters and brothers members of one family, the human family, God's family – please help me, help me? Help me make this world a more compassionate place? Please help make it more gentle, and please help make it more caring? Help me? Help me? Help me? Please help me?"

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