

A Vicar's Reflections

Today's been quite a day! Thousands are gathering in Parliament Square, in Manchester, and across the country in support of the Black Lives Matter campaign, following the police killing of George Floyd, an African-American. Since then, numerous videos of US Police brutality have emerged, including the assault on an elderly white man in Buffalo, NY State, who was left lying on the pavement, bleeding from his ears, having suffered major brain trauma. The full squad of 57 police officers have subsequently stood down in support of their two suspended colleagues responsible for the assault. Although the support for George Floyd is the fundamental reason for protesters to attend the rallies around the UK – against the advice of the Home Secretary and Health Secretary - the underlying challenge here is against institutional racism, evidenced by, amongst other things, the disproportionately high incidences of 'stop and search' tactics employed against Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) individuals by UK police forces, and concerns that deaths in custody suffered by those of these communities somehow seem to get glossed over. The vast majority of the protests have been peaceful, and the police have been restrained in their response, despite the present ban on associating in public in groups of more than six.

Meanwhile, Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, and former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has spoken out against President Donald Trump's posing with a bible outside St John's Episcopal Church, opposite the Whitehouse, having caused a peaceful demonstration to be dispersed with flash grenades, tear gas and rubber bullets, for a photo opp. Williams writes: *'Objectively, this was an act of idolatry – standing somewhere else than in the truth, using the text that witnesses to God's disruptive majesty as a prop in a personal drama. In a context where racial privilege itself has long been an idolatry, where long-unchallenged institutional violence has been a routine means for the self-defence of that privilege, the impact of the president clinging to the Scriptures as if to an amulet is bizarre even by the standards of recent years.'*

For those of us not from a BAME background, or belonging to BAME communities, it may be hard to understand the level of frustration, anger and fear felt by many in those communities. However, the *experience* of racism runs deep in those communities, and in the lives of many of our BAME friends and colleagues.

For some time, I have found myself resisting the call to notice *colour*. I firmly believe that God creates us all *equal* in his sight and his love, irrespective of colour, creed, etc. My response to those who have insisted that I should take note of the colour of their skin has often been one of nervousness. I don't want to appear racist. My sense is that if I do that, it may open up memories of childhood – in the sixties and seventies – where, sadly, there was less campaigning for minority rights than today, and I was growing up in a largely white neighbourhood, with just three boys of colour in my school, and one in my local scout troop. For me, it was only in my later twenties, in CMS (the Church Mission Society), that I was privileged to work alongside many wonderful colleagues from various African states and the Caribbean, bringing black African colleagues to work short-term in East Anglia, and also staying in people's homes in the DR Congo. Even *with* that experience, and good friendships more recently, I am sometimes worried that I may unwittingly say or think something which might be experienced as racist.

I am aware that travelling internationally and living alongside those of other racial communities is a privilege which not all have. I still find myself, though – out of curiosity – asking the 'Where do you come from?' question. I am genuinely interested, and long for opportunities to find out more about people's experience, whether here or in some distant country. However, I also understand that that is a question

which those of colour usually dread, as it is so often asked by way of categorising, and sometimes excluding, the other. I must try to remember to avoid the question, in case I cause distress.

The actor and writer, Obioma Uguola, offers some very powerful suggestions as to how we may challenge racism in ourselves, and when we see it being enacted in front of us. He encourages all of us, of whatever background, to support 'anti-racism'. Along with suggesting some important reading, like '*BRIT(ish) on Race, Identity and Belonging*', by Afua Hirsch, Uguola quotes the Writer, Ijeoma Oluo, saying that, '*The beauty of anti-racism is that you don't have to pretend to be free of racism to be anti-racist. Anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism wherever you find it, including in yourself. And it's the only way forward.*'

We are wonderfully blessed in our little church communities here to have members from all sorts of backgrounds, and of different races. We are so grateful that that is the case, and we long for significantly greater diversity in the years to come. If that is to happen, and our churches are to remain the 'warm, welcoming communities' which we hope they are, each of us must look inside our hearts and take seriously any behaviour which may - consciously or subconsciously - denigrate or under-value those of any background which is different from our own. Racism is an ugly and world-wide phenomenon. Jesus calls his people to care, especially, for those who are - for whatever reason - marginalised. Sometimes, our concern may be perceived as coming from a place other than empathy, or solidarity. It was encouraging to hear JOE say that we all make mistakes in this area at times; but that is not a reason to 'beat ourselves up' or to avoid the issue. It is best to listen to our brothers and sisters of colour, and then choose to stand alongside in solidarity. I am convinced that in this area, as in others, Jesus would have us take soundings from others, look deeply at ourselves, admit our failures, seek forgiveness, and then resolve to do better next time (with his help) - in support of those whose rights have been violated or whose lives have been lost. Structural evil is as pernicious as personal evil, and often more wide-ranging in its impact.

St Paul urges us to allow our lives to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12: 2). Then we 'will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will'. This is likely to be a 'renewing of the mind' kind of issue for many, both here, in the US, and around the world. Let us pray that when we, and others, take up the Bible to discern God's instructions to us in this matter, we do so by physically opening and reading it, rather than simply by holding it aloft, imagining what it might contain. We may be surprised. There may be less direct teaching in here on race than we had anticipated, but plenty on God's love for *all* those he has created; plenty on his twin passion for justice and mercy; plenty on his willingness to identify with those who suffer (most powerfully in his Son, who suffered death as the greatest act of empathy with the downtrodden and unheard) - but also plenty of his willingness to forgive, and to offer a fresh start. None of us is perfect. All of us make mistakes. Yet, the invitation, in choosing to follow Jesus, is actually to address those mistakes, and *not* to go on making them, again and again.

When I was studying for my teaching qualification, 30+ years ago, I was deeply struck by some video research which revealed that in mixed classes of girls and boys, girls tended to fare worse than in all-girl situations. On average, girls received no more than 35% of the teacher's attention, because if boys received, on average, less than 65% of the teacher's attention, they would act up. Subconsciously, teachers tend to give in to this pressure, so as to avoid clashes in the classroom; but the girls generally lost out. During my teaching career, I determined deliberately to give more of my teaching time to girls, knowing that, even then, I was likely to be achieving less than 50%. However, it was, if you like, a necessary form of positive discrimination, in order to approach parity of support and teaching time. Maybe *that* is the equivalent of what is being requested, when we hear demands for *positive discrimination*? Maybe *all* of us need to be praying, campaigning and speaking out more, if this world is really to become a *fairer* place?