

Racial Justice Sunday OoS

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Welcome to LW

Hymn God is love, let heav'n adore him

Prayer of praise and Thanksgiving

Dear God, we thank you for your love for us and all that you have given us.; for the beauty we see around us and the people with whom we share our lives. So often we take these things for granted and it is good to stop and take time to appreciate the good things that bring us joy.

We thank you that although we believe that we are made in your image that we are also uniquely individual. We remember and give thanks for all those people who have helped to shape our lives, parents, family, teachers, friends; those that have influenced our thinking and our sense of justice including journalists and lecturers, church folk and colleagues. We thank you for those people that speak out against injustice and others that share painful experiences that we might gain a better understanding.

We thank you that you are always with us, able to understand our hopes, our fears, our joys and sorrows and our dilemmas. AMEN

Introduction

Today is designated in the Methodist calendar as Racial Justice Sunday for which a substantial amount of material was available which I have used for preparing this service.

I don't remember hearing of Racial Justice Sunday before, yet it has been marked since 1995, in part as a response to the Stephen Lawrence killing in 1993. Stephen was returning home with a friend when he was attacked and killed by a group of white youths. Subsequent enquiries and reports concluded that the murder of Stephen Lawrence's was one of many racist killings of Black and Asian young people at that time. What characterised all the cases investigated was that no one had been convicted of these killings.

The Methodist church took a particular interest because the Lawrence family attended Trinity Methodist Church in Plumstead, Southeast London. Prior to this the Methodist Church had engaged more in addressing racism within the Church, but the Lawrence case plainly demonstrated that racism was not a benign force that could be tolerated, but something that 'killed'.

So what is our own personal experience of racial justice - or injustice?

One of the contributions describes a life journey that probably mimics many of our own experiences -

As a child growing up in Scotland, I didn't see many people around that didn't look like me - maybe more often remotely on the TV than in person. Any differences that were noticed were awkward to articulate.

it took some time to recognise that there was a shift in what was appropriate in terms of humour or reference, and although it was a long way from anti-racism, there was to an extent, an emerging awareness.

At university studying music I began to understand that there was heritage and narratives that were different, diverse and important.. Over the years my approach to difference and diversity has remained open, welcoming and accepting of any invitation to engage in dialogue or to co-create. It felt cool, creative, and progressive.

Until the murder of George Floyd.

I changed my profile picture, on social media, made an effort to find anti-racist quotes and post things that felt like some kind of act of solidarity. After that initial response, and some conversations with friends, the silence crept in. Not because I thought it wasn't important enough, it's just, life kind of got in the way. Racism didn't acutely affect me as I continued to move through life without difficulty because of my background, heritage, and skin colour.

His experience very much mimics my own - when I was 14 the school that I attended had its first coloured family and we were told by the headmaster in assembly that they were no different from us and were to be treated the same as everyone else. When I was in my early 20s my father was travelling on the London tube and confessed later that he had been frightened by a group of dark-skinned youths not because they did anything untoward, but because he was not used to that sight, and they were different.

As a human race we are tribal in nature. It is based on recognition and trust of those who surround us and suspicion and fear of those who are different.

Most of us like to think that now in the 2020s and being all grown up we are not biased against other people for no reason, Bias is now recognised within the church as a norm. If you serve on a committee to appoint a new Minister you are asked to go on a course called 'Unconscious bias' which recognises that we all have biases and if we are able to recognise those biases then we are more likely to make less prejudiced judgements.

But is silence to injustice in society an acceptable response? Our writer decided that it was necessary to be intentionally and actively anti-racist, rather than passively not racist. He felt he had responsibilities as someone who is part of systems and cultures, to influence and strive for justice and equity.

The bible speaks very little of racial injustice for reasons that we will see later. It talks more of radical equality between people, communities, and nations, irrespective of whether human beings are ethnically or culturally the same or are different – and by radical I mean acknowledging that there is so little difference that it is not a cause for mention.

This is particularly evident in the telling of the events at Pentecost where racial justice appreciates our cultural, ethnic and language differences, Life in the Spirit is living as Christians and being one in Christ in fellowship with each other.

I have used a mix of the Message and Passion translations of the bible to retell the story

Reading Acts 2:1-12

The Holy Spirit Comes at Pentecost

When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy

Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

Now, at that time there were Jewish worshipers who had emigrated from many different lands to live in Jerusalem. When the people of the city heard the roaring sound, crowds came running to where it was coming from, stunned over what was happening, because each one could hear the disciples speaking in his or her own language. Bewildered, they said to one another, "Aren't these all Galileans? So how is it that we hear them speaking in our own languages? We are north eastern Iranians, north western Iranians, Elamites, and those from Mesopotamia, Judea, east central Turkey, the coastal areas of the Black Sea, Asia, north central Turkey, southern Turkey, Egypt, Libyans who are neighbours of Cyrene, visitors from all over the Roman Empire, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs. Yet we hear them speaking of God's mighty wonders in our own dialects!"

They all stood there, dumbfounded, and astonished, saying to one another, "What is this phenomenon?"

Hymn O Lord all the World belongs to you

Prayer of confession and forgiveness

God and Father of all, in your love you made all the nations of the world to be a family, and your Son taught us to love one another.
We thank you for the astonishing variety of races and cultures in this world.
Enrich our lives by ever-widening circles of friendship and show us your presence in those who differ most from us.

