HEBREW SCRIPTURE READING  
Song of Songs 1:5-6

I am Black and beautiful, O women of Jerusalem,  
tanned as the dark tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.  
Do not look down on me you fair city girls just because my complexion is so dark.  
The sun has tanned my skin.  
My brothers were angry with me and sent me out to tend the vineyards in the hot sun.  
My own vineyard I have neglected.

NEW TESTAMENT READING  
Revelation 15.3; 21.24-26

Great and marvellous are your actions, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations. Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous deeds have been revealed.

The nations of the earth will walk in its light, and the rulers of the world will come and bring their glory to the new City. Its gates never close at the end of the day because there is not night. And all the nations will bring their glory and honour into the city. New Living Translation

REFLECTION

This year’s Racial Justice Sunday is more important than ever. The Coronavirus revealed racial inequalities in our society; ethnic minorities were disproportionately affected by this pandemic. And the tragic killing of George Floyd in America, and the powerful ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement following it, speak of the need for greater racial justice in Britain and Ireland, as well as America.

Do you ever recall hearing verses above from Song of songs in a worship service? I have to admit that I do not remember them. It is wonderful that the woman is able to describe herself as Black and beautiful. But it is sad that she then feels it necessary to explain her dark skin as because her brothers forcing her to work in the fields. The class difference is highlighted; working in the fields and exposure to the sun was associated with a lower status in their society.

This passage shows that in biblical times, as well as throughout history, people have shown prejudice, extreme nationalism, and racism. However, this behaviour does not follow God’s purposes and plans for humanity. In Genesis God created all human beings in the Divine image. In Revelation we read that God’s vision for future of the world is that it includes people ‘from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.’

As the Body of Christ today we should be demonstrating that kind of inclusion and acceptance in our churches. Nationally the United Reformed Church affirmed the British Council of Churches Statement on Racism in 1987 and then adopted its own Declaration on Racism in 1987. However, we still struggle to have fair representation of Black and Minority Ethnic people on our committees and
national bodies but are working hard to do so. In our British society in many ways, we have improved how we treat people from different nations and cultures - but we still have a long way to go. Sadly, the history of the British Empire includes slavery of African peoples until the Abolition of Slavery in the 19th Century! 1807! And unfortunately, that legacy still influences some people’s attitudes today. Many Black people have difficulty finding jobs, and those that do, are rarely promoted to the higher positions of leadership. This is a challenge for churches.

One of the difficulties we face in the Eastern Synod is that we do not have the breadth of racial and ethnic diversity in our communities compared to some towns, nor in our churches. At present we have only Whites in St Ives Free Church and Fenstanton URC. Thankfully, we have had some individuals from different backgrounds in the past. But this lack of diversity does mean that if someone from a different ethnic background comes into our church congregations, he or she is likely to feel very different from everyone else and stand out. We enjoyed having George Mwaura as a student minister a few years ago. Without ever saying a word, he made me aware that the pictures and videos I used in worship were of White people and I realised that I needed to show greater variety. Our congregations may not have great diversity of colour, but we do have people from different countries and backgrounds, and who have visited different countries. We can learn from their cultural experiences. We can show a warm welcome to any visitors from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and ensure that we fully include and incorporate such people in all aspects of church life. If we publicly present ourselves as those who respect people of all backgrounds, then we may encourage some newcomers of different colour and race – and we will be the richer for it.

Prayers

Gracious God,
you showed us in Christ that you love all people, especially those who were poor, or unwell or pushed to the margins of society.
Help us to be a witness to that kind of indiscriminate love in all we do.
Help us in our words and actions to show respect, welcome and acceptance of people from all different racial and ethnic backgrounds.
In Jesus name we pray,
AMEN.