

**One New People: Racial Prejudice and the Gospel; Ephesians 2:11 – 22**  
**Andy Banks, Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> June 2020, Trinity Baptist Church**

Good morning. I'm temporarily diverting from our resurrection series today, because I believe it's important, in the current climate and as a follow up to our statement on our website, to offer a gospel perspective on the Black Lives Matter movement. I record these sermons in advance so events may have moved by the time you hear this. But, actually, I don't want to talk about specifics in the news so much as what the Bible says about racism and the equality of all people, and how that should impact how we treat one another.

Having said that, I do want to start by clarifying three things about the statement on our website. Firstly, the article about George Floyd glosses over his criminal past in presenting his later Christian, peace-promoting years, so we have changed the tag to more accurately reflect the truth. Secondly, and far more importantly, I want to emphasise that our statement "Black lives matter" is firmly rooted in the gospel truth that *all* lives matter, *equally*. But Black and Ethnic Minority people continue to be disadvantaged by our societal systems, and more frequently treated by some individuals as though they are of lesser worth, and so we see a need to positively and specifically affirm their worth. Thirdly, in affirming the truth that Black lives matter, we do *not* affirm all that the Black Lives Matter Global Network, stands for. In particular, we cannot endorse their desire to "disrupt the ... nuclear family structure," their call for the withdrawal of funding for the police, or the violence towards people and property that has characterised some of their protests (nor indeed the failure to adhere to social distancing in some protests, given the current crisis).

As Martin Luther King Jr. said in his 1964 Nobel Lecture: "Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral ... In spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers."

We need to hear the truth of those words afresh today. But let's move on to what the *Bible* says about race equality, reading from Eph 2:11-22. If you don't know, the term "Gentiles" in this passage refers to anyone who was not a racial Jew, and male circumcision was the key distinguishing mark between these peoples.

**[read Ephesians 2:11-22]**

*11Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands) – 12remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

*14For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

*19Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

**[Pray]**

Paul provocatively calls out the air of racial superiority among his own people, the Jews (whilst equally challenging any such reciprocal attitudes among his Gentile hearers). I wonder if you heard the racial prejudice? It's in the name "Uncircumcised" (v.11), which was a derogatory way that some Jews referred to those who weren't God's chosen people. They were regarded as "unclean;" so much so that the Jewish leaders insisted that Jews must wash their hands and pots before they ate, lest inadvertent contact with Gentiles might contaminate *them* and make *them* "unclean" too. And *eating* with a Gentile or visiting their *home* was *completely* out of the question!

As Paul reminds the Gentiles, "at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (v.12). Now, there was a degree of spiritual *reality* to that statement whilst the Old Covenant remained in effect (so Gentiles could have no cause to consider themselves racially superior, either). But, arguably, their exclusion was just as much caused by Israel's jealous guarding of their privilege as God's chosen people – even though, God chose and blessed their ancestor, Abraham, and his offspring, *so that* they might *be* a blessing to the *other* nations (Gen 12:3).

Yet, regardless of what existed under the *Old* Covenant, Paul insists, "*now* in Christ Jesus you who *once* were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (v.13). Jesus' death and resurrection changed the situation radically. Christ "*destroyed* the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" between Jews and Gentiles (v.14) – the great racial divide of his day. And even more astounding was why (v.15): "His purpose was to create in himself *one* new humanity out of the two." Racial divisions are the exact opposite of God's purpose for his church; all Christians are *one* people in Christ; all are *equally* loved and *equally* reconciled to God; built together into *one* holy temple – *one* fitting place for God to dwell (v.22)!

That was *always* God's plan for his people and his world! As Paul also told the *Galatian* Christians (Gal 3:8): "Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: '*All* nations will be blessed through you.'" But the Jews largely ignored this aspect of their Scriptures, because it upset their sense of racial superiority. And likewise, too often through the centuries, the Church has been complicit in supporting unjust racial superiority, and coercive government oppression, rather than challenging injustice and seeking to be a *blessing* to *all* peoples.

For example, the Church supported Constantine's military campaigns, by which he sought to force conversion to Christianity. The Church endorsed the expansion of the European Empires and even the Slave Trade on a similar premise, and a devaluing of Black people. And the Church supported South African apartheid for years, on the basis of a few isolated verses, taken out of context.

The temptation is there in *every* generation for the Church to adapt its teachings to suit the prevailing societal agenda, including racial superiority. That is easier than standing with God on the side of the oppressed in their search for justice. And it is easier than joining Jesus in his mission to bring the gospel to *all* nations and *all* people groups – the gospel of *reconciliation* between God and humanity and between *all* races and people groups.

