

Sermon for Holy Trinity Geneva on Sunday 9 February 2025 - The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday before Lent.

*Texts: Leviticus 19.33-34; Colossians 3.9-15; Luke 5.1-11*

## **Racial Justice Sunday**

Today is Racial Justice Sunday and it is also the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the observance of this special Sunday in the Church of England. Racial Justice Sunday came into being very largely in response to the murder of a black teenager, Stephen Lawrence in London in April 1993. As his murder and the subsequent miscarriages of justice which occurred demonstrate the urgent need for racial justice, I want to start by telling you about his case.

In 1993 Stephen Lawrence was 18 years old studying for his A levels in London and wanted to be an architect. He was waiting by a bus stop one evening when he was attacked by a gang of white men in a racist attack. He died from his injuries.

Although the Metropolitan Police investigated the case and some suspects were charged with Stephen's murder, these charges were dropped before a trial could happen and the Police declared their investigation into Stephen's death "inactive".

Stephen's parents continued to campaign for justice for their son and many felt the police had treated Stephen's case differently because he was black and that some officers had acted in a racist way. Nelson Mandela, the President of South Africa, had met with the family at the time and urged the police to do more. An independent inquiry was opened into Stephen's death and the police investigation and in 1999 the Macpherson Report found that the Metropolitan Police were institutionally racist. I became particularly interested in this case, because my former boss, Bishop John Sentamu served as one of the three independent advisers to this inquiry.

The inquiry made 70 recommendations which led to significant changes not just in the Metropolitan and other police forces, but in other major institutions in England including the Church of England. In 2012, two of the original suspects of Stephen's murder were found guilty of his murder and sent to prison.

Stephen Lawrence's case highlights the ugliness and terrible consequences of racial discrimination, which is the unfair, prejudicial treatment of people because of their race or ethnicity. It also cast a spotlight on how, like a cancer, racial discrimination can become institutionalised and normalised as was the case with the Metropolitan Police. It has led to welcome changes in the law, in codes of conduct, education and training and of working practice in the UK. But we are very aware that a lot more change is needed.

The same is, I imagine true for many, if not all of you, in the different countries from which you come today. In some, discrimination and persecution of some citizens

because of their race or ethnicity is overt; in others, it is more hidden but nevertheless having a negative impact on their lives of some because of their race. We are not immune from it here. Even in Switzerland, a country justly proud of its record on human rights, according to the Federal Statistical Office. 27% of people felt victimised in 2022 and 3 out of 10 people in Switzerland felt they had been subjected to discrimination over the past 5 years. The Service for Combatting Racism (SCRA) in Switzerland reported that nearly 17% of people felt they were victims of racial discrimination in 2022, mainly on grounds of their nationality and language.

Racial discrimination is a terrible thing, isolating those who experience it, forcing them to suffer loss of dignity, opportunities and justice as well as, in some cases psychological and physical abuse and even death.

The Bible is quite clear that we are called to engage in racial justice. In the Old Testament, this is rooted in the Israelites' experience of the Exodus as we see in our reading from the book of Leviticus today. "You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19.34). Moreover, when the Israelites fled from Egypt, they did not do so alone. In the book of Exodus, it is recorded that 'A mixed multitude went out of Egypt' (Exodus 12.38). In other words, the Israelites were fleeing with slaves from other countries and in the wilderness, God instructs the Israelites how to treat the foreigners and sojourners amongst them. They are to be given protected status under the law (Exodus 12.48); and are to be included as the Israelites celebrate their religious festivals (Numbers 9.14).

The Hebrew word 'Ger' describes the 'alien, stranger, sojourner' and those who settle in a foreign land, perhaps as a trader or one fleeing famine. They are similar in many of our migrants today who, often without a passport or the necessary papers, lack any legal status or entitlement under the law of that land. Instead, they are driven to the margins, subject to exploitation and injustice, living a life of risk and alienation.

