

The Selwyn Lecture

“The Race for Justice in a time of Black Lives Matter”

Subtitle: Three words and four steps

I want to use this session to look at three words and four steps. The three words are “breathe”, “grieve” and “believe”, and the four steps involve “talking”, “repentance”, “education” and “training”. I would like to start with the words, the first of which is “breathe” or “breath”. One of the phrases that has stayed with me this year has been George Floyd’s plaintive, haunting words, ‘I can’t breathe’, as he lay dying under the knee of a police officer. Breathing, as we all know, is the very essence of life. If there is no breath in a body, then a person is a corpse.

I will never forget attending the theatre while visiting Jamaica to watch a tragedy. One of the central characters had accidentally shot her lover and as she knelt weeping over his corpse, a young boy in the audience shouted, ‘stop your bawling the man is not dead, I can see him breathing’! I won’t do the Jamaican accent, but let us just say that his untimely intervention totally ruined the moment and embarrassed his parents.

The Bible has much to say about breath and breathing. The Hebrew scholars in the audience will know that the term “Ruach”, which means breath of God, can also be translated as “wind” or “spirit”; while in the Greek, the term “Pneuma”, has a similar meaning. One of the first instances of this word being used occurs in the Creation Story in Genesis 2 and we read in verse 7, it says: ‘Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.’

When I consider this passage, a lot of artistic licence comes into play because there is so much creativity involved. I imagine the Lord God Almighty leaving the heavens to literally get his hands dirty on earth, as he uses dust or clay to form a human being in his own image. For me, the final act of this amazing, beautiful process involves him leaning over Adam and gently and tenderly breathing into his nostrils to give him life. It does not say how long this process took; could have been minutes, could have been hours or days – we don’t know. What we do know is that God is the very giver of life, and that all life has sanctity.

If we juxtapose God’s actions in the creation story with the killing of George Floyd, we see such a stark contrast. The officer responsible for this, was someone who had power; not like God of course, but power none the less. He had the power to detain and arrest. While I would like to believe that God gently leaned over Adam, this officer casually placed his knee on George Floyd’s neck, while his hands were in his pockets, as he callously expunged the man’s life in eight minutes, 46 seconds, according to some accounts. As human beings we have the power to save and sustain lives, but not to create life the way God can. It’s such a tragedy that we often use what little power we have for such negative purposes.

This naturally leads on to the second word which is “grieve”. Anyone who has lost a loved one, grieves for that loss, and we saw that with the killing of George Floyd – his extended family and friends were inconsolable regarding their loss and wanted answers. However, I would like to use the term grieve in the context of Genesis 6:6 in terms of God creating human beings. The Hebrew word used is “nacham” which is difficult to translate but it expresses grief, regret and repentance.

I have been involved in the work to address racial justice issues for more years than I would care to admit, and have carried out many of those roles within a church capacity and some in a non-church one. At one point, I was an education policy officer for the social policy think-tank, “Race on the Agenda”. So, I have taken an interest in these matters for many, many years.

With regard to George Floyd’s killing, as brutal as it was, I still struggle to understand why we, as a country, responded so dramatically to this tragedy. The truth of the matter is that Britain has had similar George Floyd moments in the past. If you know anything about race relations in this country, you will be aware that Black folks have died in police custody. I would argue that one of the major differences was that a video on a camera phone captured George Floyd’s death. Which leads to the obvious conclusion, do we only grieve or take an interest in justice issues when they are right under our noses, or in our faces? What happens when they are hidden in plain sight, such as the Windrush Scandal, which I will explore in a few moments.

While George Floyd’s death occurred in under ten minutes, the Windrush Scandal was a travesty that took years to unravel and was borne of something called the “Hostile Environment” - a government policy that aimed to make life very hard for anyone deemed not to have the right to reside in the UK. As we were to find out, it impacted people who had every right to live in Britain, resulting in discrimination, destitution, distrust and death.

The Windrush Generation, who were caught up in this scandal, were the folk who came to Britain after WW2 looking to help rebuild what they described as the Motherland. My parents were part of this generation – they travelled to this country on British passports with big smiles and even bigger dreams. The vast majority, like my parents, were Christians. What we do know is that some of these men and women were turned away from the historic churches by vicars who told them that their faces did not fit. A classic example is a man called Carmel Jones, who attended his local Anglican Church, St Paul’s Clapham, in southwest London, in 1955, as a 17-year-old boy recently arrived from Jamaica. At the end of the service the vicar thanked him for coming but asked him not to return. Carmel Jones took the vicar’s advice and chose to attend a Black Pentecostal congregation. He later went on to establish the award-winning ‘Pentecostal Credit Union’, receiving an MBE for his efforts. Interestingly enough, on 25 October of this year, some 65 years after that incident, St Paul’s Church held a service at which its current vicar invited Carmel Jones and his family, where a public apology was made.

While some like Carmel Jones left the historic churches for obvious reasons, others stayed and were subsequently caught up in the Windrush Scandal, in some way, shape or form. Given the way the “Windrush Generation” have helped to revitalise the Church in this country, it is shocking that the Church has not done more to help them. On the 2 November 2020, the BBC News website reported that nine people have died without receiving any compensation for loss of income, accommodation and detention, so this issue is still on going. Indeed, only yesterday there was an Equality and Human Rights Commission report which criticised the Government for its ‘Hostile Environment’ policy which led to the mistreatment of these Caribbean folks. I believe that the Church’s lack of a proper response, should be a time for repentance and grieving due to its failure to stand up for what is right and just.

