

SERMON FOR RACIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY | 10.09.23

(2 Kings 5: 1-3, 9-14; Acts 10: 34-36, 39a, 43-467a; St Matthew 12: 15b-21)

So you were in Bradford, eh?

It is very difficult not to hear, in those words, a whole raft of assumptions. They weren't thinking about the Media Museum, The Bradford Bulls Rugby League team, the Alhambra Theatre, the Peace department at the University or the fabulous transformation of the building that now houses Waterstones. The word 'Bradford' spoke of a run-down city with a majority Asian population, denuded of investment, the kind of place you wouldn't wish to visit and certainly not think of moving to.

Like Leicester or Bolton for that matter.

Whether we like it or not, there is a deep discontent about race relations in our country – shown up in millions of ways, not least the findings of the Stephen Lawrence enquiry which spotlighted the attitudes of the police and in particular the use of Stop and Search.

Equally worrying I my view have flowed from attempts by our lawmakers to enshrine some protection for those with ethnic minority concerns so that when those of colour have been taken to task in the work place, others have tended to feel they won't get justice because the person under suspicion has been able to use the 'race card': *you can't touch me because I am black*. There has been further pressure as a result of the call to at least think about compensation for those affected by slavery and the increasing desire to remove statues and monuments honouring historical figures – who also were involved in slavery.

This could not be a more unhealthy situation and very many people are asking where will it all end? When can we live in a society where the colour of people's skin is no more interesting than what they wear or what job they do.

It won't surprise anyone that these forms of endemic racism flourish when others feel they are under threat or are, for whatever reason, particularly stressed. In our first reading Naaman, the army commander to the King of Aram who suffered from leprosy, is somewhat put out by being advised by one of his slaves to go and consult with the prophet Elisha. He hates his leprosy; he hates being told how pig-headed he is by people who are socially inferior to him and he hates having to ask for help from someone he doesn't know.

So when he is told to go and wash in a foreign river, his expletive filled response is not unsurprising: *if I have to demean myself by washing, publicly, in open waters, what's wrong with my own rivers? Aren't Abana and Pharpar - in my own home city of Damascus - far better than any river in Israel? I don't like being sick - and I certainly don't want to be forced to go and mix with people who are different from me, some muddy stream in Israel!*

It isn't rational and it isn't clever: he desperately wants to free himself from his leprosy - but his parochialism gets in the way of being able to see what the greater good might look like. He felt under threat, and this was the result.

But is racism so natural and deep-seated that there is no hope of things changing? Does even the sight of a Muslim Mayor in Bradford arouse suspicion because the older population of the city can see nothing but a loss of what they knew? What lies at the heart of the problem there: skin colour or social change?

Yesterday Bishop Joanne sent an email to tell us of the sad death of the Bishop of Woolwich in Southwark Diocese, Karwei Dorgu. We all knew him when he was the hugely popular, endlessly cheerful Vicar of St John's in Islington's Archway parish. 6'6" tall, a former Nigerian doctor with a love of hats, Karwei was always the life and soul of the party and he 'walked tall', greeting everyone he met with warmth and humour. It was a great delight to all of us when he was made bishop just three years ago.

Not long before, however, he had lost his eighteen year old son to something connected with the common African Sickle Cell condition - and it now looks as if he may have suffered from the same condition himself as the press release said he had been ill for some time.

Did anyone say, we don't want Karwei consecrated to serve in Southwark? Absolutely not! His infectious faith and his desire to see the good in everyone ... made us completely blind to the colour of his skin. Similarly when Clive Myrie, who lives in Arlington Square, reads our evening news came - and took part in the Islington Proms a couple of years back, hosting a discussion by local authors, no one thought twice about his colour.

Here at St James' it has always given me the greatest pleasure as the ethnic mix has increased, with Monstratians, people from all over the Caribbean, Easter and West Africa – as well as Italians, French, Ethiopians and Iranians have made their home here – for no other reason than we share a faith in a God who is equally colour blind.

But what we have to remind ourselves is that when we feel down or under threat, we will look for some kind of conspiracy reason to blame others ... for the turmoil that is really going on inside us. The Nazis did it to the Jews, the gay and Roma communities; we, sadly and still too instinctively, do it to people of colour – not just the Windrush generation or even the days of slavery – but also when the desperate cling to small rubber boats and try to cross the English Chanel. No room, we cry – not because we don't actually have plenty of space but because we are in an economic crisis where schools are falling apart because of cheap skate concrete and our hospitals are heaving under the strain of massive underfunding. How different our attitudes to race would be if we lived a society better at ease with itself and its economic policies.

And that is what God's justice is all about. There, in the Book of Acts, we read: *God shows no partiality; every nation who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.* As soon as St Peter is aware of what God is doing with the new Gentile converts – despite his feeling that he is more comfortable with his native Jewish customs - he is the first to see the power of the Holy Spirit falling on the new members, black, white, Greeks, Romans – everybody.

Why, because there was no threat: they were always going to be stronger when they could rely on each other, wherever they came from.

But under pressure, under threat, we look for scapegoats including in my time in Bradford, members of my congregation who reacted so negatively to 'the Pakis' as they were so rudely called. I remember a member of the Choir of whom I was very fond, telling me that they were moving to another house in a 'whiter area': *I don't want the Lahore Test match being played outside my front door, and I don't want their noise, their politics or the smell of their cooking either* he said.

Jesus promises to bring God's justice for all - and we still have a long way to go. But until we learn not to feel threatened by change, we are unlikely to make much progress.

And that doesn't just apply to race either. The changes here in Church, in our local Borough and in the ways our families are changing, are all there to test whether we really are striving for God's justice so that equal opportunities are available to all, or whether – as I was told when I felt more than slightly unsettled when I first moved to Islington – *if you don't like it here you can always go away.*

Lord, help us not to feel upset by difference. Help us to welcome diversity and to know your love for all your children, equally.