

# Desmond Tutu urges college to live by principle of 'Ubuntu'

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**Published:** Monday, March 7, 2011

**Updated:** Monday, March 7, 2011 22:03

"A person is a person through other persons" was the Most Rev. Desmond Tutu's principle message to the Modesto Junior College community this weekend. This concept is expressed by a Bantu word he introduced to this audience: "Ubuntu," meaning that people are interconnected through their common humanity. Tutu said that ubuntu is a principle and "a way of life" and offered examples of how it works and how we've all experienced it.

The 1984 Nobel Peace Prize winner's March 5 visit to MJC was approved by President Loewenstein at the request of MJC Project Coordinator, Jenni Abbott. The night's events began with performances by MJC's Off-Balance dance group, the MJC chamber singers, and a reading of a poem written for the occasion by MJC English Professor Sam Pierstorff, who received a standing ovation.

Walking on stage, Tutu first asked for a moment of silence and time for a short prayer. He then said, "It's a very very great privilege to be here in this great institution." Tutu's speech was packed with funny anecdotes as well as serious, inspirational statements. One such anecdote recounted an incident in San Francisco in which Tutu says a woman mistook him for fellow South African activist and friend, Nelson Mandela.

On the more serious subjects, he captivated the audience, telling the audience that by the end of the evening they would think "What the heck? Have we always practiced ubuntu without even knowing what it is? I hope at the end you will say ah..now I see!" he said. Tutu, who was the first black South African Anglican Archbishop of Capetown, South Africa, gave many examples of ubuntu in both history and in everyday happenings. He made it clear that ubuntu was, in fact, universal. He talked about the Garden of Eden, calling it "history's most profound story."

He described God's creation of the animals and Adam and how "God didn't think it was good for Adam to be alone." When he described Eve's creation, he says that Adam was awed by such a "delectable creature" and made a move with his hands in the shape of an hourglass to show the shape of Eve's body, eliciting laughter. Tutu said that this story is about humankind in general.

"It speaks about how we can't live on our own lonesome. We are meant to live on interdependence. We need at least the community of two persons." This is ubuntu, he said. "A person is a person through other persons," he repeated again and again.

"I wouldn't know to speak as a human being, except through other human beings," he said. "I wouldn't know how to be human except by learning that through other human beings. We are meant to live in this network of complementarity."

As the crowd soaked in these profound statements, he hit them with another one. "God is smart," he asserted, "because God gives you gifts that God has not given me. God gives to me gifts he has not given you." We are different "not so we should be alone" but to teach each other and help each other with our different talents."

"We are made for togetherness," he affirmed. "The totally self-sufficient human being is in fact sub-human." Once more, the meaning of ubuntu sank in. The audience nodded their heads, in understanding and in encouragement for him to go on.

"You have heard that the birthplace of human kind is Africa?" he asked, breaking the silence. The audience laughed once more and started clapping. "You believe scientists, don't you?" He added to this statement, another message. "There is really only one race: the human race. We are meant to live in harmony; harmony of collaboration." This is "the fundamental structure of our existence," he said. "An organism is an organism because it has different organs working together," implying that the human community is an organism.

He ended his presentation with a message to the audience about how much we are hurting our planet with global warming, starvation, and war. "This is for real," he said. "We have but this Earth." Tutu told the young people in the audience to "dream of a world that's hospitable to caring, to kindness," and that if we don't live ubuntu we are headed to destruction. "We have headed [there]," he said.

As the realization that he had finished spread through the audience, they rose to their feet in a standing ovation, yelling and cheering enthusiastically. Tutu walked calmly off the stage. A person is a person through other persons.

Rev. Tutu was born in South Africa in 1931 and became prominent in the 1980s in the worldwide struggle against the South African system of apartheid. He has been active in the defense of human rights and uses his high profile in the church and later as a Nobel winner to advocate for the oppressed. He has campaigned to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, homophobia, transphobia, poverty and racism. In addition to the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, Rev. Tutu received the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism in 1986, and the Gandhi Peace Prize in 2005, among other honors.