

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

FOR RACIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY 2010



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Migration - Building Bridges or Barriers?

Racial Justice Sunday is not intended to make us feel guilty. Nor is it the only day and time of the year when we reflect on ways to counter prejudices and racist practices - all those attitudes and actions that deny us sharing together in God's offer of fullness of life. The racial justice and anti-racist vocation or calling is about the whole of life and all of our relationships. Unfortunately, our world and life on these islands is not free from bigotry, prejudice, and discrimination. It is true that we have passed numerous laws to protect marginalised and vulnerable people in our communities. Yet, it is equally true that racism and similar cultures of discrimination and exclusion find new expressions today. For instance, there is a connection between the current phenomenon of migration, sanctuary seeking and racism and the growing support for and power-base of far-right politics. Even politics and politicians from the more traditional parties can fall into this trap, in their efforts to win votes by calling for and implementing more stringent border-controls and the means by which these are carried out.

The agenda of working towards a cohesive, inclusive and just society in the midst of narrow-minded and insular politics, one where all can contribute to the common good, must remain a priority for all. Churches have no option but to engage in this calling. For the gospel mandate is a call to engage in the mission of a God who seeks to ensure life in all its fullness for all. The reality is that there can be no peace and justice without anti-racism policies, practices and work and no reconciliation without addressing all forms of unfair exclusion and discrimination.

Reflect on

- **How can churches model the habit of welcome for all?**
- **How can our communities be the embodiment of grace in a multi-cultural, diverse and complex world?**

Among the insights from the readings for Racial Justice Sunday 2010, based on the theme *Migration - Building Bridges or Barriers*, are whispered shapes of the hope we all dream of and that points us to ways we can become bearers of reconciliation and justice. The many and continuing guises of racism along with its complex relationships with similar/other forms of marginalisation, can lead those engaged in anti-racism and inclusion work to despair. How can we address this possibility to despair with the life and hope of justice and reconciliation - God's dream for a world where goodness and righteousness prevail?

Our scriptures point us to ways we can practice living lives of just actions that build bridges - doing whatever is necessary to keep all of us honest, holy and righteous. So what insights can we glean from these readings?

The reflections below are based on the readings for Racial Justice Sunday 2010 in the Revised Common Lectionary, the Roman Catholic Lectionary, or both.

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READINGS FROM REVISED COMMON

LECTIONARY

Heart of God

Jeremiah 4:11-28

Jeremiah's prophetic ministry began in Jerusalem around 627 BC and he would have witnessed the final years of Jerusalem before it fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC. The context was troubled times and we have before us the portrait of a prophet who tries to help his people make some sense of their circumstances, rediscover who they are and look towards a future with hope. Images of women are numerous and they do reinforce stereotypes and pejorative representations as the worldview here is patriarchal. Notwithstanding, what insights can we draw for justice awareness, both racial and other? There are the images of marriage and adultery used to accuse Israel of betrayal compared with the faithfulness of God towards God's people. The use of the marriage metaphor is an interesting way to describe the covenant - the human experience of intimacy and love.

Judah is portrayed as much worse than Israel because Israel had been lost to the Assyrians and surely Judah could see her fate would be the same. If Judah would just repent and return to worship God faithfully, then Yahweh would restore Jerusalem to its former glory. The call to repent is repeated using various images. The anguish of the prophet seems to mirror the anguish of God: how can a people become so bent on self-destruction? No wonder God is unable to keep silent! Indeed, one may be overwhelmed with the bleakness of the passage and the sense of no easy answers here. Yet, the reading underscores the destructive forces that humans unleash on each other.

We are quite familiar with some of these: for instance through the many ways we continue to wage wars, marginalise, dehumanise and displace our fellow human beings. As in the time of Jeremiah, we are responsible for the destruction and denial

of life that we unleash on each other. Racism is one of the many ways that we continue down the road of destruction, of others and ourselves in the process. Greed is another way, and we are currently reaping the consequences of this. Why do we persist with actions and life-styles which are often not for the benefit of others and the common good, but are life denying. Hope takes the form of God's promise of a new covenant, this time to be written on the hearts of the people.