The third and last word is “believe”: I believe that by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, real and substantive change can take place within our congregations and that the Church can then be in a moral leadership position to advocate for change in society. I believe in this two-step process rather than a twin track approach, because you must first be able to put your own house in order before seeking to do that to anyone else’s. I also believe that the events of this year have put the Church in a unique position to do this. The writer of Ecclesiastes says in Chapter 3:1: “There is a

time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens". I can't think of a time when there was so much interest in racial justice. This year marks the 25th anniversary of Racial Justice Sunday in Britain and Ireland and for at least 24 of those years, the Church has been ambivalent at best, and hostile at worst to these issues. In fact, in terms of racial justice, I invariably use the abbreviation BGF and AGF; BGF means "Before George Floyd" and AGF means "After George Floyd".

So, for me, the BGF saw me speak at the occasional event where I was sometimes regarded as a purveyor of unpalatable or uncomfortable truths. When I spoke about racial justice, some folks would invariably roll their eyes while others would shake their heads. I even heard one person say, "these people [me] are always talking about racism, trying to guilt-trip everyone".

Conversely, the AGF has seen my diary filled to the point where it is chockablock – right through to late spring of next year. I don't mind because I enjoy talking about my work. However, what is better than talk, is seeing words become actions; actions that result in real substantive and meaningful change. We often talk about the church recovering its "prophetic voice" and regaining, or in many instances, simply being able to have the courage to "speak truth to power". Much like the climate emergency, racial justice is now part of the zeitgeist. It is, to quote Victor Hugo, an "idea whose time has come". Many centuries before Hugo came up with that saying the writer of Esther 4:14 said this: 'And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?' As a Christian, I think that God is encouraging the Church to remain true to Christ's teachings, which are to show the requisite courage and determination to step out in faith on the journey to become more equitable and inclusive in terms of racial justice.

I have been working with colleagues to develop four steps that will help the Church on this racial justice journey. Like all journeys, progress may be slow and far from straightforward, but we can reach our destination with courage, faith and determination. The following steps include:

1. Breaking the silence by hearing stories
2. Repentance and lament
3. Education
4. Training

1. Breaking the silence by hearing stories

It is important that churches break the silence on racism by hearing stories of racism, inequality and prejudice. They do this by first allowing those who have experienced it firsthand, to talk about it. It is important that one hears from those who have experienced these issues, and safe spaces and forums need to be created which enable folks to candidly share their experiences of all aspects of this – in both Church and society.

2. Repentance and lament

Having broken the silence and heard a range of stories on racism, the next obvious step is that of repentance with lament at the core, which is very much linked to the concept of grieving. There is a rich and powerful tradition regarding lament in the Christian scriptures, as well as in various societies down the centuries. Lament is regarded as a crucial facet in the forgiveness process or any action with redemptive purposes. However, in this context, it is inextricably linked to racial justice, equity, honesty and truth telling. Therefore, the churches should lament for:

- a) Perennial inactivity on racism
- b) Perpetuating a colour-blind theology
- c) Failing to address the racism and inequality that has existed within Church structures since the Windrush Generation's arrival

- d) A reluctance to affirm the giftings and skills of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Christians who stayed in the Church, despite its racism.

3. Education (formal and informal)

The third step builds on the previous one and encourages churches to examine their structures and systems of working to see how they mitigate against equality and inclusion – and then take action.

However, any change must not be tokenistic, and anyone brought on to the leadership team must be given the appropriate training and assistance to demystify certain practices and activities, so they can play a valid role in the decision-making process.

All churches must take Racial Justice Sunday (RJS) seriously and use this day, which is the second Sunday in February, to Remember, Reflect and Respond to racial justice matters.

We must also be cognizant that the racism we now see in society has a lot of its roots in African enslavement and the colonialism and “empire”-related projects that followed. History shows that the Church was inextricably linked to all these enterprises, often allowing Christian scriptures to be twisted to justify these practices.

Such education should lead to the need for the Church to be more inclusive in worship and activities. The most obvious thing would be to have hymns, worship songs, liturgy and prayers that speak of the diversity found in God’s creation and the importance of justice and equity.

Linked to this would be opportunities to tell stories about Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Christians and their achievements. This can start with those who resisted enslavement or fought against unjust colonial or imperial enterprises, right up to contemporary figures who have helped to shape the spiritual and political climate in Britain today. In particular, those women and men who have been at the forefront of the struggle for racial justice and equality in Church and society.

4. Training

Closely linked to education is the need for improved training for leaders and those with leadership positions within the church. In most churches, little is done or achieved without the blessing of the leader – this would also include a commitment to effecting racial justice and equity within the Church. Change must be both top down and bottom up, and have those with real power within the Church at its core, leading it.

The first action should involve training, which should take place at theological colleges for all those seeking to become leaders. However, those currently serving in leadership must enrol on courses which focus not solely on “unconscious bias” but “anti-racism”. The former tends to look at personal attitudes and behaviours, while the latter also equips a person to challenge incidences of racism and find ways of changing racist situations.

Equally, leaders should also see it as their responsibility to find ways of equipping congregants with the tools to challenge the racism that exists in society. Churches must also take a greater interest in those racial justice issues impacting their non-white members. They should join organisations such as the Churches’ Refugee Network (CRN) to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers in Britain and Ireland are treated with dignity and fairly.

Conclusion

As churches have chosen to sidestep the issue of racial justice for decades, it would be naïve to expect that they will be able “put their own houses in order” quickly, thus allowing them to have the

moral authority and wherewithal to help society do likewise. Yet, this is not a moment for indecision or indifference. The young (Black) folks who are taking forward the Black Lives Matter protests in this country have displayed a boldness, which coupled with their energy and creativity, has changed the narrative on racism, inclusion and how we see ourselves as a country. Churches need to take a leaf out of their book, and do likewise. So, as previously stated, this is a time for courage and determination, and for the Church to apply both as it steps out in faith on the racial justice journey.