It is in this context that we begin to glimpse just how radical God's demand on Israel is. Israel is called by God to remember their experience in Egypt, all that they endured and to show compassion. "Remember what happened to you. Remember what you felt like. Remember your vulnerability – your fears for your family. Show mercy".

The call for us, as Christians to remember the Exodus, is also a key theme in the New Testament. However here it is taken further as we are called to remember that as our ancestors were freed by God from slavery in Egypt, so we too have been freed by Christ from our slavery from sin which had kept us trapped.

The implications of this are radical. St Paul makes clear in writing to the Colossians that as we start a new life in Christ at our baptism, the old barriers which previously kept us apart, fall away.

It's important to remember that the society in which both Jesus and St Paul lived and ministered was full of barriers. Some were religious and thus Jews who were circumcised and followed the Law regarded with contempt those who were not.

Other barriers were rooted on education and class – thus the Greeks who were the educated elite looked down on those who were not and saw other nations as barbarians. There were barriers of power which separated the ruling Romans from those they governed. A huge barrier separated those who were free and those who were slaves. And even within the family, major barriers existed too with women and children having virtually no rights before the law.

But, as St Paul demonstrates, in Christ, all these barriers come tumbling down. For if we are in Christ, we are literally a new creation. What matters is not that we are Jew or Gentile, educated or peasant, male or female, old or young or the country we are from but our common identity in Jesus Christ. St Paul outlines to the Colossians, the virtues which Christians need to practice in order to live in a society of great diversity in which all may flourish. He stresses the importance of pity – a quality not highly rated in the Roman world of his time in which the weak, the disabled and those who were vulnerable were treated with contempt. We need the virtue of kindness – so that we are constantly looking to what will bring about the wellbeing of the other person, the one who seems different to us. We need humility, that word which reminds of us of our common bond across all humanity as creatures, made from the dust by God to love and worship Him. We are called to show the virtues of grace, mercy and forgiveness. His words are certainly relevant for us today.

The theme of Racial Justice this year is Joseph's coat of many colours. It's a good image in many ways because it reminds us of what happens both within a community and a society if we don't practice racial justice and if we do.

For at the start of the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis, his brothers are roused to fury at the sight of the vivid coat of many colours which their father has given to him. He becomes in their eyes "different", and a target for their jealousy, anger and hate. From there it is a short step to regarding him as 'less human' someone they can contemplate killing in cold blood, but then, instead, sell him as a piece of merchandise into slavery in Egypt.

The tables are turned many years later when famine strikes Israel and Joseph's brothers are forced to come to Egypt, a land of power and success, to try to buy grain. Suddenly they are the aliens, the strangers, the one with no legal rights in the land who can be summarily held or imprisoned at the whim of those who rule. Yet as Joseph reveals himself to his brothers at the end of the story and forgives them, so we see a new beginning. They bring their old father from Israel and the family settle in Egypt, welcomed and accepted – able to begin a new life. The coat of many colours has now become a lived reality.

Today it is a time for us to rejoice in our diversity at Holy Trinity – drawn, at last count, from over 28 countries of the world. But it is also a day when we can reflect before God whether there are any things which we are doing which make it more difficult for any, because of their race or ethnicity to flourish here. It's also a day for each person here to think and pray whether there are things you experience which you believe need to change. I hope and pray that we can be honest with each other before God, knowing that we are one body in Christ. Thus, if one suffers, we should all experience that pain and be willing to respond.

Finally, this year, we will be celebrating our diversity in a proactive way. One of the things we are going to do is focus on a particular country from time to time during the year and learn more about it from those who live there. In this way, I hope we'll be able to build up knowledge and understanding of our different contexts and grasp in a deeper way, the challenges that we face and those things to celebrate.

In the Book of Revelation, which is the final book of the Bible, the writer has a vision of the end of time in which a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages stand before the throne of God and before Christ worshipping in praise and adoration (Revd 7. 9ff). I pray that in our life together at Holy Trinity we may have a foretaste of that vision of joy, glorifying God both in our diversity and in our unity in Christ.

**Amen**

**The Revd Canon Dr Daphne Green**