Reflect on

- **Ways we continue to marginalise other human beings? What are the 'new' shapes to racism in the UK?**
- **Ways through which God's promise of a new covenant can bring about a new day, with new relationships.**

Anger at Oppression

Psalm 14

This psalm is a lament, but with a difference. The Psalmist laments the breakdown of moral order and the destructive nature within the community – the defying and denying of God. 'Fools' are those who deny that God is concerned with human behaviour and flaunt any sense of accountability. To the psalmist, the world is full of such fools, people who are 'corrupt' (including cynics), and do terrible things. The cry 'there is no God' is common in the psalms. It is not a statement of belief or lack thereof and it is not an expression of atheism. Rather, it denies that God is concerned with their actions and thoughts. As long as they can get away with what they do, or persuade others of their right, then all is alright.

God, however, is in the community of those who follow God's ways and God will deliver the oppressed from the ungodly and there will be rejoicing. Hope for the psalmist lies with God and the psalmist draws on a deep tradition of hope. The psalmist is quite clear: there is accountability for those who presume their deeds go unnoticed. For the poor there is a reality beyond the present corruption and injustice. There are those who are wise, do good and seek after God. There will be a time of rejoicing and gladness.

Reflect on

- **Instances where the principles of justice were violated and what direct intervening role you took as a reconciler to protect the victims and to work for ways to change the system.**
- **What are the key insights you wish to share with others?**

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READINGS FROM ROMAN CATHOLIC

LECTIONARY

Daring Advocacy

Exodus 32: 1, 7-14

Whose side will we be on: that of the God of abundant life and building bridges or that of our own creation of gods to fit our needs? What does it mean to be on the side of the God of abundant life? Exodus 32 offers us some insight through two different and related situations. In scenario 1 there is Moses at the top of Mount Sinai just about to conclude many days and nights in which he spent receiving instructions from God. Scenario 2 presents us with the Israelites at the base of the mountain becoming restless, having second thoughts about Moses ever returning: hence, their request to Aaron and the crafting of a golden calf. God is not pleased and orders Moses to get down back to base camp and let that lot of disbelievers know what God intends to do. They will be destroyed and God will start all over again with Moses! Moses, however, dares to take a stand for the people and argues with God. Even more remarkable is that God changes His mind! It is only after this that Moses returns to the people.

Rereading this encounter in the context of racial justice work, one is struck and encouraged by Moses' radical advocacy on behalf of the Israelites and his taking their side. This is clearly the view of the biblical narrator who thinks that Moses has done the right thing. Thus, in a summing up of Moses' life and career (end of Deuteronomy), we learn that 'never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.'

Justice advocacy today desperately needs the radical spirit of Moses and what we have here is considered powerful guidance for taking the side of those who are the most vulnerable and have no other defenders.

Reflect on

- **The ministry of justice advocacy - its shapes and dimensions, challenges and a spirituality for sustaining us through such a ministry**

It is helpful to locate this 'psalm of David', in the context of the Prophet Nathan's visit to David after his encounter with Bathsheba, the death of Uriah (her husband) and David's marriage to the broken-hearted widow. David had much to reflect on in relation to his actions, though he may not have been initially aware of the need. He may have thought it was the end of the matter, except that the prophet Nathan turns up and confronts the King with his wrong-doing. Truth is often hard to tell, even more difficult to hear if it is about us, and at the same time it is liberating. Psalm 51 captures the pain, the depth of guilt and the urgency of the situation. The imperative verbs – *have mercy*, *blot out*, *wash* and *cleanse* capture this sense of urgency and the sinful nature of David as reflected in his actions.

These powerful images are quite appropriate for our work in developing anti-racism work and practices and all other justice related work. Hating, coveting, excluding, hurting, killing, and denying other human beings opportunities to share in a full life emphasise how much we and our communities are still sinful, 'bent out of shape' and consequently 'miss the mark' of God's good purpose for us. Nurturing communities of welcome, inclusion and hospitality demands that we experience a cleansing and conversion that produces 'clean hearts', new and fresh beginnings, and renewed/clean spirits - with God as the active source.

