

RACIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY

The Changing Face of Britain & Ireland

13 September 2009

Biblical reflections

"Who do you say I am?"

Mark 8:29



Today is Racial Justice Sunday. None of us would claim that we are racists. Yet, in spite of all our good policies and intentions we still inhabit structures and systems that reproduce an array of related 'isms', including racism.

Take an intentional look around us and witness what internalised despair is doing in terms of black upon black killings and gang wars; reflect upon the prejudices against Muslims, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Witness the disproportionate impoverishing of Black and minority ethnic people. Racism runs deep, works in the interest of the privileged and assumes a variety of garb (individual, spatial, environmental and economical). In the midst of prejudices, fear of the other, suspicion of the foreigner, the mantra of jobs for natives and restrictive border controls, racism is assuming a variety of complex garbs.

It is a reality that our landscapes have changed dramatically on these isles over the years and still continue to do so. Whether it was earlier migrants or later ones, prejudice and discrimination remain a reality. How we build a cohesive and just society, in the midst of this changing and diverse landscape, where all can contribute to the common good, remains a challenge.

In the context of this reality, the theme for Racial Justice Sunday 2009 is 'The Changing Face of Britain and Ireland' with a focus on Jesus' question to his disciples, "who do you say that I am?" Identities, faith and the practice of faithfulness are timely themes for our reflections.

The flyer and the materials carry a picture of a variety of faces on a map of Britain and Ireland, pointing to the diversity of the population on these islands. With this orienting imagery, the question of Jesus takes on a double meaning. It is not only one being posed to the disciples in the past or to present followers in relation to their discipleship. In the context of migration, diversity, changing and fluid contexts, and conversations on identities in our diverse national contexts in Britain and Ireland, Jesus' question becomes more poignant when asked by the colourful minority ethnic faces of the dominant group: "who do you say I am or we are?"

"Who do you say that I am?" becomes clearer as we practice the gospel stories not as bystanders, but like Jesus responding to the hurts and the hopes, the fears

and the confusion of those standing in front of him. What comes to mind is Jesus' other reminder that "whatsoever you do to one of these, the least of my brother or sister, you have done unto me". The question of "who do you say I am" cannot be answered apart from "who is my neighbour"?

It may be that 'YOU' is more than a word. It is clearly a commitment tied to discipleship. We are being offered an alternative model of being. We are being challenged to want something different. Instead of thinking only of ourselves and believing that it is to our good to become prosperous and avoid that which is costly, we are being challenged to a life of generosity (giving) that embraces the way of Jesus - that of self-giving love.

How can church become what it is called to be: a place where faith is practiced rather than wrapped up in creedal statements; where there is love rather than habit, where worship is alive and living rather than restrictive, where the language of compassion is spoken, rather than the voice of rigidity; and where all are welcomed?

How can Churches be the embodiment of grace in a multi-cultural, diverse and complex world? For churches are not called upon only to soothe those already present, but to invite and welcome all those who would never want to be there because they believe that they are not welcome as they are. Certainly, this places in perspective the demands of Jesus - what it means to gain life by losing it for the gospel's sake.

Much of our identity as human beings is shaped by our family, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture, nation and religion. Yet, knowing who we are is never complete or static. How willing are we to understand our limitations and how open are we to embrace new ideas and perspectives? Are we adventurous enough to let our openness shape our identity as people of God?

Going against the current of popular opinion, or dominant ideas that demand us to conform, is very hard as the answers to Jesus' question reveal. A different view or way of walking in faith is like swimming upstream. This is the subversive wisdom and spirituality that has propelled the world of racial justice on these islands over the years.

Readings from the Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 50:5-9

This is the third of the four 'servant songs' in Second Isaiah. Who is the servant is a minor matter for our purpose. It is the life and actions of the servant that matter. The servant deployed the gift of listening to and discerning God's word most effectively and he was empowered by that word to give support and encouragement to the weary among the exiles of Israel. The servant is willing and confident and, in spite of the long haul, is sure that God will deliver. The Servant challenges his detractors to stand up to him daring to 'speak truth to power', standing on the side of God against injustices.

- How are we using the gifts of listening/ discerning to enable racial justice work?
- What do we need to do differently?

Psalms 114

A midrash on this psalm suggests the following. With the Egyptian chariots bearing down upon the fleeing Israelites, they were trapped on the seashore. A battle waged within the depths of the Red Sea. "Both the Egyptians and the Israelites are idol worshippers", the waters claimed, "why should we miraculously split and provide salvation for one nation at the expense of the other?" As the confrontation in the depths escalated, the waters caught sight of the bones of Joseph which the people had brought from Egypt. The sea promptly parted in respect to Joseph's righteousness, leading to the dramatic conclusion of the exodus and the ultimate redemption of the Israelites from their Egyptian oppressors.