Arguably that was the greatest miracle when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost – the breaking down of the language barrier that separated people groups from one another: everyone heard "the wonders of God in [their] own tongues (or dialects)" (Acts 2:10)! It was the beginning of *all* nations being welcomed into the people of God *as equals*. Yet, Jesus' disciples still needed some persuading to make that a reality – witness Peter's vision by which God convinced him to go to Cornelius' house (Acts 10-11), or the racial segregation that Paul rebuked in Antioch (Gal 2), or the Holy Spirit inspired ruling in the Church not to force Gentile converts to be circumcised as some Jews demanded (Acts 15).

But, the tragedy is that it seems in every generation the lesson has to be learnt all over again! One of the seminal moments of the last century was the amazing outpouring of the Holy Spirit on a little church in Azusa Street, Los

Angeles, which began on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1906. Actually, the story starts about a year before that when Charles Parham, against accepted social conventions, permitted a Black man, William Seymour, to sit just outside his Bible classes as he spoke on the work of the Holy Spirit. God baptised Seymour in the Holy Spirit and called him to minister in a church in Azusa Street, whereupon the Holy Spirit fell in power, and modern Pentecostalism was born, famed particularly for the rediscovery of spiritual gifts, like the gift of tongues (speaking in other languages).

But the far greater miracle was that, whilst society enforced strict racial segregation, Black people and White people, men and women, united together in worship and in church leadership. God was doing an astounding work. And Seymour felt overwhelmed by the task. So, he asked Charles Parham to help him. Parham came, saw the interracial harmony ... and declared it an abomination before God. Then he called all the White people out of the church, took them elsewhere, and started his own Pentecostal church.

Racial prejudices run deep, even in the church! And we kid ourselves if we believe that we are immune from them! One small example that I have heard from multiple sources, some even within Trinity, goes something like this. A White person asks a Black person where they are from. The Black person replies that they live in Bexleyheath or Thamesmead or wherever. The White person replies, "No, where were you born?" "Oh, in Lewisham," the Black person replies – or something to that effect. "No, where were your *parents* born?" comes the reply. And it doesn't matter if the answer to that question is Brixton or Birmingham or Kingston or Accra or New Delhi. Or how many generations of their family have lived in the UK before them. The fact is that the message has been conveyed, "You cannot be British." And whether we believe it or not, it is the colour of their skin that prompted that line of questioning. I know that because my family were immigrants some generations ago – from Italy – yet no-one has ever pursued this line of questioning with me.

Now, I'm sure, in most cases, such conversations are innocently conducted – quite possibly with a genuine desire to take an interest in someone else's life. But this is where we need to listen to one another. Because the truth is that sort of inquiry hurts people who have been told by less well-meaning people all their lives that they do not belong in the UK. So, if we want to take an interest in people, say if they are new to the church, it's far better to keep the questions race-neutral: "Are you visiting Bexleyheath today, or do you live in the area?" "Are you new to the area or have you lived here a while?" These are legitimate questions, because they seek answers that might help us help people to feel welcome or to settle, rather than answers that satisfy *our* desire to put someone in a box with a label.

And, by the way, racial prejudices are far from exclusively White against Black. When I was training for ministry, we sat through a very uncomfortable two days on racial equality, in which our worldviews were exposed, and God highlighted to *every one* of us certain racial prejudices we still held. Before those seminars, I believed I had dealt with all my racial prejudices from my past. But God highlighted that I still held prejudices; not so much because of skin colour, but against certain other nations – against French and American people, for instance. Effectively, White on White prejudices. And the trainer himself was Indian by birth, and revealed his prejudices against Indians of lower castes – Asian on Asian prejudices. Racial prejudices can be White on Black, Black on White, Oriental on Black, Asian on White, White on Oriental, White on White, Black on Black, etc. And none of them have a place in God's Church. Because God's purpose in Christ was to make us *one* people, *one* holy temple.

And that is what we will be in eternity (Rev 7:9): "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from *every* nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." And, as Jesus showed John the beautiful new creation to come, he saw the River of Life, flowing through the city of God, and "On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the *healing* of the nations" (Rev 22:2).

This is the gospel we believe and the gospel we are called to live out. It is never comfortable to be told that we might hold racial prejudices, even subconsciously. But the important question is what we do with that knowledge. We can

resist it, and get annoyed that someone suggested it. Or we can acknowledge it, repent of it, and ask God to help us to change. Part of that change might be apologising if we have hurt someone by our attitudes. Part of that change is listening to other people's experiences, and seeking to understand. And part of that change is being willing to embrace and celebrate cultural expressions that differ from our own. I love the fact that Trinity welcomes people from all races. But to be a truly multicultural church where all feel *equally* valued and heard will take continual hard work of seeking to understand and celebrate one another.

And sometimes, like now, it will take us being willing to stand united with those who find themselves disadvantaged in society, to campaign with them – peacefully, lawfully, but persistently – for justice. A start might be for each of us to commit to speaking up when we hear things, or read things on social media, that belittle or question the worth of people from other nations and racial groups. When one part of the body hurts, every part hurts. But what can be achieved if the whole body works together in unity?