Use Psalm 51

- **as an opportunity to reflect on our need to confront the truth about our lives (as individuals, communities and nations)**
- **and then attempt to rewrite Psalm 51 for us today**

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READINGS FROM REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY AND ROMAN CATHOLIC LECTIONARY

Grace Abundant

1 Timothy 1:12-17

As one of the Pastoral Epistles, 1 Timothy is not only addressed to individuals. It is also addressed to the public square, interweaving personal injunctions and ecclesial advice, with the community very much at its heart. The epistle seems to suggest that Timothy has to cope with rival forms of Christianity, differing teachings from what was considered the tradition, the presence of people with power, and the views of the Greco-Roman society about Christians.

The selected reading underscores that responding to God's compassion is not about receiving a guarantee for a future gift, but taking up the offer of a relationship with a God who is going places. We are invited in grace to get on board and join this God who is on a mission – one of abundant grace. As seen in the life of Paul, God in Christ is in the business of embracing and inviting 'faulted people'. Such is the nature of God's generosity and it is a reconciling one. In terms of anti-racist work and practices, Christians must operate on the principle that some form of reconciliation or bridge-building is always possible and that healing can happen.

Reflect on

- **Examples of reconciliation and healing in communities torn apart by prejudices and racism. What contributed to the transformation, new perspectives and relationships?**

Seeking, Welcoming & Rejoicing

Luke 15:1-10

The three parables in Luke chapter 15 have been referred to as 'Gospel within the Gospel.' Our readings cover the very pithy parables of the lost sheep and lost coin: what Mark Twain referred to as 'the best short story ever told.' In few words we are presented with the very heart of the nature of the Divine Creator and Divine Love who goes at length and beyond to seek out, welcome and embrace the excluded, wounded, vulnerable and despairing human beings. These parables urge us to rethink any tendency towards religious bigotry, creating barriers, and any temptation of trying to 'read the mind of God' when it comes to who should be part of God's communities of grace.

What kind of God do we image in our word and actions? This is a critical question for reflection and if our words and acts do not measure up to the image of a seeking, welcoming, loving and embracing God, then we are 'missing the mark.' Ironically, while we tend to gravitate towards our created communities of like-minded and decent people, these parables push us out of our comfort zones to hang out with 'strange people' and 'throw parties' for the disadvantaged and those who do not fit our criteria. The bottom line is that our relationship with God cannot be separated from our relationship with fellow human beings.

Reflect on

- **How can we work towards creating spaces for each other around the table?**
- **How long will we continue standing outside rather than entering inside and taking our place around the table?**
- **What kind of God do we image in our word and actions?**
- **What about the idea of being lost and then rediscovering one's place in the community?**

There is passion and joy in living lives geared towards wholeness and inclusion and it is costly. Obsession with policing 'who are in and who are out' makes us unable to perceive and share in the joy. Seeking, welcoming, embracing and including, produce joy for anyone with an open heart to make this a habit of their living. It produces a wholeness that overflows into joy. On the other hand if we operate with closed hearts and clenched fists and in restricting/excluding ways through prejudice and discrimination, then joy evaporates and we become dried-up and lost individuals and communities. This is a timely message for our context today in our response to migrants.

Are we able to see beyond our own needs and own 'worlds?' Embracing and welcoming is not about less to share. It is about more - abundance. It is about more feasting, more wine, more food, more music and dancing - a carnival kind of a party, that is JOY! If we operate on the principle of scarcity then we will see less and images of losing will take over our lives. But if we operate on the principle of abundance there will be plenty - more than enough. Is there a metaphor here for our life together as a faith community and as a society as a whole?

Reflect on

- **The importance of helping people assume responsibility for things as they are and things as they ought to be**
- **How the way seeking, welcoming and embracing is often routed through conflict and confrontation**
- **If grace/love is to become the orienting metaphor, how would our life together be shaped differently?**