

The Selwyn Lecture

“The Race for Justice in a time of Black Lives Matter”

Subtitle: Why we should be interested in Racial Justice

As we approach the twelfth month of a tumultuous year, for me, there have been two events that have set the agenda in so many ways; the first, and obvious one, has been the COVID-19 pandemic, which when not claiming so many lives, has turned everything else in our lives upside down. The second is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which, among other issues, has enabled the Church and society to talk about a subject that has been left off the agenda for far too many years.

In both, there is a clear racial justice dimension. It was once argued that the COVID-19 crisis was the great leveller – all of us were in the same boat when it came to the pandemic. I would argue that we are all facing the same storm, but we are in different boats. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people in this country, not only in terms of fatalities, but also the infection rates. Moreover, there are several socio-economic factors that see folks from these backgrounds more adversely affected by this crisis, leading to a Dispatches television programme on Channel 4 last Monday arguing: “Is COVID-19 racist?”

Equally, the BLM movement escalated to international prominence with the killing of George Floyd in the USA, which was a racial justice issue because of who he was – an African American – and there is no shortage of evidence revealing the entrenched and perennial inequality facing Black people in the US criminal justice system as well as in housing, healthcare, employment and any other public policy sphere.

I have been the Director of Justice and Inclusion at CTBI for just over two years; I started in November 2018. Prior to this year, I received numerous invitations to talk about justice, but very few offers to discuss racial justice. I will say something about this in a few moments. I always make a joke of the fact that I have never met a church leader who was not interested in justice. Justice is a bit like love – which Christian, if they call themselves a Christian, would say they are not interested in love? It’s a similar thing with justice.

Conversely, I have heard Christians argue over the merits of equality, diversity and inclusion from a theological perspective - but never justice. The real challenge is defining what we mean by justice, as our understanding of it can differ.

So, any talk on justice needs to start with what it is or is not. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, justice is:

- The quality of being fair and reasonable. And the example sentence they use is: *‘the justice of his case’*
- Also, it is the administration of the law or authority in maintaining this. And the example sentence is *‘a tragic miscarriage of justice’*
- And a further definition is that of a judge or magistrate, in particular a judge of the Supreme Court of a country or state, and an example sentence of this is *‘It is, therefore, a matter of public interest who becomes judges of the lower courts and justices of the Supreme Court’*.

And the OED provides further legal and technical definitions for this term. The one I particularly like, which is not from the OED, states that, “justice looks at the systemic barriers to thriving, at the misuse of power that exploits people’s lives, labour, and dignity. This means that justice is intricately tied to power and seeks to repair harm and inequities. Powerful people command society’s political and economic resources, and utilize them to maintain power. In this way, they violate the basic rights of others that are essential to justice and cultivate a disordered, unequal society. Justice differs from charity and development, as it challenges powerful people and structures that perpetuate cycles of corruption and violence and disenfranchise the poor”.

The abovementioned interpretation is one with which I can engage, but what does the Bible have to say about justice? From a purely statistical perspective there are 130 references to it in both the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament. Figures reveal that 115 of these are in the Old Testament – 30 of which are in the Book of Isaiah, while Psalms mentions the word, in one form or another, on 17 occasions. Equally, of the 15 mentions in the New Testament, five of these occur in the Gospel of Luke. However, some academics have argued that the Greek word *dikaionês*, which appears hundreds of times in the New Testament, is translated in Latin or the Romance languages (Spanish, French, Italian, etc) as “justice”, but in English as “righteousness.” If we follow that argument, then the New Testament is replete with this term.

It goes without saying that there are some standout verses in the Bible which are a clarion call for justice, such as Micah 6:8 – “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. And there are a number of Christian organisations committed to effecting justice in one form or another, which have Micah in their names or titles.

So, the Bible has much to say about justice, but as God’s “word” to us, how do we understand his heart for this issue? If we read the Bible one cannot fail to see God saying on numerous occasions, “I love justice.” Throughout the Bible, he “denounces greed and calls for the right use of power”. What is more, he calls for the right treatment of the widow, immigrant, and orphan. These notions dovetail well with the “Four features of justice” paradigm, which state that:

1. There is a God of justice who is active in the world
2. The word of God has the power to change lives
3. God redeems and restores the victims of injustice
4. Christians are to embrace the biblical call to justice

What is notable about this model is that three of the features focus on who God is, and what he stands for. The fourth focuses on us and how we, if we truly love the Lord, must follow his example, and do justice. Jesus continues this focus on justice; at the outset of his earthly ministry, we read in Luke 4:18-19, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

In business terms, this would be a mission statement – a statement of intent which has justice running through it, and all over it. Theologians have argued that “being, doing and saying truth and justice” were central to the life of Jesus.

It is said that “Justice is love in action”, while the US academic, Prof. Cornel West argued that “Justice is what love looks like in public”. In Psalm 82:3 we are told to “defend the weak, and fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and oppressed”. By the same token, Jesus’ “Parable of the Good Samaritan” has justice at its core, alongside mercy and love. In Luke 10:29 the expert in the

law seeks to justify himself with regard to his question about his neighbour, to which Jesus tells him the parable about the Samaritan, an outsider who moved by compassion and a sense of what was just – does, to paraphrase the filmmaker Spike Lee- “the right thing” for the injured man.

It can therefore be argued that if you love people, like God does, you should love justice, because what we describe as “justice issues” invariably involve people. For instance, one of the most pressing issues of our age is that of climate justice, which involves our planet. Yet, people live on our “Big Blue Planet”, and it is the poorest ones who tend to be the most affected by this emergency. It also happens that they are the ones who are not responsible for causing these problems. So, justice issues are people issue.

It can also be argued that anything that denies the very source of humanity – that is the image of God in humankind, is a sin. Equally, anything that “destroys God’s likeness in every person and thus repudiates God the Creator, is sinful”. All human beings are “living icons of God and worthy of respect and dignity, so when we fail to treat others and creation with this respect, we insult God, who is the Creator”. As such racism is sinful because, among other issues, it assumes all are not equal before God and are not part of God’s family; it is contrary to biblical teaching and denies basic justice and human dignity. All who perpetrate it are guilty of sinful behaviour and all who fail to challenge it in Church and/or society are guilty of condoning or colluding with sinful behaviour.

So, the vision that should lead the Church, is one in which it is free of racism and is a just and inclusive community. Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr would describe this as the “Beloved Community”, where justice is one of the cornerstones. For this to happen there needs to be a transformation in us, our churches and our understanding of who we are in terms of God’s creation. Romans 12:2 says: ‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God’.

So, we are God’s agents for change in the world. However, the change starts with us working for justice in the place or places where we are located – the places where God situates us and with those around us. When Jesus unrolled the scroll in that Nazareth Synagogue and said those prophetic words, he was talking directly to those who were gathered. In Charles Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit*, one of the characters says, “charity begins at home, while justice begins next door”. I believe that the work to effect racial justice, much like charity, begins at home. However, it does not end there, because as Christians we must take a real interest in tackling all forms of injustice. I’m reminded of Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr’s famous saying that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”. Nevertheless, I would argue that the church in the West, if you can use that term, has singularly failed to truly engage with racial justice in its own locales.

As you would expect from someone in my role, I have numerous books, journals and the like on justice or social justice. However, very few of these focus in any detail on racial justice. Somehow, the racial dimension is ignored or played down in this conversation. If they do explore it, they tend to look beyond their context and milieu. It has been a similar story regarding the Church. For instance, in the 1970s and 80s there was plenty of racial injustice in this country, but churches preferred to focus on South Africa, and after this, areas of the world that had inter-ethnic conflict – Rwanda for instance with the Hutus and Tutsis. I believe it is noble to fight for justice abroad, but not at the expense of what is taking place at home.

The failure to seriously engage with racial justice is always exposed when churches and congregations make attempts to effect racial reconciliation. This time last year I attended a CTBI/Board of Deputies of British Jews event called ‘Invest in Peace’, which among other issues, gave Palestinian and Jewish Israelis opportunities to talk about the situation in their country. One

Palestinian speaker said the work to bring about real change in his country could not be reduced to “Hugs and Hummus”. I would argue that racial reconciliation must have racial justice at the centre. Sadly, we opt for our own form of “Hugs and Hummus” reconciliation in what I call “Curry goat and choir” conflabs – involving all Black choirs belting out verses of ‘Kumbaya’ or John Newton’s “Amazing Grace”, followed by large helpings of curry goat with lashings of Jamaican ginger beer. While I like a good choir, and also enjoy mouth-watering curry goat, washed down with that fiery, non-alcoholic beverage, our route to the destination marked “reconciliation” must pass through the racial justice highway.

The late, great and controversial African American comedian, Richard Prior, once said that when it comes to Black people, there is “no justice – it’s just us”. He was saying that Black folks in the USA have never received their just desserts in terms of equal treatment and fairness. I would argue that his comments about the USA also mirror what has taken place in this country because there have been countless government and civil society reports highlighting the inequality and racism faced by Black Britons, in terms of the criminal justice system, jobs, health, housing and other public-policy issues, but very little has really changed as a result of those reports. Only this year, the current Conservative Government established another taskforce to address these enduring inequalities.

