LEADERSHIP CALLS FOR COURAGE

When everybody was afraid of disagreeing with President George W Bush’s foreign policy towards Iraq, Mr Mandela referred to the leader of the world’s most powerful nation as ‘someone who did not want to belong to the modern age’. This is a story of Mr Mandela’s courage in raising a prophetic voice against those perceived to be most powerful.

On 12 September 2002 I read a headline in The Post, one of Zambia’s leading newspapers: ‘US threatens world peace, says Mandela.’ The article began, ‘Nelson Mandela has condemned United States intervention in the Middle East as a “threat to world peace.”’ Mr Mandela is quoted as having called senior advisers to President George W Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney ‘dinosaurs’. He concluded that the advisers did not want Bush to belong to the modern age.

In another story, Gray Younge wrote in the Mail & Guardian of 20 September 2002 that Mr Mandela ‘is annoyed at how the US is exploiting its overwhelming military might’. Younge quotes Mr Mandela speaking about the US: ‘They think they are the only power in the world. They are not and they are following a dangerous policy. One country wants to bully the world.’

These statements came at a time when the US was trying to justify its intention to attack Iraq in order to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein. The US argued that Hussein was a menace to world peace by allegedly supporting terrorism and being in possession of weapons of mass destruction.

Mr Mandela was speaking just a few days after the first anniversary of the terrorist attack on the US on 11 September 2001, when the whole world had been shocked by the gruesome deaths of innocent people. Even a year after the event, sympathy was expected for the US and its people. The US government assumed that the rest of the world would support its plan to attack Iraq.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the US has been left as perhaps the most powerful nation in the world. Those who do not agree with them prefer to remain quiet rather than be seen to be in conflict with such a superpower.

It is in this setting that Mr Mandela told the world, through the media, that the US was a threat to world peace. In the South African Sunday Times of 15 September 2002 Mr Mandela was quoted thus: ‘The US has made serious mistakes in the conduct of its foreign affairs, which have had unfortunate repercussions long after the decisions were taken. Unqualified support of the Shah of Iran led directly to the Islamic revolution of 1979. Then the US chose to arm and
finance the Mujahideen in Afghanistan instead of supporting and encouraging the moderate wing of the government of Afghanistan. That is what led to the Taliban in Afghanistan.’

Seeking to explain where Mr Mandela got the mandate from to criticise US foreign policy, Younge wrote in his story, ‘Towering like a moral colossus over the late twentieth century, his voice carries an ethical weight like no other. He rode to power on a global wave of goodwill, left office when his five years were up and settled down to a life of elder statesmanship.’ And that is exactly how millions throughout the world received Mr Mandela’s words and took them to heart.

It was very courageous of Mr Mandela to have spoken against the US when all those who were opposed to the US policy on Iraq opted either to keep quiet or speak so softly that nobody would notice their dissent.

Courage to stand up for what one holds to be true is one of the distinguishing characteristics of great leaders. The courage to say what we think when it is a minority view or when it is being championed by the poor and the less powerful is a rare phenomenon. We all find it easier to speak in favour of the acceptable position even when in our hearts we would disagree. It is less stressful to flow with the majority, the powerful, the most popular, although deep down we may know that we should swim against the tide.

The point of the story is not whether Mr Mandela was right or not. It is to show how vehemently he opposed the mighty US government because he believed that their intentions were wrong. My guess is that, for Mr Mandela, whether the US was all-powerful or not was never the issue. He simply felt compelled to stand for what he believed to be the truth. His courage to speak out included disregarding the names and numbers he was facing.

Standing by what one believes to be the truth may appear to contradict the notion that great leaders ought to be great listeners. It is not a contradiction. Standing by one’s principles is the result of a dialectical relationship between listening to the views of others (including the empirical evidence available) and examining the principles one holds sacred.

Great leaders do indeed listen. In choosing where they will stand, they must first suspend their overall judgement. They must silence their initial opinions so that they can include other people’s views in their reasoning. They have to see reality from the perspective of others.

In his book Higher Ground Leadership, Lance Secretan makes the point that, to listen truly, we must learn to be silent (as he says, the words ‘listen’ and ‘silent’ even have same letters!). This silence is not just a question of not speaking. It includes, and more importantly, the silence of the mind, making every effort to hear people from their point of view, to become conversant with what is going on in their hearts and minds and circumstances. This is also known as
empathy. It is only after we have listened in this way and weighed what we have learnt against our moral values that we earn the right to take a position that we can stand by and champion as leaders.

You and I know of leaders within our communities or organisations whose truth depends on who is stating the case. Like reeds in turbulent waters, cowardly leaders change sides as those they fear or look up to change their positions.

Great leaders often earn respect even when history later proves them wrong. I think this is because their mistaken position was decided on principle and then held with the courage to stand up for what they believed regardless of how unpopular it made them.

Food for thought

Courage is a gift that nature bestows on all of us when we are willing to use it. It usually means aligning our words and actions as much as possible with the way we think we should behave. Quite often courage demands that we publicly show where we think the truth lies. Courage has to do with identifying and living the fundamental values that lie in the deepest recesses of our hearts.

Courage demands that we strive to stand by what we believe to be true without being influenced by the names and numbers on either side of the argument.

Courage does not mean we are never scared. It is a matter of acknowledging our fears and at the same time choosing to follow what we consider the right course of action. Great leaders all have this courage.

Excerpt from: