

## PRAYER

Picture: The face of Christ  
(In His Image by William Zdanak)

*Father, you have made all people in your likeness and love all whom you have made, do not allow ourselves to separate ourselves from you by building barriers of race or colour. As your Son, our Saviour, was born of a Hebrew mother, but rejoiced in the faith of a Syrian woman and of a Roman soldier, welcomed the Greeks who looked for him and allowed an African to carry his cross, so teach us to see all people of every race and nation as inheritors of the kingdom of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Reflect on this picture of the face of Christ for a few moments. If you look carefully you will see it is made up of many different faces from all over the world.

Paul writes: We are the Body of Christ, by one Spirit we were *all* (Jew and Gentile) baptized into one body, the body of Christ. 1 Cor.12.27.

Though we are many we are one body in Christ Jesus and individually members of one another. Rom.12.5. We are one in Christ in our rich diversity and we belong to one another. I sensed this when worshiping in Kenya, a deep belonging in Christ. I sensed this with my Indian friend Solomon Raj, an extraordinary Christian artist. I sensed this when spending an academic year overseas living and training with people from all over the world, when between us we could speak 60 languages. I sensed this in the multi-ethnic parishes in which I was privileged to serve. A oneness in Christ in our rich diversity.

Any Christian perspective on race -or racism – must be grounded in the revelation of God. For Christians our approach is not grounded in any political ideology. We do not enter this contested arena as simply one more voice in the heated battle of identity politics. Though having said that, we do approach this through the lens of our identity as children of God and as members together, across every race and nation and language, of the one body of Christ.

So to come to any authentically Christian theology of race and racism, we must begin with God's revelation. This has to be the bedrock of any approach we take on the matter of race and race equality. So I will unashamedly start with the Holy Scriptures. I will begin with two terms used in theology, *protology*, the

theology of first things and *eschatology*, the theology of last things. This will help to give us a framework for any Christian perspective on race.

So first, the Creation narratives in Genesis 1 and in John 1. In Genesis, God says 'Let us – note the 'us', there is diversity in the unity of God – make humanity in our image and likeness.' Gen. 1.26. Not *some* of humanity, no gradations or hierarchies of humanity, no caste system, but *all* of humanity, no exceptions. Now fast forward to St John's magisterial prologue, writing of Christ through whom all things and humanity were made, we read 'In him was life and the life was the light of all people.' John 1.4. Christ is described as 'the true light which enlightens every one.' John 1.9. 'All things, all people were created through Christ and for Christ'. Col.1.16. Paul tells us.

Now fast forward to the end, the *eschaton*, the last things and the fulfilment of all God's purposes, as described in Revelation, 'After this I looked and there was a great multitude that no-one could number, from every nation from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and the Lamb ...'7.9. all worshipping God. So we see that our God rejoices in diversity and there is no place for divisions or hierarchies based on ethnicity in the Kingdom of God.

And now, between the beginning and the end, between Genesis and Revelation, we note two major events in salvation history that confirm the all embracing love of God. First, the covenant God makes with Noah after the flood, is a covenant with the whole of creation and with all of humanity. The sign of that covenant is the rainbow in the sky, the rainbow covering the whole spectrum of colours.

(This of course is not to deny the covenant God made with Moses, but as the prophets such as Isaiah prophesy 'all nations shall come to your light' and Jesus himself make clear, the God of Israel is the God of all of humanity. Simeon declares Jesus as a light to lighten the gentiles (i.e. all peoples) and the glory of God's people, Israel.)

The second event is Pentecost, when, Luke tells us, Jews from every nation under heaven were gathered. The Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of unity, unites them, but each one of those gathered from all over the world heard the word of God in their own language. So the unity experienced at Pentecost embraced the distinctive identities and languages of all who were gathered.

So we see that difference is good and part of God's plan but that division based on difference is not good and not part of God's plan. In our fallenness, we as humanity so often turn difference into division. So the Church, or Christians animated by the Holy Spirit of God, should not reflect the divisions and hierarchies of the wider context in which we are situated. In the Kingdom of God, the hierarchies of this world are inverted. As the Magnificat proclaims, God brings down the mighty from their seats and lifts up the lowly. God fills the hungry with good things and the rich he sends empty away. Jesus teaches that those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The first communities of Christ-followers founded by Paul were shockingly inclusive. In no other community at the time would you have found Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free sharing life together as equal brothers and sisters in Christ. When Paul says 'there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' Gal.3.28. he is not saying you are all the same. He is saying that though you are different from each other and occupy different places in the hierarchies of the world around you, you are one in Christ, you are equal in Christ. So Paul exhorts Philemon to treat his slave who has come to faith in Christ to treat him no longer as a slave but as a brother in Christ. In terms of ethnicity, Paul honours these distinctive identities in Christ. So Jewish Christ followers do not have to abandon what is distinctive to Judaism and, on the other hand, Gentiles should not have to adopt practices distinctive to Judaism. We are all, Jew and Gentile, heirs of Abraham, 'the father of us all', Paul writes.

For those first disciples, who were Jewish, following a Jewish Rabbi, in a Jewish majority culture, their default perspective would have been as 'insiders'. Jesus challenged this majority, privileged, insider perspective again and again. This is important for us to recognize if we are serious about countering racism today.

There was I guess an element of 'entitlement' about those first Jewish and male disciples. Entitlement is what we as white and majority culture, don't realise we have. Jesus again and again challenged the insider, entitled, perspective of his Jewish disciples with the faith of outsiders who had so much to teach them. It was the 'outsider', the Roman centurion, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Samaritan leper, who could teach his Jewish disciples about faith. In the parable of 'The Good Samaritan' he communicates this very thing. We need to learn, we need to receive from the one who is 'other', who is different

from us. We discover Christ in the stranger. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves but we must also know, as the parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us, that it is 'the stranger' who is our neighbor. If we are part of a majority culture, we can become so habituated and enculturated into the values of the majority culture that we do not see and do not feel what it must be like to be an 'alien', an outsider, a stranger, a refugee in this culture. God warns the people of Israel about this and his warning is also a command. 'You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger – you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt.' Ex.23.9. 'When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord, your God'. Lev.19.33-34. As Lord Rabbi Sacks put it 'God cares about the stranger and so must we.'

I hope we have recognized God's purposes in this survey of the Scriptures. We will recognize also, however, that humanity, in our fallenness has betrayed God's good purposes. We recognize, as the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation reminds us that 'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' and we pray 'The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class, Father forgive.' We do not pray 'Father forgive *them*,' it is simply 'Father forgive' as we recognize our own collusion in building walls, the very walls which God in Christ comes to break down.

We recognise too how the Church - or some of the Church - has been involved in supporting repressive and unjust systems. Most Christians in 1930s Germany most Germans were Christian and (apart from the very small Confessing Church which included both Bonhoeffer and Niemoller) did not speak out against or challenge Hitler's genocidal Nazi regime. Hitler himself clothed Nazism in Christian clothing. Similarly, Apartheid South Africa was justified in its inception on Biblical and supported by many denominations, especially the Dutch Reformed Church. The key Apartheid text was Acts 17.26. 'From our one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the earth and he allotted the time of their existence and *the boundaries of the places where they would live.*'

The point I am making here is that as fallen human beings, we, who are made in the image of God, try to make God in our own image and even recruit God to justify our purposes which are not actually of God. St Paul knew this well and exhorts Christians in Rome – and us today – to 'let yourselves be transformed by the renewal of your minds' Rom.12.2. It is not about us trying to bend God's will into our will. It is about seeking and trusting God's will. In

this context the words of Abraham Lincoln are pertinent. 'What matters is not if God is on your side but if you are on God's side.'

Bringing us back to the here and now, what is the challenge for us as Christians? First of all, I think it is to recognize the reality of racism and not just the overt, outspoken, self-conscious racism of extremists. We have to recognize the existence of racism not only in our society but also in the Church. I wrote a piece for social media last year, following the death of George Floyd, in which I quoted a black conservative MP, Bim Afolami, who said. 'I am 34 years old and I don't think there's any black person of my age who has not experienced racism.' In the same week, Boris Johnson said 'I recognize that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people face discrimination in employment, education and the application of criminal law.' Bringing it closer to home, our local Stratford MP, Nadim Zahawi has spoken of experiencing overt racism from a Tory party activist and casual racism, such as being told to 'go back home' in Stratford. Our local Police and Crime Commissioner, Philip Secombe has made it plain that in his view racism and inequality continue to exist.

My ministry as parish priest was for many years in multi-ethnic parishes in Coventry and Birmingham with wonderfully diverse congregations. There I was told of how many black people who were invited to this country by the Government to fill jobs in the NHS and transport especially, were not welcomed in some Churches here. Such Christians gathered and set up their own black-led churches. As a result, we have the scandal of having white churches and black churches worshipping separately, a far cry from the will of God and the wonderfully mixed churches founded by St Paul.

Last year at General Synod ++Justin apologized for racism in the church and committed with the members of the General Synod to eradicate it. This is very much on our national, regional and local agenda. I can share some of what is happening on this front later.

Finally, just to say we, as Christians are called to be bridge builders, ambassadors of reconciliation, to break down barriers. We are also called to listen to hear the stories of those in our churches and their own experiences of racism. All of this should bring us to repentance and repentance is the place of deepest hope where God can change our hearts and strengthen our wills to build a more Christ Child like world reflecting the glorious diversity of the kingdom of God.

In the end this is about our solidarity with one another across every ethnicity and culture and language. I'll close with the famous words of Martin Niemoller, imprisoned in Nazi Germany for challenging the regime.

*First, they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew,*

*Then they came for the trades unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trades unionist.*

*Then they came for the socialists and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist.*

*Then they came for me – and there was no-one left to speak out for me.*

Possible questions to take into groups, asked by Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

*'Can we hear the voice of God in a language or culture not our own?'*

*'Can we see the presence of God in the face of a stranger?'*