

## **God does not discriminate**

Welcome and opening sentences:

Micah 6: 8                    And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

We come to worship, each one unique, each with our own hopes and fears, strengths and weaknesses. What we have in common is that we have heard God's call to come to worship together this morning, to acknowledge God as our Lord and to praise him.

StF 28                    Jesus calls us here to meet him (v 1 – 3)

Introduction to the theme

The church marks Racial Justice Sunday each year and the theme for 2022 was "What's it got to do with me?" You may feel that it's not an issue which impinges on your daily life much – although Bedfordshire is a very diverse county.

Racial Justice Sunday was first marked by the Methodist Church following the Stephen Lawrence murder and has since linked with many other initiatives in other denominations, so it is now marked very widely in this country. Some of the material in this service comes from Churches Together in Britain & Ireland, prepared for Racial Justice Sunday 2022.

But this issue also challenges us about other areas of injustice and inequality and our Christian faith directs us to reflect on our attitudes in the light of God's love for ALL.

I hope that in this time of worship, we will be able to reflect on what justice means for us personally. We are invited to think of the 3 R's –

Remember the importance of justice

Reflect on human diversity & thank God for it

Respond – work for an end to injustice, racism and ignorance.

Opening prayers

### Adoration

God of all, You alone are worthy of praise, from every mouth in every nation and time. You created the world in Your infinite grace, and by Your everlasting love redeemed it. Hold us to the shared task of loving one another as You have loved us.                    Amen

### A prayer by Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr

Ever present God, you called us to be in relationship with one another and promised to dwell wherever two or three are gathered. In our community, we are many different

people; we come from many different places, have many different cultures. Open our hearts that we may be bold in finding the riches of inclusion and the treasures of diversity among us. We pray in faith. Amen.

The Bible doesn't actually have anything to say directly about racism as we think of it, although there is plenty about nationality and tribe, about different cultures and religions and about inequality. The Bible certainly has plenty to say about how we should treat each other as human beings, all created equal and all created in the likeness of God.

To help our thoughts this morning, we are going to hear just one story from the Acts of the Apostles, which we will hear in sections. The scene is set in Caesarea quite early in the growth of the Christian church

Reading        Acts 10 1 – 8

Comments

The Romans were in control, feared, powerful. Caesarea was a key port, on several trade routes, so Cornelius must have been a trusted officer. But he was not the usual stereotype of a Roman officer.

He was devout – he had rejected the Roman gods and was searching for God, he respected Jewish traditions.

He was also a generous man, doing good and using his position to help the poor.

When he had a vision, he acted upon it immediately. Now we hear of a second vision

Reading        Acts 10 9 – 23

Comments

Peter – Simon Peter, the fisherman, the denier of Jesus – is now a key figure in the growth of the church.

He was in Joppa, some 30 miles from Caesarea, where he had healed 2 people. Notice that he was staying with a tanner – in itself significant, for tanners were regarded as unclean because they dealt with animal skins. Peter was staying with someone who would have been on the margins.

The Jewish food laws were what distinguished them from others in society – they would not even eat with non-Jews. At this point, Peter didn't know about Cornelius, so this vision would have been a real mystery to Peter. It would have challenged his fundamental assumptions about the special nature of the Jews, about the beliefs he'd been brought up with and about God's kingdom. This was earth-shattering stuff.

So here we have 2 contrasting people, with seemingly little in common except an openness to God. We will hear shortly what happened next – spoiler alert, Peter went to Cornelius’s house. It was an unlikely meeting.

We pause to sing a hymn which reminds us that we are all called to travel with each other, sometimes in unlikely combinations, to serve and be served.

StF 611          Brother, sister, let me serve you

So let’s hear what happened when Peter went to meet Cornelius

Reading          Acts 10 24 – 35

Talk

So the moral of the story is that all are equal in God’s eyes, all are welcome, there should be no barriers.

That does NOT mean that God simply accepts everyone and leaves it at that – for an encounter with God should always result in a change of heart. But it DOES mean that God invites EVERYONE to respond to his love and in doing so, to find forgiveness, renewal and a fresh purpose in life. This is good news for each one of us – and for all the people we come into contact with.

Our story today has a happy ending – let me read you the last few verses of this account.

<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.”

So how does this relate to us today? Note Peter’s words as the penny dropped for him – God does not show favouritism. That was a huge jolt for Peter and the Jews with him – and probably for Cornelius and his friends. Peter had broken the Jewish law by entering Cornelius’ house and he realised that God does not show favouritism.

