

From Horror to Hope: Sharpeville 1960 and 2020

by Mary Ward

Introduction

Sharpeville: the name resonated across the world.

Nelson Mandela read the poem *Die kind (wat doodgeskiet is deur soldate by Nyanga)* at his first inaugural State of the Nation Address to the Parliament of South Africa in May 1994:

The child is not dead, not at Langa nor at Nyanga,
Not at Orlando, not at Sharpeville
Nor at the police station at Philippi
Where he lies with a bullet through his brain.
The child is the dark shadow of the soldiers
On guard with rifles, Saracens and batons.
The child is present at all assemblies and law-givings.
The child peers through the windows of houses and into the hearts of mothers.
This child who just wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga is everywhere.
The child grown to a man treks through all Africa.
The child grown into a giant journeys through the whole world
Without a pass.
Ingrid Jonker (1933-1965), translated from Afrikaans



Mandela said that “in the midst of despair, Jonker celebrated hope”, and “confronted by death, she asserted the beauty of life”. Ingrid Jonker had been moved to write the poem after seeing the image of a dead child at the police station at Philippi near Langa, a township in Cape Town, where protests against the pass laws also took place on 21st March 1960.

Sharpeville, March, 1960

The community of Sharpeville and Langa townships had planned a peaceful demonstration as part of a national campaign against the ‘tyranny of the pass system, imposed on all black men and women during the apartheid era.’ The pass laws, known in Afrikaans as *dompas*, “stupid or dumb pass”, restricted the movement of people of colour in certain white areas, and were a powerful means of control by the apartheid regime. The plan for the peaceful protest was for everyone to leave their passes at home and to gather, young and old alike, unarmed, outside the police station, thus making themselves publicly available for arrest. Robert Sobukwe, the leader of the Pan African Conference, announced in Biblical language: “African people have entrusted their whole future to us. And we have sworn that we are leading them not to death, but to life abundant. My instructions therefore are that our people must be taught now and continuously that in this campaign we are going to observe absolute non-violence.”

It was said that “the situation was tense, as many of the police were facing a crowd situation for the first time. A scuffle at the wire surrounding the police station broke out and a policeman started to pull his trigger. Shots were fired for 10 to 30 seconds. The crowd fled.”(Sharpeville Memorial Site) 69 people were killed, the youngest a child of twelve, and 180 injured. 70% of bullets had entered from the back, and the bullets “were of high velocity.”

Clive Brown, from our congregation, living in Johannesburg at the time, remembers the shock waves. It was a seminal moment in South Africa’s history, leading to worldwide condemnation of the brutality in the form of anti-apartheid protests and violent struggle and, eventually, the release of Mandela from prison in 1990 with the resulting collapse of white minority rule and the establishment of a new democratic South Africa.

Little St Mary's links with Sharpeville

In the early 2000s Fr David Dinkebogile came on sabbatical to Westcott House from St Cyprian's, Sharpeville. He was invited to preach at LSM and established close links with the congregation. He was keen to establish a Sunday School for the children in Sharpeville. The vision became a reality, and the building was dedicated by Bishop Peter Lee who was the Bishop of the Diocese of Christ the King, Johannesburg, on Sunday 23rd January 2011.

A painting of the Little St Mary's Building was hung in our new Parish Centre, which was dedicated on the 6th June in the same year. LSM has continued to pray for St Cyprian's and to support the church financially. The current incumbent is Fr David Mahlonoko, who is one of the archdeacons of the diocese. St Cyprian's is the largest church building in the diocese, which has no cathedral.

Visit to Sharpeville Memorial Site and St Cyprian's Church, February 2020

I flew to Johannesburg from Cape Town where I was met by Fr David. My visit to Sharpeville has been long overdue, as I have been visiting Cape Town regularly to see family, for the past ten years. As we drove out of Jo'burg towards Sharpeville, a distance of 52 miles, Fr David gave me some background. At this time the threat of Covid-19 appeared to be distant news.

He described the demographic of his congregation as largely retired and elderly. They are often raising their own grandchildren, as parents may have died from AIDS. During the last two years he has taken 108 funerals, usually on a Saturday. He has buried all ages, and several deaths were alcohol and drug-related.

The plans for the church include extending the kitchen (the faculty has been granted) and setting up and running an after-school club which would provide guidance and help with homework and perform a valuable function in keeping young people off the streets. Financially, the church is suffering in that there are comparatively few members of the congregation who are able to contribute regularly to church funds.

As we came into Sharpeville we drove down a long street which Fr David said was a street which never slept. He called it Las Vegas and went on to comment on the African custom of "after-tears" where the traditional wake is augmented by noisy drinking and dancing. Community leaders are keen to set up projects here and provide employment.

Sharpeville itself is one of the oldest of six townships in the Vaal Triangle. Named after John Sharpe, a Glaswegian, it was created in 1958 by forcibly removing 10,000 Africans from nearby Topville. The church itself was built in September 1955. The township is divided by the main street, and in the distance rise the cooling towers of the steelworks reflected in the dam, on the eastern borders of Sharpeville.

We first visited Sharpeville Old Police Station, which has been protected as a Provincial Heritage Site since 1996. The buildings are low-lying, of rose-pink brick, and the police station is now a community arts and crafts hub. Fr David then took me to the Memorial Stone "marking the site of the indiscriminate killing of men, women and children by the police on March 21st 1960." He pointed out that 21st March is now Human Rights Day, commemorated annually to remind South Africans about the sacrifices that accompanied the struggle for democracy. That day in March is no longer defined in South Africa as the day of the massacre. In 1996 Mandela signed the final draft of the constitution in Sharpeville, chosen as a symbolic location.



