Nelson Mandela and Non-Violence

Nelson Mandela was born in 1918, he helped dismantle the Apartheid system in South Africa.

Apartheid means 'separateness' in Afrikaans, the language of Dutch settlers in South Africa. This was a system of laws that enabled the minority of white people who lived in South Africa to rule the country while it discriminated against all who were categorised as non-white, despite black Africans forming the overwhelming majority in the country.

South Africa used to be a British colony before it gained political independence in 1910 and as a result, contained different ethnic groups. People were categorised as white, black, coloured or Indian. Each group had a different set of rights. The rights of the black majority were decreased steadily from 1910 onwards, including being prevented from voting or taking part in elections, applying for certain jobs and where they were allowed to live. This was enforced by the police who were armed, unlike the black Africans.

Nelson Mandela supported Gandhi's ideas about non-violence but became frustrated at the lack of impact nonviolence was having. He started to believe that some armed resistance was necessary and joined in civil disobedience campaigns which included advocating bombings and the sabotage of power lines and transport links. These campaigns aimed to avoid civilian casualties but not those of the police or army who enforced apartheid laws. Mandela also organised peaceful strikes from workers and refused to comply with laws about where black South Africans could travel.

It was for the latter two activities that he was jailed in 1964 and was sent to a prison on Robben Island. He came to believe that while it was understandable that when people were mistreated they might consider violence, he also realised that it was not working to bring about the changes he wanted. Violent acts that aimed to frighten the white minority resulted in greater fear but this only led to greater force being used against the black majority.

Also, it meant that white South Africans who wanted to help bring about change faced criticism because they were accused of supporting violence.

From prison, he started to move towards promoting and supporting resistance that was non-violent. This included strikes in South Africa, the boycott of South African goods abroad and the establishment of the African National Congress as a political party. The non-violent action gained greater support for the cause of equality and meant that while many white South Africans did not like the idea of giving up privileges, they no longer believed that they had to fear a system where all were granted equal rights.

An international campaign eventually led to the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the end of apartheid. He became the first President of the new democratic system in South Africa and was able to bring this about peacefully.

Nelson Mandela was a Methodist (Protestant Christian) and he was influenced by the Christian teachings on the importance of forgiveness. During his time in prison, he realised that without forgiveness between South Africans for acts committed in the past, they would not be able to move forward together. This included forgiving those who had imprisoned him. After becoming President, he also set up a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation to ensure that all who had suffered during Apartheid would be able to tell their story and gain justice. Instances in which people felt their human rights had been abused were documented and those who committed them were given a fair hearing and consequences. In this way, Mandela was able to create a situation where South Africans of all backgrounds could move towards living together.