

Black Lives Matter

Today the banner headlines in the newspapers are about the Black Lives matter protests. Something has at last pushed the virus from the front pages. But the headlines are mixed. Some offer support for the protests in British cities, defending the action of the majority of protestors; others condemn the violence against police and the toppling of a statue in Bristol. Some present graphic accounts of US police actions against black people; others cite the criminal record of George Floyd in an attempt to say he deserved what he got. And of course, the backdrop for many of the comments and opinions is the Covid 19 related restrictions on mass gatherings and the advice to keep a safe distance from others.

And the same difference of opinion comes out in the responses of Christians and church leaders to the protests and the events that led up to them. Some defend the right to protest – even in these days of social distancing and concern about a possible second wave of the virus; others say that the protests have broken laws and are inappropriate. Many underestimate the anger and frustration that lies at the heart of what is going on.

So what about us. Here in Shirley, thousands of miles away from Minneapolis, in a different world physically and culturally. Perhaps surprised that there was a Black Lives Matter march here in Shirley yesterday. Probably looking at things from a largely white perspective. How should we reach our conclusions? What should our views be?

Whilst recognising that there are some protestors who seem to be bent on causing trouble – either by attacking police or inciting criminal damage – its important also to acknowledge the depth of anger at the injustice that is around – something its quite hard to appreciate from a white perspective.

We read of the ways in which black people are targeted. I heard recently the story of a professional black man in the states who was filling his car up with petrol one evening when he was surrounded, arrested and handcuffed by police. Apparently a white woman at the filling station had heard on the local news that a black person was being sought by the police for an offence and she immediately assumed it was him. It took a white man's intervention with the police officers to convince them that this guy was not the person they were looking for. And here in the UK, in the last year for which statistics are available – the 12 months to March 2019, there were 4 stop and searches by the police for every 1,000 white people, compared with 38 for every 1,000 black people. In other words if you are black you are 10 times more likely to be stopped by the police in situations where there is no evidence that you have done anything wrong.

And it's not just interactions with the police. Many black people – indeed a disproportionate number – grow up in disadvantaged situations, with fewer opportunities to progress. Things are stacked against them from the start. And it almost impossible for someone like me – male, middle classed, Oxford educated – to understand what they go through or to imagine myself in their place. But even those people of the BAME community who seem to have advantages face additional pressures and challenges in a society that is structured around

white privilege. They can find themselves trying to grow up in two worlds and trying to conform to both, despite them being mutually exclusive in many ways.

But it can be hard seeing what is really going on from the inside of a society. The toppling of that statue of Edward Colston in Bristol highlights this well. Some 300 years ago Colston was a slave trader. Forcefully taking black people from West Africa to the new world to work as slaves in the plantations. He made a lot of money and gave generously to the city of Bristol. Many buildings, including the Cathedral, were funded by his generosity. And I guess at the time people couldn't see what was wrong with what he was doing. The story of John Newton – the famous hymn writer / abolitionist is interesting on this point. When he converted to Christianity he continued as a slave trader until he had a stroke and even then continued to invest in slave trading activities. It was much later in life, when he was a Parish priest, that he became an abolitionist. And this kind of thing makes we wonder – what will people in 50 years or 100 years time stare at in disbelief about our own society. About what will they be saying *How could they have thought it was right to do that?*

And even in the church there is racism. Not intentional perhaps, but there just the same. A black ordinand posted online this week that he had applied for a curacy and received a rejection letter which basically said that because he was black the parish would be unsuitable and he would not be considered. The retirement this past weekend of the former Bishop of Birmingham, lately Archbishop of York, John Sentamu means that now there are no senior clergy in the Church of England from the BAME community . The Church is solely white led.

It's easy to respond to the person saying "Black lives matter" with the retort – all lives matter. Yes, this is true, but it actually detracts from the message that needs to be heard now. In the context of the killing of George Floyd, and the evident racism that is endemic in American and still to a real extent in British society, it is vital to declare loudly and clearly that black lives do matter. In saying so we are only doing something similar to what Jesus did in the way he addressed his society and said these people – looking at the marginalised and the outcast – these people matter. Today black lives matter is the vital message from which we shouldn't be distracted, but that could equally well be applied in our society in other situations to all non white ethnicities or to Eastern Europeans or to gay, lesbian, trans and non binary people. The list sadly could go on and on.

In the gospel passage today we see Jesus looking at the crowds and having compassion on them. We know that throughout his life and ministry he was always on the look out for those on the margins, those rejected by the system, those who had little or no power. The leper, ostracised by society; the woman of ill repute, treated as garbage by those she lived amongst; the Samaritan – someone a Jew would have no contact with whatsoever. Jesus saw the value in every human being. By his actions he affirmed the words from the very start of the bible that we are, each one of us, made in God's image.

And this underpinned the way that the early church understood things. Paul – even though he came from a position of great privilege being male, a learned Jew and a Roman citizen – was able to declare that "there is no longer Jew nor Greek, no longer slave nor free, no longer male nor female – we are all one in Christ Jesus." James, in his letter in the New

Testament, urges churches to treat all people the same. For him it's the distinction being made between treatment of rich and poor – but the underlying message is the same. We are all of equal value in God's sight.

I am sure we all understand this in our heads. The problem is that through our upbringing, through what we read, and through the culture we have imbibed over the years we have unconscious bias built into the way we see the world and the way we view people. We need to be able to see with new eyes; to see as Jesus would see.

Many of us might say that we have friends or colleagues who are black or come from other minority ethnic backgrounds. Surely that means we are not part of the problem. And yet deep down perhaps we are more fearful of a black man walking towards us in the street than a white man. Perhaps we unconsciously treat black people or people of colour with less respect when we come across them day by day. Maybe we are inwardly surprised when we see black people in positions of responsibility and authority.

Jesus had compassion on and showed love to both individuals and to crowds. For him the crowd was a collection of individuals. Just as those individuals were each seen as carrying the image of God, so the crowd reflected God in many and varied ways.

Jesus could see that the problem was not simply with the way individuals treated each other; it was not simply down to some bad apples in the crop. He could see quite clearly that the problem was woven into the way society was organised and people were viewed. The rich, the privileged, the "haves" if you like were seen as blessed by God and better than those on the edge. So many of the stories Jesus told of the upside down nature of the Kingdom of God were shining the light on this. And the way Jesus lived as well as the things he taught were a direct response to this.

So back to the question we asked earlier. How should we view what's going on around us and across the world. How should we respond.

The first thing is surely to find out about what's happening. To be interested in what's going on around the world. Listen to news broadcasts; read different accounts from different perspectives; read books; listen to voices we would normally shut off. Try to get a balanced view.

Second think about what we hear and read; weigh it up in your mind; listen to Christian responses; talk to each other. What would Jesus do? What would Jesus say? Is doing nothing in an unjust situation any better than aggravating it. Balance what we find out with what we know as truth from scripture and experience.

And thirdly think about what we can do and do it. Maybe it's a letter to our MP; maybe it's prayer; maybe it's taking part in some direct action; maybe it's a boycott of goods or services from a certain company or country; perhaps its using some of our money to donate to causes that help black people in reaching their potential – something that is still sadly difficult in today's Britain. But whatever we do, we should always try to amplify black voices rather than speak for them.

We cannot change the world with our small actions, but we can be part of the actions that change the world. Slowly, perhaps barely noticeably but definitely making a positive contribution for good and for God in a world that seems to have drifted far away.