James 2:14-18

James is more than a letter: it is an exhortation to ethical conduct. As members of the Christian community found themselves in an alien world, full of evil, they are called to a faith that is acted upon in every aspect of their lives. With trials and tribulations all around, and with the poor suffering at the hands of the rich, the author also calls the community to joy, endurance, wisdom, confident prayer and faithful

response to the liberating word of God, as they await the second coming.

The scandalous message of James (as Elsa Tamez puts it), underscores that faith must be *living*, accompanied by actions – or else it is useless. Here is a call to 'walk the talk' rather than 'talking about the walk'. Faith in Christ and living in ways which discriminate against people is a contradiction. Jesus embodied the hope of good news for the poor and hungry and the creation of a community of love. The call to welcome the most vulnerable among us as we would welcome God is at the heart of the gospel.

- What happens when our witness and praise of Jesus fail to embody what Jesus manifested?
- What does James mean when he says that God has chosen the poor?
- When and how is the advice 'slow to anger' helpful in racial justice work?

Mark 8: 27-35

Jesus is journeying north from the Sea of Galilee to the various villages surrounding Caesarea Philippi. This, of course, is not home turf. The conversation between Jesus and his disciples is key to the gospel of Mark. Jesus' query as to the popular view of how he was seen brought interesting responses. Significantly, what is missing is any notion of Messiah. Hence, Jesus' question is more poignant when he asks his friends: "who do YOU say...I am?" This is the context of Peter's quick answer of Jesus as the Messiah, located along the general view of the religious status quo - that a Messiah will come to free the Jewish people from Roman occupation and domination. Jesus' talk about suffering and death, cross bearing, denying self and losing life in order to gain it, did not map on to the generally held view. Like Wisdom, Jesus' truth-telling about his alternative way, sounded foolish.

Following Christ and walking the Jesus way is a costly adventure – becoming vulnerable for the sake of the Gospel. Clinging to life fearfully, we cannot open our hands to receive the gift of life.

- Can we answer this still pertinent question ("who do you say I am?") without answering "who is our neighbour?"
- Is not Caesarea Philippi, honouring Roman might, a good starting point for thinking about power?
- How can the three imperatives denying self, taking up cross, and following Jesus help shape and re-shape racial justice work?
- What does it mean to call ourselves Christians? How do we understand the person and ministry of Jesus?
- How do we follow as disciples? What are the implications for the vocation of racial justice?

Proverbs 1:20-33

Every culture has its sayings, proverbs and collected pieces of wisdom. In the world of the Ancient Near East these were collected and written down. The Book of Proverbs is one of the places where these sayings have been summed up. In these verses, Wisdom (a Woman) calls to the people from the street corners and rubs shoulders with them at the city gates. Like the prophets, she calls people back to faith and faithfulness – away from sin. This is also God's call as Wisdom is no ordinary woman of prophet. She is the presence of God actively engaged on earth – the source of life and blessing. As representative of the presence of God, her offer of knowledge will lead those who heed to life.

- In what ways does God's wisdom challenge the sin of racism? How can racial justice become a source of life and a blessing?

Psalms 19

Of Psalm 19, C. S. Lewis wrote: "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world." In this psalm the created order is delivering eloquent speech with a wide array of expansive images. Declaring the creative words of God, the heavens joyfully proclaim God's glorious work. The psalmist, calls for more than creation appreciation or wants more than a sense of awe. The intention is creation's significance in the whole of God's work. Heavens telling, firmament proclaiming, daytime speech, night-time knowledge, words voiced to the end of the world - all of these are the visible world enabling our understanding of the invisible. To describe creation's testimony requires expansive images and imaginative language.

- Reflect on new images, metaphors and imaginative language to affirm the place of all God's people and the whole of creation in the story of God's love for the whole world.

Wisdom 7:26-8:1

The book of Wisdom is a gathering of proverbs and reflections attributed to Solomon, son of David. Tradition affirmed that he was the wisest man who ever lived and that his wisdom came directly from God. This book was written after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile, several hundred years after the death of Solomon.

Wisdom tells us that being made in the image of God includes sharing with God in immortality. Only the godly and the ethical will be granted eternal life; those who choose to deviate from God's ways will be punished and will disappear into nothingness. God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom (v.28) and that "against wisdom evil does not prevail" (v.30). The reach of wisdom is long as "she

reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well" (8:1)

James 3:1-12

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Is James pointing us to consider the ways we communicate? If read from this perspective, perhaps the issue is not so much about finding words but about how and what we communicate. Do we bless God and curse our fellow humans with the same breath? The failure to use words for life affirming communication accounts for much of the misunderstandings that occur in families, churches, and society, that is, in our relationships.

- Words are not value free. Reflect on the power of words. Do our words hurt, exclude or heal and reconcile? Do they build up or tear down?
- In what ways do our choice and use of words communicate the image of God in us?

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