

Racial Justice Sunday

RJS this year falls on Sunday 14 February. This annual opportunity to lament the racial inequalities in our society and to commit ourselves afresh to achieving racial justice has particular significance in the light of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the tragedies which have fuelled it.

In this Diocese, our BAME Working Group is hosting a special service to mark RJS, at 4pm on that date. Please email Miriam Cavanagh if you would like to attend the service on Zoom, at Miriam.e.cavanagh@gmail.com

St Mary's and St Augustine's – Reflections this week are by Rev Canon Mike West

Set readings for second Sunday before Lent: Psalm 50.1-6; 2 Kings 2.1-12; Mark 9.2-9; 2 Cor 4.3-6.

Not long ago a very bright and personable young priest, who was a participant in course I was running, was looking for her next post. She applied to a Cambridge College to become their Assistant Chaplain. She was short listed and invited for interview. At the College a porter showed her to the Senior Common Room and told her she would soon be called. An older man in academic robes came in. He demanded to know what she was doing there. Alison explained she was waiting to be interviewed. He said “you are in the wrong place – you should be downstairs in the Housekeeper’s room”:

You’ve guessed my point! Alison is black – and in the academic’s view more likely to be seeking a domestic post. She didn’t get the job!

There are many Special Issue Sundays calling for our attention - Social Justice, Lifeboats, Students and countless others. They tempt us to move our attention away from the themes provided by the lectionary. But this year there are two good reasons to mark Racial Justice Sunday. First the cry that went around the world from Minneapolis when George Floyd cried “I can’t breathe”. In this and almost every city in the world people went into the streets to proclaim that “Black Lives Matter”. We were all challenged to examine again how the institutions of our society (not least our wonderful NHS) systematically show black people “to the housekeeper’s room”.

Secondly we all heard the splash as Edward Colston’s statue fell into Bristol Harbour. We have been challenged to recognise how the wealth accumulated through the slave trade shaped and continues to influence the wealth of this country and its position in the world.

What do we Christians bring to these complex political issues? It would be understandable if not forgiveable if we looked for easier issues, or limited our focus to face to face situations! In the early church where Jews and Gentiles, Romans, Greeks and Syrians sometimes found it hard to recognise their common humanity Paul writes “He (Jesus) has abolished the law with so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two tribes - Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2; 15) The church is called to be the place where the accidents of race, gender, orientation and class are overridden so that our common humanity is recognised. And in this the church is called to be the vanguard in God’s plans for all creatures “made in his image”. We often think of the way the early church was exploded across the whole Roman empire. But long before it reached these shores it was established in India, where the Mar Thoma church claims it was begun by the disciple “doubting” Thomas. And in Africa the roots of the church in Ethiopia go back to the fourth century. When Augustine was converting the anglo-saxons the world wide church

was already multi-racial. Therefore the church, as a body and through us as individual Christian citizens, should be at the forefront of the struggle against racism in whatever form it takes.

Our commitment to join the battle for Racial Justice is relatively recent. A friend of mine who arrived in Sheffield from the Caribbean was greeted at her parish church with “the church for you people is at the other end of the High Street” She persisted and later became the Bishop’s Adviser for Black Anglican Concerns. In 1995. At St Augustine’s we are proud that in 1975 when Fr Charles came to be our Vicar he was the first BAME incumbent in Sheffield. But also remember that his experience in the city led him to create Sheffield Campaign against Racism.

May I suggest three actions to embody our prayers on this Racial Justice Sunday? First examine yourself: are there still occasions when you hear of a leading academic or politician and are a little surprised when you see that he or she is not white? – like the academic at the beginning of this piece! I wish I could say for myself “never”. Second in an evening’s television how many BAME people appear on screen? This week in a news item ten teenagers in Sheffield were interviewed about their experiences of lockdown - all were white. Thirdly what do we learn about our country which relies so heavily on BAME doctors and nurses but in which a large proportion of the BAME communities are not yet coming forward for vaccination? And when we have answers what shall we do about it?

In God’s Image by Karen Campbell

From the United Reformed Church’s service for RJS

I am a child of God –as you are.

In my face is reflected the likeness of God –

As in yours.

Why then do you despise the colour of my skin,

The shape of my features, or the texture of my hair?

Why do you think that I must think *like you*,

act *like you*, speak or believe *like you*?

I am me -

Made in the image of our Parent God –

In whose image you are made.

Why must I have your approval -or permission -

To be me? fully me!

The ‘me’ our Parent God

Birtherd me to be!

So says our Parent God -

In whose image we both are made.