

Brancepeth Sermon 5 July 2020

Black Lives Matter

Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

*Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

I am going to plunge right in today.
I tried to think of a preamble, a gentle introduction,
but my mind went blank, and stayed that way.
So I'm simply going to dive straight in to our first reading,
from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome,
and to the strange tension that sits right at the heart of it.
'I do not do what I *want*,' Paul says,
'but I do the very thing I *hate*.'
'I delight in the law of God ...
but I am captive to the law of sin.'

Now, this might sound like an incomprehensible paradox,
a difficult bit of mental gymnastics,
but in many ways it's just a grimly realistic picture
of how our wills, how our desires work -

because we are perfectly capable of *wanting* to do something
and *not wanting* to do it, at the same time.

So I want to get fit, but I *don't* want to exercise -
or, to put it another way,
I don't really *want* to exercise, but I *want to want* to exercise...
I *want* to follow Jesus,
but I *don't* want to do some of what Jesus calls me to do.
I *want to want* those things,
but in reality I shy away from them.
It's complicated, yes -
but it's a fairly familiar kind of human complicatedness,
one we can probably all identify in ourselves, from time to time.

Paul's meaning goes deeper than this, though,
and in order to explore this deeper meaning,
I want to turn back to something that
Geoff talked about last week:
the Black Lives Matter movement,
especially as it affects the church.

So, in the word of Ben Lindsay, *We need to talk about race.* [Slide]

Over the past couple of years,
and more intensely over the past couple of months,
I've had the chance to spend a lot of time in conversation with,
and reading reports of other people's conversations with,
a number of Black and Asian people
in the Church of England,
hearing about their experiences of the church.

And over and over again -
not just once or twice, or every so often,
but enough that it feels like I'm hearing
a great wave of voices saying similar things,
I have heard my Black and Asian brothers and sisters
speak of their experience of racism.

Some of that has been about overt racist abuse,
or obviously racist attitudes,
even in church contexts.
But even more of it has been about
the numbing, crushing effect of much smaller actions.
It has been about the thousand small ways in which
they have been made to feel like outsiders,
made to feel like they don't belong,
made to feel like they're not really welcome.
It has been about the ways in which they find
assumptions being made about
what they're interested in,
what roles they are fitted for,
what spaces they belong in -
assumptions that have little to do with them as individuals,
and a lot to do with the colour of their skin.

And their stories have, time and time again, been about how,
when they finally pluck up the courage to speak
about what they have experienced,
to express their pain,
to describe the reality of what they have undergone,
they aren't believed.

And that is what I want to focus on this morning. [End slide]

In the Church of England -
and, dare I say, here in St Brandon's -

we know that we are a welcoming and inclusive church.
So if we hear people tell us about failures of welcome,
failures of inclusion,
and about their experience of prejudice,
we *know* that they must be exaggerating,
or that these *must* be isolated, unrepresentative instances.
We *know* that there can't really be *that* much of a problem.

But the stories I have been listening to *aren't* isolated -
there are dozens of them, hundreds of them.
Looking at the church
through the eyes of the people I have been speaking to - through these Black eyes, these Asian eyes -
it looks rather different from the church *I* think I see
when I look around me.
How can we make sense of that?

Well, Paul's words can help us here.
We *want* to do the right thing.
We want to welcome, to include,
to build a diverse and vibrant community.
Our intentions *are* good; we do *want* what is right.
But we don't see the ways in which
our perceptions, our reactions, our habits, are skewed -
we don't see our unconscious bias,
we don't see our own prejudices, and the effects they have.

When we encounter people,
we make a whole host of assumptions
- on the basis of accent, of age, of gender,
and, yes, of skin colour -
and most of the time, we don't notice we are doing it.

We all do it, even those of us who think that we don't
- who are *sure* that we don't.
Despite our good intentions,
we still act in ways which leave our church segregated -
and we don't see it.

The law of sin is still at work in us, Paul would say,
despite our best intentions.
And, as Paul knew, those best intentions aren't enough.
We can't pull ourselves out of our prejudices, our biases,
just by pulling on our own bootstraps.
We hate the idea of racism,
hate the thought that we might collude with racism - but
'I do not do what I want', Paul says,
'but I do the very thing I hate'.
'I delight in the law of God ...
but I am captive to the law of sin'.

Good intentions are not enough; we need *help*. We need *grace*.
And sometimes the help we need is given to us
through the voices of those who challenge our complacency. Sometimes, we need those voices to show
us where
the law of sin is still operating in our lives -
and, by showing it to us, those voices can,
by the grace of God, help us to begin overcoming that law -
help us to turn more fully into *Christ's* way.

So. You are going to hear and read more
about Black Lives Matter on the news -
and you are going to hear and read more about
discussions of racism in the Church of England
(and those discussions are getting louder and more widespread,
so don't be surprised if you hear more about them soon - including from quite prominent figures). **[Slide]**
[Take slide down after a pause.]

And as you hear these things,
the first thing to do is simply to *listen*:
to listen to the stories that
Black, Asian and other minority ethnic people tell.
To take seriously their accounts of their experience,
their suffering.
Listen to them explain how
the behaviour they have experienced in the church -
even some of the most well-meaning, well-intentioned behaviour
- actually felt so alienating, so oppressive to receive.

Learn to see our church
not just through the eyes of those of us who know that we belong,
and who already feel welcome -
but through the eyes who have not experienced that welcome,
or for whom that welcome has been undermined or betrayed.

Such listening can, however, be hard.
And to understand that, we need to look briefly
at our second reading, our Gospel reading from John.
That's another hard passage,
because Jesus thanks his Father that the Father has
hidden the truth from the wise and the intelligent.

Now, we know the truth that the Father reveals:
it is the truth embodied in Jesus.
It is there in his gentleness and humility;
it is there in his care for
those who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens.

But this revelation is not innocuous.
It is not tame, and safe, and sweet.
It is *revolutionary*,
because it overthrows our world and its workings. 4
Jesus turns his face to those who are weary and burdened - those who are belittled, marginalised, and

side-lined -
and he *stands with them*; he shares his life with them.

He doesn't spend his time amongst those
who know that they belong,
who already feel comfortable and at home,
who are looked up to and respected -
those already recognised as 'wise' and 'intelligent'.
No. He is to be found amongst
the despised, the rejected, the ignored - the 'infants'.

Sometimes, when we read the words in this passage
about Jesus' love for the weary,
and those carrying heavy burdens,
it is right to hear them as words of comfort for ourselves -
as promises of refreshment and release.

But at times it is also important to hear them
as words of *discomfort*.
Because if Jesus stands with those who are weary
at the exclusion, at the side-lining, at the pushing away
that they have experienced in our church,
then he might be siding *against* us -
siding against us when we exclude people,
however unwittingly;
when we marginalise and side-line, without really noticing;

when we dismiss the cries of people who suffer,
who are weary and heavily burdened,
and say that those cries are exaggerated,
or mischievous, or that they have nothing to do with us;
when we rush to defend ourselves and our church
from accusations of racism.

Jesus stands on the side of those who suffer,
and calls us to pay attention, to *listen*.

To hear what God might be saying to us in this moment,
we need to open our ears to those
whose experience of our church does not match our own,
to voices that seem angular, disturbing, and challenging,
even angry and accusatory;
we need to turn our faces towards those who
have experienced exclusion.

And when we do, we may hear the voice of Jesus call us,
and we may find him there waiting for us,
ready with the grace we need to overcome
the law of sin that is still at work in us. *Amen*