

Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the Graca Machel Chancellor's Award for continental leadership, Desmond Mpilo Tutu.

The night before Desmond Tutu heard that he had won the Nobel Peace Prize, he slept badly. He said: "It was almost like waiting for exam results! Twice before people had said I was a strong candidate and the letdown was very hard." Some of the other South Africans on the short list were Helen Suzman, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo.

At 9 o'clock the next morning, the Norwegian ambassador showed up at the Tutu's door carrying a bouquet of flowers for Leah Tutu – and she knew immediately.

The Desmond Tutu who won this internationally significant prize grew up in Makoekeng, the Klerksdorp "township". His father was a primary school teacher and his mother trained in domestic science. When he was a toddler, he caught polio and nearly died. Then, one cold morning, he stood too close to warm himself at the brazier, burst into flames and was badly burnt. Later, in high school, he contracted tuberculosis and spent 18 months confined to a sanatorium.

Maybe it was these early experiences of life and near- death, but, whatever it was, something has given Desmond Tutu an inner truth-force. He has a remarkable ability to speak fearlessly to those in power; to speak up for the voiceless and to speak from his heart to the poor and the vulnerable.

Many times, in the deepest darkest days of apartheid – he spoke out. When others had given up, and the nooses for the Sharpeville Six had already been measured, he still spoke out. He called ambassadors, he phoned heads of state, he drove to Tuynhuys to plead with PW Botha for mercy.

He defied apartheid restrictions and put himself between police and funeral crowds; he negotiated with armed security forces, he stood in front of 30 000 angry people and pleaded with them to disperse.

He spoke out at the TRC. When Dirk Coetzee admitted that he had callously killed activists and burnt their bodies, Tutu spoke out for redemption.

He listened with his heart to the stories of those who had been ignored for so long and, on the day that Singqokwana Ernest Malgas described how he was tortured by apartheid security police, Archbishop Desmond Tutu dropped his head in his hands and wept.

He spoke out to international leaders: Thatcher, Reagan and Helmut Kohl and told them: "You are protecting a racist government that is killing children" But he also has, in the words of his good friend Bono, the ability to be humble, yet not walked upon. He's earthy, but elevated; serious, yet silly. He carries the weight of injustice, yet he remains light on his feet. He has so much faith and so little religiosity.

The day after Tutu heard that he had won the Noble Prize, he said:

“This award is for mothers, who sit at railway stations eking out an existence, selling potatoes and selling mealies.

This award is for you, fathers, sitting in a single sex hostel, separated from your children for 11 months of the year. This award is for you.

This award is for you, mothers in the KTC squatter camp, whose shelters are destroyed callously every day, and who sit on soaking mattresses in the winter rain, holding whimpering babies.

This award is for you, the 3.5 million of our people who have been uprooted and dumped as if you were rubbish.

This award is for you.”

Desmond Mpilo Tutu is an African leader. He is a moral leader. But he is also an international icon.

Desmond Tutu: rabble rouser, servant of God, instigator, visionary, healer of the nation, professional beggar, courageous fighter, radical rock star, national and international treasure, we salute you.

Chancellor, I have the honour to invite you to present the Graca Machel Chancellor's Award for continental leadership to Desmond Mpilo Tutu.