Maybe for you it’s not as big a surprise as it was for Peter – you know it, at least in theory - but it challenges us just the same.

I suggest that we ALL have prejudices – because of our upbringing, the society, culture and history we have lived through, the influence of others. What are your prejudices? Skin

colour, language, sexuality, religion, life style – I understand that some people are biased against beards! We all make judgements, often based on very superficial knowledge of others. The first step to overcoming them is to be honest with ourselves before God, to acknowledge that we DON'T always see everyone as equal.

You may say, but surely things are MUCH better now – you may even think they have swung too far the other way, that there is too much focus on inclusion. Or you may say that in my own life, I don't mix with the people who challenge my prejudices. Maybe that's part of the problem – ignorance. We all know how easy it is to have a perception of a group of people – refugees, the homeless – but when we get to know an individual, our perceptions change. And even if we are not affected directly, if there is injustice in our society, Christians should be calling it out.

Racism and other prejudices are so often covert, not overt, but they still exist. Here are a few examples:

Oximeters, designed for white skin, over-estimated oxygen levels in those with dark skin, so there were more deaths from Covid amongst those with darker skin.

There is racial abuse in football and abuse of others via social media.

Black women suffer far higher rates of miscarriage and maternal death than white women – but so far there has been little research and we don't know why.

Blind recruitment (anonymous applications) shows us that there is prejudice based on perceived birth place (a foreign –sounding name does not necessarily mean a foreigner!)

In some parts of the Christian church, women are still marginalised and not allowed to be in leadership roles.

We all know about the church's struggles with same sex relations.

What else comes to your mind?

God does not discriminate, and our faith demands that we don't either. That's hard, but with God's help, we can overcome our biases.

Remember the 3 R's –

Remember the importance of justice

Reflect on human diversity & thank God for it

Respond – work for an end to injustice, racism and ignorance. How can we do that? By listening, by having open minds, by reaching out to those who are different from us, by lobbying and supporting petitions and by praying for a change in our own attitudes, in the attitudes of society and for those who are treated unfairly.

May God help us as we seek to work against injustice and to embrace difference.

#### Prayer of confession

Merciful God, You made us in Your image, With minds to know You, With hearts to love You, With wills to serve You. But our knowledge is imperfect, Our love inconstant and immature, And our obedience incomplete and self-serving. Help us day by day to grow in Your likeness, Which is so widely displayed in the diversity of creation. Help us to understand our own prejudices and narrow mindedness. Help us to love our neighbour as we ourselves long to be loved. Help us to serve others with humility and gratitude. Do not hold our sin against us, but help us to repent of outdated and inappropriate world views. Help us to mature in our thinking, loving and serving. Amen

Our next hymn reminds us that Jesus is to be found in the varied needs of our community – and we need to walk alongside him, to share his care for every person and to respond to his call.

StF 251          Jesus Christ is waiting

#### Prayers of intercession

God our Maker, in whose image and likeness each of us has been created, with a human dignity worthy of respect. Listen to the cry that rises from every corner of this fragile earth, from our human family.

To world leaders and decision makers, grant the wisdom to reach beyond boundary and border. May our common humanity drive policy and foster peaceful dialogue and constructive collaboration.

To those who misuse their power or take power from others, through violent action or hateful speech. Grant mercy and grow in them a humble heart of compassion, peaceful dialogue and respect for others.

To the innocent ones robbed of dignity, possession, or shelter, for those who are the victims of injustice or oppression, we pray that they may be assured of their infinite value in your eyes.

To those who fight against injustice, grant courage and strength, that they may speak truth to power.

For ourselves, may we be honest enough to admit our own prejudices , generous enough to truly see each person as equal and concerned enough to use our voice to confront injustice and inequality.

Prayers for local concerns

Lord's Prayer

Our closing hymn creates a wonderful picture of how the church could and should be, a place where everyone can be heard and loved.

StF 409      Let us build a house

Prayer of dedication and blessing

Generous God, you have given us so much and with grateful hearts we offer you now our time and gifts, our money and our love. Please bless what we offer to you, inadequate as it is, for when we work with you, we can do so much more to grow your kingdom in this place. So bless, us Lord, as we go forward into the week to come – we place it into your hands and pray that we will know your presence as we seek to serve you and to trust in you.

We need God's grace to follow him – so we ask for that gift for each other now. We share the Grace.