

## Sermon for Racial Justice Sunday – 13 February, 2022 – by Rev Phil Wootton

Acts 11: 19-21; 13: 1-3    Luke 6: 17-26

If you take a look around you this morning, would you say that we represent a fairly typical Anglican church? I don't mean the building, but the make-up of the people. We tend to be ... of a certain age, more female than male, and close to uniform in terms of ethnicity. There's nothing wrong with being any of these! But actually, the typical Anglican today, I believe, would, yes, be female, but young and Black, probably Nigerian – for there are more Anglicans worshipping in Nigeria than in the whole of Britain, Europe and North America combined.

Is this a problem? As we come to Racial Justice Sunday, people might, 'We don't have that problem here. Why does the church want to get itself involved?' I would suggest that very perception of 'not having a problem' is itself the problem, a failure to identify with the deafening calls for justice represented in the Black Lives Matter movement. This week, Lord Boateng (the first black British cabinet minister) put it very powerfully to the Church of England's General Synod: "All of us are diminished by racism. We have to talk about those things that cause hurt, not just to each other, but to God. Racism is a gaping wound in the body of Christ." If we don't recognise the issue, then we have a problem here.

That pair of words, 'racial' and 'justice' may not appear in the Bible, but God's passion for justice for every race of people is apparent throughout. The word 'justice' occurs 130 times in the Bible, but it's much more than that. Justice is love in action – what love looks like on the public stage. It includes what happens in the law courts. It includes how rulers treat their subjects. It includes fair use of weights and measures, remission of debts, provision for the marginalised, and protection for foreigners.

Today's Gospel passage can be seen as a manifesto for justice. When Jesus says, blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sad and the vilified, he is emphatically not saying it's OK people are suffering in this way, because one day they will go to heaven where it will all be lovely. Nor is he saying to the rich, the well-fed, the happy and the flattered that they will necessarily be going to hell. He's acknowledging this is the present reality in the kingdoms of this world – that it's the rich get the gravy and the poor that get the blame – and insisting this world is out of sync with the kingdom of God. God's reign, which he comes to inaugurate, challenges all that is familiar (and we often think, inevitable) about the way the world works, and demands that those who follow him work with him to turn the world the right way up once more. Justice matters to Jesus, so justice must matter to his church.

I was very struck (if not surprised) a few weeks ago, to look at a map of the City of Wolverhampton divided into sub-wards, which showed the areas where most of the Covid deaths have taken place. What was very clear was the correlation between death rates, poverty and ethnic mix. That is not, of course, to say, that everyone of a certain background is poor, or that everyone who's poor suffered from Covid, but overall there is a broad corridor of deprivation extending from the city centre outwards in roughly a south easterly direction. I don't suppose anyone is entirely surprised by this, but to me it did strike home quite starkly. The disproportionate impact of Covid-19 pandemic on those who were already struggling has exposed much of the injustice that has made its home in the cracks of society.

Not all injustice is about ethnicity, but you don't have to subscribe to 'critical race theory' or the doctrine of 'white privilege' to see the extent of the problem. From a Christian point of view, it's ultimately a failure to recognise the image of God in the face of every individual, whatever their background, and so to treat everyone with the dignity that God's image deserves.

Can we find an alternative vision? What has the church to offer? The earliest churches did things differently, but we have to dig beneath the Biblical surface to find out. Our first reading today was two tiny sections from the Book of Acts which tell of the church in Antioch, the place where believers in Jesus were first called Christians. These believers were of mixed Jewish and Gentile heritage. Furthermore, a study of the names given in Acts tells us more than we might imagine. Five individuals are named: Barnabas, we know, came from Cyprus; Saul (Paul) was from Tarsus in modern day Turkey. Manaen was brought up in Herod's household, so presumably from the privileged elite, although we know nothing about why he left – was he a refugee, perhaps? Then we have Simon 'called Niger,' which is Latin for the colour black, so there's every chance he was black African. Finally, there's Lucius from Cyrene in modern day Libya. You will remember Simon from Cyrene who carried Jesus' cross. Christian tradition suggests he was Black, it's quite reasonable to think Lucius would have been as well.

So, this dynamic a Syrian-based church not only contained, but was being led, by people from Asia Minor, from Africa and from the Mediterranean, as well as from Judea. They remained connected with their spiritual roots: when famine hit, it was these same Christians who organised food parcels for the church in Jerusalem where people were suffering. This church was diverse and connected, bearing the concerns of all, making known the kingdom of God in every way it can. One of the problems we have by not fully representing the wider community is that we fail to bear the concerns of the community, in the prayer and in the action that flows out from love for those we know around us.

What can we, as a church, do in the face of these challenges? Obviously, we must delight in every individual as a child of God, respecting them as bearing the image of God. Obviously, we must ensure a warm welcome to everyone, of every background, looking to learn from them and adapt to them, rather than trying to make them like us. Obviously, we must always be careful with our words, conscious words carry different meanings for different people. I trust this is what we do as a matter of course. None of that, in itself, will produce the dynamic, diverse, multi-ethnic church of Antioch. To go further, perhaps what we need is to engage with the issues of economic and social injustice faced by our sisters and brothers – issues that, for many of us, are not right in front of our eyes. Build connections and relationships, and make common cause.

As the church at Antioch gives a vision for the local church, our final inspiration is higher still. Let's be stirred by the vision of the glorious worship at the consummation of all things, when heaven and earth unite, with all tribes and languages, peoples and nations, united in giving their praise together to the God and Father of us all.