**SERMON FOR TRINITY 7 | 18.07.21**

**Psalm 23; Ephesians 2: 11-end; St Mark 6: 30-34, 53-end**

**I watched them: four late teenage to early 20s: hoodies up, masks on, circling around Union Square, doing wheelies on their bikes. Black hoodies, black masks – and black faces underneath. Who were they – and what were the up to? Did they fit the stereotypes that have been circulating for some months on the NextArlington community website about the phone snatchers who have been having a field day around here recently?**

**But what difference would it have made if they were wearing different colours and had white faces; what then?**

**It didn’t take the failure of Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Sako to score penalties in last week’s Euros final to bring out the pretty unedifying racist sentiments to be found in print, in social media and in pub conversations. And every single one of those attitudes each of us would reject – in the same way as we reject anti-Chinese racism which is, statistically, higher in the UK at the moment as the result of the Covid pandemic and the attention being paid to the labs in Wuhan as people look for someone to blame for the havoc that Coronavius has wrought on us internationally.**

**But my opening story points to something much more worrying: not the overt, ignorant prejudice that marked ex-President Trump’s remarks after the death of George Floyd and so many other people of colour, but the much more subtle, instinctive anxiety that we as a community so regularly display when we see young black boys gathered in any numbers.**

**Today our readings encourage us to look at the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd, the one who knows and loves all his sheep. Daniel Niles, the Sri Lankan theologian *(who incidentally wrote the hymn we often use at baptisms: Father in heaven, give to your children, mercy and blessing, faith without end…)* tells the story of how he once got into conversation with a young Indian shepherd boy who was controlling a simply enormous flock of sheep. In the conversation Daniel asked the boy how many sheep he had*? I don’t know,* the boy replied, *I can’t count.* So Daniel asked him, *the how do you know if some of the sheep haven’t wandered off when you get to the place where you are going to camp at night?***

**Back came the reply, *I don’t know how many sheep wander off, but I know each one of them. I can’t count but each sheep has a name and I know their names. I would know if one of them was missing.***

**And that was very much in keeping with the way eastern shepherds have raised sheep for millennia, not for their meat but for their wool. As a result the sheep would be with the shepherd for years and would be known by names like ‘brown leg’ or ‘black ear’. The shepherd would know each sheep – and the sheep would know the shepherd’s voice. Both the sheep and the shepherd were unique.**

**And that is where the debate on racism needs to take us: to that often hidden assumption that those with skin colours other than white are not quite as good at doing their job - or bring with them hidden issues that no one dares to articulate; it is that ‘O so polite English’ tendency which still expects those from minority groupings to be twice as good as their white colleagues if they are to be fully recognised, promoted - or voted for. It is the reason why ‘bias training’ has become so necessary and why the Church of England, meeting in General Synod this week has been debating this topic at length. And it is why the London Diocesan Synod on Thursday made clear that the next bishop of Willesden, to be appointed later in the year, will not just be able to head up work on this particular issue in the Diocese, but will actually be selected from the UKME community. That there will be an ethnic minority bishop in the Diocese of London is a matter of justice, even of common sense. The fact that they will be the very first, ever, shows just how far we have needed to come.**

**Because this not just a matter of being PC, politically correct. It goes back to the Indian shepherd; it is about knowing each and every member of the family – and actually knowing about the problems of living in today’s Britain ‘from the inside’. An ordinary member of a church congregation wrote this in an article I read this week: *I think the main problem about racial justice today is that majority of people just don’t get it. I believe that to really understand someone’s suffering you have to experience something of their pain. And I am not sure that many white people ever truly ‘get’ racism and understand what it feels like to be discriminated against simply because it is not part of their daily reality of their lives. They don’t experience, as we do, the horrendous racial abuse, bullying, violence, harassment, racial profiling and much, much more - all because of the colour of our skin. When we try to discuss these subjects, our perspectives are repeatedly ignored or, worse, even gaslighted. We are told it’s not a major issue and we should just ‘get over it’. We’re told not to play the race card…***

**St Paul, writing to the Ephesians, shares this beautiful picture of the way that Jesus, who really did know what suffering with other people felt like, has that incredible ability – as he says – to break down the dividing wall, the hostility between different groups. As he writes, *Christ has created one new humanity in place of the two. Through the cross he has abolished the fear and hostility that once divided us.***

**One of the wonderful signs of grace that we are experiencing at St James’ just at the moment is an influx of new people from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds. On Friday night, in our garden, a few of us were able to get together to wish Sergio and Cecy well in their new flat in the Vicarage basement and to look forward to their wedding in Mexico on August 2nd. In that tiny group two Mexicans, a Brazilian, two with Ghanaian backgrounds; and on the apologies list three French people, an American – and of course several white Brits too.**

**Whatever else our churches are about, there can be no better calling than for us to be living out that passage from Ephesians where Christ’s gift becomes a reality: where *we are no longer strangers and aliens to one another but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.***

**Thankfully this is not new here. Nothing gave me greater pleasure than to see the celebration of our Montserratian community on St Patrick’s Day in the early days of my time here, and very shortly afterwards to see the election of Maria Flavius as a Churchwarden – one of our very best. It is with a real hope in my heart that one of our younger mums of colour will become involved in the work of the Cloudesley Charity which has been such a good friend to St James’ over the years.**

**In such ways we show our overwhelming commitment to do all we can to unseat that hidden, secret, not-to-be-admitted-to feeling that when we see a few kids on their bikes in Union Square we don’t jump to the same instant conclusion as the rest of society around us. Ewe have to pay more than lip service to St Paul’s words: *Christ came to proclaim peace to those who were far off and to those who were near so that we might be joined together and grow into a holy Temple in the Lord.***

**Sadly none of us is immune from prejudice of one sort or another. But unless we name the pernicious evil of racism for what it is, and really make the effort to get to know ‘people as people’ not as people with particular coloured skin, the chance of our being one family in Christ will remain nothing more than a pious dream.**

**We can do much better than that.**