

SERMON FOR TRINITY I | 14.06.2020

Exodus 19: 2a-8; Romans 5: 1-8; St Matthew 9: 35-10: 1, 10: 5-8



In preparing for this sermon, I have to say how helpful it was to talk to Matt Jean Baptiste from the St James' congregation. Matt and Nicole were married here in September 2016 and we were delighted that they made their first Holy Communion together in November 2018, bringing Eve for baptism a year later. Matt was one of a handful of black boys at St Ignatius School in Enfield and is now a Fund Accountant. So, I asked on the phone, what had been his reaction to the events in Minneapolis?

What intrigued me throughout the conversation was the way Matt had navigated his way through the subtlety that is racism in this country today. One example: like many people of his generation, 'Linked-in' is a vital website for making contacts and Matt duly joined up, filled in his background and qualifications, posted a photograph - and waited for something to happen. Nothing did and he mentioned this to a colleague. 'Try taking your photograph down' they said. He did. The offers came flooding in.

His telling of this story showed only too clearly the way he has had to deal with racism in everyday life, albeit in a low key way, At school he was a good sportsman so he never suffered the indignity of being left out of teams but, he says, he still has a slight anxiety if the police pull over his (very nice) car at a road check. And he has learned to brush off the staring that happens when he and Nicole walk down the street. Nicole is white. For most people, he says, there is just a subconscious 'double-think' when they see his family enjoying time out. It doesn't mean much but...

So are things getting better, I asked? For himself, moderately comfortably well off, Matt thought there wasn't much of a problem; but he pointed to the way that economic necessity had driven many of the urban poor people of colour out of boroughs like Islington and into the vast estates to the east and south of London where housing is so much cheaper. He worried that this concentration into ghettos was storing up trouble as poorer black people, alongside their poorer white neighbours, become increasingly frustrated by their lack of opportunities. 'By and large', he said, 'poverty is race-blind'.

But there was, he thought, another blindness. Black history. Like most of his generation school history had been a diet of Henry VIII and the wars of the 20th century! Where were the studies on the slave trade or the willingness of so many Empire troops of colour to fight alongside the Tommies in the trenches? He thought that the relatively recent rediscovery of black history has been a good thing but was in danger of creating yet another ghetto: 'black history month' a token of concern which could then be otherwise ignored. Black history - slavery, Windrush and all - deserved to be threaded through the whole curriculum not just relegated to the margins.

As I am sure you noticed, today's readings could appear to smack of another kind of racism. Having crossed the Red Sea after escaping from slavery in Egypt, and having 'smited' every other race in their conquest of the Promised Land, this extract from Exodus seems to perpetuate the notion that the Jews are 'God's favourites', in some way superior to all other nations. Jesus' instructions to the apostles to avoid the Samaritan towns and to tell the Good News only to the lost sheep of Israel seems equally unfair.

But is there another way of looking at these stories - in answer to the question 'how do we celebrate the particular while remaining fair to everyone?' Because a video clip that caught my attention this week was also from Minneapolis. An African American woman was sitting in front of a microphone, crying, just a few days after the murder of George Floyd. And she was crying for her husband who had also been murdered.

But unlike George Floyd he wore a policeman's uniform. He had been killed on the street by a gang of youths, fired up by the demonstrations, just doing what he could to calm the rioters down. And she was hurting every bit as much as the Floyd family, but with far less attention.

We have also had a crash course in history in this country through a very quick review of our public statues. While we probably knew about Cecil Rhodes, I had no idea that Prime Minister William Gladstone's father had been a slave owner or that Thomas Guy of Guys Hospital fame and Robert Geffrye whose legacy is the Geffrye Museum in Kingsland Road or Francis Drake, Captain Cook or Admiral Nelson all had murky backgrounds in this regard. And now we hear that the statue of the founder of the Scouts, Lord Baden Powell is under attack on Poole Harbour.

And we wonder whether our outrage at the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis is in danger of becoming nothing more than a crude tool of protest for the racial injustices which we all agree have been inflicted on people of colour for at least three hundred years? But will anger and/or the destruction of some statues go any way to developing the conversations that Matt believes are vital if our society is to be truly integrated? How can we celebrate cultural and ethnic difference properly?

But let's quickly go back to that story in Exodus because I suspect we were all in danger of reading it the wrong way. What are the actual words that God says to Moses? *Out of all the peoples on the earth you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation...*

If we read that quickly, it can sound like the Jews are being set apart and given some kind of privilege. But it isn't actually what God meant at all! To be *priests and be to be holy* was to have a vocation, a calling, to serve everyone else before themselves. A priest (in any context) is to be the servant figure, just as Jesus the High Priest became the greatest servant of all by giving up his life on the Cross. No priest should be on a pedestal; they should be too busy supporting everyone else.

And that goes for police too. And everyone in public service. Our job is to make it possible for other people to flourish and to be safe.

So that 'priestly ministry' described in Exodus 19 requires that we develop the skills to see that, whatever someone's colour, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, they are entitled to 'be themselves' - fully human and fully free. We have, as we have said often before, to learn to wear each other's moccasins.

What was so remarkable about the scenes in Bristol when the statue of Edward Colston was being unceremoniously dumped into the harbour was the fact that most of the people taking part were white, not black. Colston's slave trading activities weren't at the expense of their forebears and yet they had reached the point where they felt the pain that the statue gave to the 12% of Bristolians who identify as black.

That is what it means to be a priestly people. That is what Israel was being called to and, indeed that is what we are being called to as well: to have that instinctive empathy for how others are feeling - whatever their colour and whether they are civilians or police.

May George Floyd's death help all of us to turn from being mere observers, demonstrators and armchair critics, into a priestly people. As Anglicans, 'the Church of England', it should be part of our natural DNA to serve other people whatever their nation or language or faith - or race.

But for that to happen, there have to be some radical changes in society too. The statistics about the police on that wall in Bristol simply have to be a thing of the past. Let us commit ourselves to making sure that 'Black lives matter'. Everyone has the right to be able to breathe.