Although it was officially closed as it was getting late on a Saturday afternoon, Fr David spoke to the custodian of the Memorial Site and we were admitted to the actual site of the massacres. A simple plaque states “In Memory of those who gave their lives for a just and free South Africa - President Nelson Mandela, 10th December 1996.” 69 simple white obelisks are scattered across the grass, forming long shadows in the evening sun. A symbolic runnel runs down the middle, and it was said that the blood poured down towards the dam, and was washed completely away by a torrential storm, minutes after the shootings started. The names and age of each victim sheltered on a slate at the top of each obelisk, one of the youngest being David Makhoba, 14.



We went on to visit the 69 graves, at the Cemetery, lying just outside Sharpeville. The graves lie in a never-ending line, pebbled as if a railway track, each grave shaped as a scroll. The victims are named, the date 21 3 1960, and the Sesotho words *Robala ka Khota*, “Sleep Peacefully”.

James Buti Bessie, a child, died aged twelve.



St Cyprian’s Sharpeville, Sunday 16 February

Mass at St Cyprian’s began at 8am, and when we arrived at the building, at 7.30, the church was almost full. The many uniformed organisations were assembling, the ministers of communion in white robes, servers in red cassocks, cottas and lace headdresses, Mothers’ Union in royal blue polo shirts with the MU crest and blue hats (in this photo, Fr David is with Mrs Aletta Nhlapo, a retired nurse and former Churchwarden of St Cyprian’s); and the Men’s Guild in smart suits. There are 115 registered Sunday School pupils and the average attendance is around 80. The children went out to the Little St Mary’s building during the service.



This Sunday was the third Sunday of the month, and therefore the focus of the ministry and teaching was on the Campaign against Gender Based Violence. Many of the women were wearing black. The front rows of the church were filled with uniformed officers, including the Commander of the Police Station, who spoke to the congregation. A social worker and a Protection Officer also spoke. Justice must be done, and truly to love one’s neighbour the police were exhorted to report corruption in any form within the police force.

We learned that the victims of domestic abuse are both men and women and that the violence may be fuelled by alcohol and drugs. Men are often afraid to speak out for fear of humiliation. Women too are reluctant to take out a protection order as they fear that if the husband or partner leaves they may lose income, food, children and home. The tragedy was personal to the congregation as a member of the church had recently been murdered by her boyfriend. Again and again the Christian message of love was emphasised. Love thy neighbour. Show courage in reporting corruption. Be valiant for truth.

During the course of the service, the uniformed policewomen and men were blessed and sprinkled with holy water by Fr David. The service itself lasted three hours, conducted in Sesotho. I sat next to Stephana , a minister of Communion, who was very helpful in explaining the service. The music was magnificent, moving and joyful, with not a hymn book or copy in sight, and a brilliant choir



opposite me in the stalls Fr David had said “We like to sing” and certainly God was praised in His Sanctuary. The congregation praised “with the timbrel and dance”.

During the Peace a formal handshake was always followed by a hugely affectionate hug and I felt truly welcomed by the community. It was good to be able to read out the greeting from Fr Robert towards the end of the service, and to thank everyone for their kindness. In order to focus our minds on financial giving, the figures for last week’s offering were read out, organisation by organisation, guild by guild, in order to inspire even greater financial generosity.

Afterwards

After the service it was a privilege to meet several members of the congregation, including Mr Mkha Boloang, in his 80s, who had been present on 21st March 1960. He was 23 at the time and his brother and friend (next door neighbour) were shot at the scene. His friend died.

Several people were very excited about the thought of possibly visiting Little St Mary’s next year, 2021. I was presented with an enormous maroon commemoration umbrella, which has travelled with me back to Cambridge, and with a tiny keyring Bible by Stephana, which I will cherish.

Every Sunday Fr David, after Mass, divides the Lay Ministers into teams. They visit the sick and housebound to pray and to administer communion. I went with Fr David to two houses, the first to pray with an elderly member of the congregation and then to the home of a member of the congregation who had taken his own life in November, owing to work pressures. Fr David said that the family were struggling financially and his wife was out, working, so we prayed with the children at home.



I was very grateful to Fr David and his wife Nonhlanhla who looked after me so beautifully, and who drove me to the airport. Thank you for everything you shared and your kindness and generosity!

Coronavirus

“And can we anticipate a new politics of life that figures as the universal experience of the vulnerability of the human body?” - *R Adams*

In the *Church Times* of 17th April 2020, it was reported that “here were nearly 90,000 reports of violence against women in the first week of lockdown.” Fr David has remained in contact with LSM since the beginning of the lockdown in South Africa. He reported that they were “graced by the Bishop’s presence as part of the 60th Commemoration of the Sharpeville massacre, and before he could start to preach, the police arrived to enforce the rule of not having more than 100 people in church.”

Since then Fr David has reported that in fact the last service in church was the Commemoration. All services have since been suspended. He is unable to minister to his 43 sick and aged people in person, but phones them and prays with them. He has also said that the families who receive monthly food parcels are suffering, and he writes “Our child-headed families are going through difficulties, especially at this time of lockdown, where a 17-year-old must take care of two siblings and keep them safe. Some of them don’t even have phones, so I ‘sneak around’ with my permit to go and visit them.”

It is clear that financially, they are suffering greatly. Fr David concludes in his report:

“We continue to pray for God’s divine intervention for the world at this time and we hope and trust things will go back to the norm soon. We are committed to continuing to witness for the risen Lord and Saviour and to make His love known to all God’s people under our care. Be assured of our love and prayers for all God’s people at LSM at this time.”

God bless Africa;
Guard her children;
Guide her leaders
And give her peace,
For Jesus Christ’s sake, Amen
Trevor Huddleston