

Sunday June 14 2020.

Prejudice

A question for the start of today's sermon. I would like you to think of the names of 3 famous men from history.

I bet no-one thought of Florence Nightingale or Queen Victoria. When you heard me ask for three men, you heard me ask for three males. So, when you hear men, you think male. Yet until recently, we had prayers that talked about "all men", when they meant "all people". A bias can be buried in the very language we use.

So it is with racial bias. We have seen protests about racial justice in the news recently. Some may wonder what on earth it has to do with Beverley. We don't have race riots, segregation or some of the other evils we read of. In my very white parish in Coventry I once shared the same question; I then reminded them of the neo-Nazi graffiti on the nearby flyover. If no-one in our churches had any racial prejudice whatsoever, I would be delighted. However, when people say: "we don't have a race problem" so often what they mean is: "we don't have a significant number of people with different coloured skin living in our district." That's not the same thing at all.

Recently I heard about a student training for the Church of England ministry. He was looking for a parish where he could be curate. After a unsuccessful attempts, he applied to one and got a letter rejecting him "firstly" on the grounds that "the demographic of the parish is monochrome white working class, where you might feel uncomfortable". They didn't even talk to him. If they had, they'd discover he's an African-American, with experience of working in white working-class areas. He didn't get a chance to be considered, simply on the grounds of race. If that doesn't shock you; it should. It happened during the last few weeks in the Church of England.

As Christians, we believe that all people, regardless of race, are made in God's image, valued by him and precious to him. How, then, can we prevent racial prejudice and the hatred and division it generates?

1. Admit that we are all prejudiced

People get grouped. Some we choose - such as clubs, teams or political affiliation; others are facts we cannot change - such as our age group, or colour of skin. And some groups set themselves up as better than others - especially when they have power. And because we all have labels which apply to us, we all have the potential to be prejudiced against those who do not belong to our category. My theory is that at least at the "gut reaction" level, we all have some level of instinctive prejudice against those from other backgrounds or ethnic origins.

About 25 years ago during the "mad cow disease" crisis, there was a huge fuss when France and Germany banned British beef imports. Then I discovered that the USA banned British beef in 1988, but there was no similar furor. Could it be that we have a gut prejudice against our Continental neighbours that we don't have against Americans? Is there something about people who don't speak English that makes us more hostile?

Or think of Islamic countries. I have questions about how the stricter Islamic communities enforce their laws, and especially how women are treated. The question which sits at the back of my mind is how much of that problem is from a logical and rational assessment - and I believe some of it is - and how much of it is governed by the fact that most Muslims are not white and have a language and culture very different to my own. To be honest, I don't know.

That's why I believe the first step towards dealing with prejudice is to acknowledge the ones in our own hearts.

2. Remember our roots.

The UK is a nation of immigrants: the Celts, the Romans, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, the Danes, and the Normans - and that only gets us to 1066. Our language, our culture, and our identity as a nation has been forged out of many different cultures, and that is a process which continues to the present day.

For example, I remember going on a week's multi-cultural experience to inner-city Bradford. During my time there, I observed a class which was teaching English to those for whom it was a second language. None of the people there spoke very much English. They had their own social network, their own shops selling their own food, and places where they could worship in their native language. It wasn't actually essential for them to learn English, but these people wanted to be able to communicate better. From my description, you may not realise that every person present was elderly and had lived in Britain for about 40 years, many went to church, and they all had white skin. You see they were Polish and Ukrainian in origin, and had come to England at the end of the war.

Bradford has been a city of immigrants since about 1830 when Germans came. There is still a part of the city called Little Germany which they use for film sets because it looks so continental. Then came the Irish, then the Poles and Ukrainians, and then in the 1960s the mill owners recruited labour from Pakistan. We need to remember our roots.

In the Old Testament - at first glance a book full of racial prejudice and rivalry - there are the following ceremonial words when the first fruit of the harvest is to be offered to God by the Israelite people:

"My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation...." (Deut 26:5)

Israel as God's chosen servant had to be reminded that they were descended from the same people as their neighbours, and they were, just as they made a costly gift to their God. We need to recall that our ancestors were a varied assortment of peoples. And the Old Testament contains repeated reminders to Israel to care for the alien – in other words, the foreigner - in their midst.

3. We need to seek the truth

The third key forwarding the cause of racial justice is to combat ignorance.

An example of this is seen in the way crime statistics are presented. Some data suggests that a much higher percentage of young men from the black community are convicted of crime than from the white community. The prejudiced say that this must mean that there is something about them that is more prone to commit crime. What that data doesn't tell you is whether you are comparing like with like. It is still true that a greater proportion of black and minority ethnic people are relatively poor. As Bishop David Sheppard noted back in 1983, if you compare crime statistics for black young men and white young men from the same degree of poverty, the statistics even out. Ignorance and bad presentation can fuel prejudice.

But let's not stop at statistics; we need to hear people's stories. I can't know what it's like to grow up being seen as different by most people I meet. I can't imagine being afraid of police cars as I walk down the street, even if I have done nothing wrong. I remember when I was at theological college in Durham, walking down into town one evening with a couple of friends to go for a drink. Another student who had Pakistani heritage was at our college for a couple of weeks to do a short course. We met him and he looked dejected. He'd been stopped at a pub door and told to go home with some choice racist language by a scary looking group of men. We took him to a different pub, but I learned a lot just hearing a story of racism that had just happened, and seeing what living permanently with the possibility of that hatred does to someone. That wouldn't have happened to me, because I'm white.

That's why I'm reading *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson as part of my response to Black Lives Matter. I'm a white man, so I need to hear more and be reminded of what it is like to be on the receiving end of racism.

Our reading said: "He [God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more for the former things have passed away." (Rev 21:4)

Racial hatred and prejudice have been the poison that has driven so many wars and so many acts of atrocity - from colonialism and the slave trade, to the slaughter of Jews by Nazis, through to the ethnic divisions in Bosnia that resulted in terrible massacres. But it has also caused so much tragedy even within our own streets and communities. I believe that as Christians, we cannot tolerate this; we cannot view these things with complacency. Prejudice begins here - inside me and you. We have those gut reactions, we must admit them and ask God to change our hearts. We need to remember where we came from - that we live in a society that has always been changing, and that it is only chance that puts those of us who are white in the positions of power and strength. Finally, we need to discover who our different neighbours really are

John's vision can only fully be realised in heaven - where racial definitions finally will become meaningless. In the meantime, there is much to do here. Let us commit ourselves anew to fighting prejudice in our world, in our communities - and in our own hearts. Amen.