

**Wednesday 10th June 2020**

*One day the Eternal God scooped dirt out of the ground, sculpted it into the shape we call human, breathed the breath that gives life into the nostrils of the human, and the human became a living soul. Genesis 2.7*

Dear Friends

As Philip North, Bishop of Blackburn, poignantly highlighted last weekend, the phrase “I can’t breathe” highlights and unites the injustice at the heart of the barbaric death of George Floyd with the injustice experienced by those communities who have suffered disproportionately from COVID19, specifically Black and Minority Ethnic communities and the poor more generally.

“I can’t breathe” communicates plainly the physical challenge of breathing when your throat is being knelt upon or when your lungs are constricted by disease. But there is another reading of this phrase too. “I can’t breathe” speaks also of being denied the opportunity to live life to the full as a child of God. If one’s human Spirit is not free – either through poverty or discrimination or both – one’s experience of life is considerably diminished. Jesus calls us into life in all its fullness; we cannot work for this to be a reality for all unless we are also prepared to question the politics and economics that give birth to so much racism and poverty in Britain today.

This week the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, retired. Tortured under the Amin regime for refusing to comply with state edicts and arrested numerous times in London by the police under stop and search powers, John Sentamu understands discrimination more than most and certainly more than any white person ever can. His time as Archbishop has not, however, led to a transformation of the Church of England into a church that reflects in the pews, in the clergy, in General Synod, the diversity of ethnicity that is Britain today. Even the most dynamic and passionate of leaders has not been able to change the institutionally racist nature of the Church of England.

That sentence might surprise, upset or anger you. But it is true. The Church of England is institutionally racist, acknowledged even by that most establishment of figures, the current Archbishop of Canterbury.

One way to recognise the challenges we face is to consider the way we interpret scripture. Take the story of the Good Samaritan that has featured recently both in one of our bible studies and in the lectionary for Morning Prayer. Like numerous other stories from the gospels – both events in Jesus’ life and the stories he told – the story of the Good Samaritan has a strong ethnic dimension to it. Yet the traditional interpretation in the West is not the anti-racist theme that is so obvious the moment one understands the extent to which Samaritans were marginalised by the Jews. Instead we were nearly all taught in Sunday School that the moral of the story was that we should care for one another. That teaching is a denial of the full truth of the gospel.

I am increasingly anxious about the future of the Christian faith, leave alone the future of the Church of England. Part of this anxiety arises from a recognition that I am as complicit as anyone in failing to communicate the radical truth at the heart of Jesus’ message – and failing to live it too. It’s not too late but we have got to start listening to scripture for the harsh truths it contains and not simply the moral platitudes that we were taught long ago.

Racism is a white problem, experienced by people of colour. So, eradicating it is the responsibility of white people. Whether we have the courage to do that in the weeks, months and years to come will define our legacy as a faith.

That’s been a heavy message this week and reflects what is truly on my heart at the moment. It’s been a frequent topic of conversation in my prayers these past few days. I hope that you have shared in prayer with God whatever rests heavily on your heart this week too. Our closeness to God is a precious gift and we need to draw on God’s wisdom and strength as often as we can in these troubling times.

Please go gently, and look after family, friend and stranger alike.

With my continuing love and prayers,

David Ford, Rector

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