Yet our world is riven apart with prejudice, arrogance, and pride.
Help the different races to love and understand one another better.
Increase among us sympathy, tolerance, and goodwill,
that we may learn to appreciate the gifts that other people bring to us,
and to see in all people our brothers and sisters for whom Christ died.
Save us from jealousy, hatred, and fear, and help us to live together
as members of one family at home in the world,
sons and daughters of one Father who live in the liberty of the children of God;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Our next reading is an example of how Jesus treated people who were recognisably different from himself

Reading - John 4:1-27 (Samaritan woman at the well)

Hymn I'm black, I'm white

Talk

It seems that to build an understanding of racial injustice is a journey that we should undertake, The first stage is to understand what is meant by racism, and then determine if we find it an acceptable part of modern society and if not then what we are willing to do about it.

'Race' as a concept has its roots in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and western colonialism, which drove the idea of an innate White superiority, and an inherent inferiority of Black and Brown people. This gave justification to the enslavement of millions of African people.

Race is therefore a social construct or as Methodism defined it in 1987 'Allowing prejudice to determine the way power is used to the personal, social or institutional detriment of ethnic minority individuals or communities.'

'Racial justice is a subject many would not want to talk about in Britain because they do not believe that there is racial injustice in the British society. This denial has continued for years, thus subjecting many from the Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic groups to perpetual 'second-rate human' treatment. From schools to workplaces, in the criminal justice system, within the police services, in academia and in sports, discrimination against Black and minority people is a common occurrence.

In the 11 years from 2006 the proportion of BAME youth in prison rose from 25% to 41% and between April 2018 and March 2019 there were four 'stop and search' for every 1,000 White individuals against 38 for every 1,000 Black individuals.

The education statistics indicate that in 2018, there were 14,000 White male professors against only 90 Black male professors in the UK universities and by 2020 no real change had taken place.

In the aftermath of the George Floyd US killing and the resulting BLM protests, many Christian denominations in Britain issued statements condemning the killing but initially failed to make connections between the situations in the USA and the UK. It is interesting that these events took place as Churches together in Britain and Ireland marked the 25th anniversary of Racial Justice Sunday.

It seems obvious to me having read all this material that it is a subject that we should as Christians be prepared to have an opinion ofn and to engage in discussions as they arise. So often as Phill Melstrom said 'life just gets in the way'. And maybe that is one of the best reasons for raising this as a subject at a

Sunday church service – it is a time when we can re-ignite our awareness and dust off and maybe update our thinking.

There are two major things of current interest that I believe we should have an opinion on - one is the principle of 'bending the knee' that many sports people have adopted, the other is the place in our urban landscape of public statues to people who have been actively involved in promoting racism. Should they be removed to a museum, have an explanatory plaque added, be pulled down or just left alone? This issue came to a head after years of discussion in the pulling down of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol and has recently resurfaced with the acquittal of those accused of destroying public property.

In June 2020 The Guardian reported that demonstrators attached a rope to the Grade II-listed statue of Edward Colston before pulling it to the ground as crowds cheered. They then jumped on it and rolled it down the street before pushing it into Bristol Harbour.

An historian compared the action to the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The home secretary urged the police to respond. She said "I think that is utterly disgraceful. The police, carrying out an investigation into criminal damage said they understood that Colston was "a historical figure that had caused the black community quite a lot of angst adding that whilst they were disappointed that people would damage the statue, they understood why it's happened.

So if as church going Christians we feel that we and the church should have an opinion where do we start?

There is an old adage which says that "confession is good for the soul", so prior to taking the first step, the Church must acknowledge that racism exists within its own structures and seek to adopt a zero-tolerance attitude in the same way it has done toward child protection and safeguarding

In the US the Church was at the heart of the civil rights movement for racial justice in the 1950s and 60s. Virtually every Black "rights" leader in US history, was inextricably linked to the Church and the struggle for Black equality. The question we need to ask ourselves in this country is how can the Church play a prophetic, leadership role to those in society when it fails to acknowledge the racism that is right under its nose?

Churches should become safe spaces where racism is discussed and then addressed in ways that bring about change. Among other issues, the work to address racial justice will enable churches and Christians to take the right steps towards the much-vaunted desire for racial reconciliation.

It can be argued that we should love justice because God does! Racism and racial discrimination are justice issues because they deny basic justice and human dignity to women and men who are made in the image of God.

If the Church is going to be relevant today and be able to speak into issues of racial inequalities, we must seek to engage intelligently with Black Lives Matter because it raises the question around the issues of race and identity for many, particularly young people

Another contributor to the material says 'One of the key reflections that I have is that there is a real requirement as a disciple, to be willing to enter other peoples' cultures, as much as you perhaps expect them to enter your own!

There is an opportunity for churches to focus on the three 'R's

- 'Remembering' the importance of racial justice
- 'Reflecting' on human diversity and thanking God for it
- 'Responding' by working to end injustice, racism and ignorance through prayer and action.

In this we ask God to help us. Let us pray:

When we do not listen to the cries **Give us ears to hear**

When we do not recognise racism and injustice **Give us eyes to see**

When we do not speak truth to power **Give us voices to declare what is right**

Amen

Prayers for others - Helen

Hymn Let us build a house where love may dwell

Collection prayer

God of life, saviour of the poor, receive with these offerings of money and service gratitude for your goodness, penitence for our pride and dedication to your service in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Blessing

May the love of Christ be active in your heart, be heard in your words, be seen in your actions and inform your choices today and all days. Amen.

The Grace