With that being the case, what is the role of the Church in the work to obtain racial justice? I believe that the Church can begin to engage with racial justice issues by celebrating Racial Justice Sunday (RJS). This year marks the 25th anniversary of RJS, which takes place on the second Sunday in February and has three key aims, which are to “Remember”, “Reflect” and “Respond” to racism in Church as well as society. The first “R” is to “Remember”: Remember the importance of racial justice – the reality of racism in Church and society. It must be Church and then society because I believe that the Church should be a prophetic voice to society – but only after putting its own house in order.

The second “R” is to Reflect: Reflect on human diversity and thank God for it. Churches ought to use this day to celebrate who they are, and the fact that God has placed them in a unique position, which enables them to make vital contributions to the social, political and economic fabric of this country. This reflection on human diversity should also see churches disavowing a colour-blind theology/ideology. Although well intentioned, when someone says they don’t see colour they are denying the reality of something that should be celebrated. We talk about ‘celebrating’ RJS – not just marking it. It is human beings who make it a so called ‘problem’ – as in ‘race problems’. Ultimately, if someone says they “don’t see race”, then it stands to reason that they don’t acknowledge the reality of racism in Church and society.

This colour-blind approach has also been adopted by Black Christians and congregations who are concerned about talking about their Blackness for fear of offending their White brothers and sisters in Christ. As such, many Black churches do not describe themselves as such, arguing that they are “International” churches with names such as “All nations” to reinforce this. When you visit such churches, some have an abundance of international flags, yet the only international dimension to the congregation is that everyone comes from different African or Caribbean countries – they are internationally Black. Here’s the thing; the Black community in Britain has a range of unmet socio-economic, cultural and political needs – I highlighted them a minute ago. I believe that God has placed the Black Church in a unique position where it can address these needs. However, for various reasons, it has yet to fully embrace this role in ways that would make a real difference in the lives of those in these communities. These churches argue that they are at the heart of the community, but “locating” oneself in this instance means identifying oneself emotionally and socially with those who are directly near to you: Being incarnational in all senses of the word! I believe that the Black

churches and their leaders should be less worried about what others may think and more concerned about what God thinks and do what he is calling them to do. A good example of this is serious youth violence, which disproportionately impacts Black young people in this country, but as of yet, the Black churches have not been fully engaged in the work to combat this scourge.

And the last “R” is to Respond: Respond by working to end injustice, racism and ignorance in Church and society through prayer and action. Black churches often argue that because they are Black-led and have Black folks in all positions within the church, racism is not an issue. This finds an equivalent in those churches which are in mono-cultural areas and have all white congregations. Again, they would say racism is not an issue as they do not have any other “races” worshipping there.

Irrespective of whether racism is a factor in the Church, it is clearly one in society and unless we all live our lives in the Church, we will encounter it there. I believe that racism is so pervasive in this society that even if one adopts an “ostrich” approach and puts one’s head in the sand, it will still be found down in the dunes! It is interesting that those churches with few or no Black/diverse worshippers are invariably situated in places which tend to have, I would argue, less progressive views on ethnic diversity. I was born and raised in Bradford, which, although it has had its issues regarding ethnic tensions, always felt a relatively safe place when I was growing up. The “racial” problems I experienced always occurred on the occasions I visited neighbouring satellite towns and villages which had few, if any, Black or Asian residents. It was during those visits that I would have many unsavoury experiences. As such, I believe that the churches and congregations in these areas have a powerful, prophetic role to play in helping to change attitudes and behaviours on race-related matters.

I believe that George Floyd’s killing, and the Black Lives Matter movement have created a “Kairos Moment” for the church. However, this is not solely a time for talk, but action. The important thing about justice is that it is something you do. In Micah 6:8, it first of all says, “act justly”. You do not talk “justice” – you do it; justice is only evidenced by our actions, which should be tangible and substantive - activities that bring about positive change.

While it is good that we are talking about racial justice, talking is only the start; the Church must engage, and this means that it must be courageous and bold in challenging and addressing the racism that Black folks experience every day. Moreover, it must engage with these issues not only now, but when it is no longer topical or part of the *zeitgeist*. Racism did not start with the killing of George Floyd; sadly, it won’t end with it either. There are no easy answers, quick fixes or magic bullets to bring about its diminution and conclusion. My dear, departed mother would always remind me of that when Christ comes again, everything will be addressed properly. I believe that is the situation. But what would Jesus want us to do in the interim? I believe that would be to “act justly, love mercy and walk humbly before our God”. With that being the case, we, as members of the body Christ, or the Church, must ensure that this justice issue remains on the agenda until there is real justice. Anything less would be failing to do justice to this issue!

Questions

1. This year marks the 25th anniversary of Racial Justice Sunday in this country. With the exception of this year, why is it that as a Church, we have failed to properly engage with this issue over the last 24 years?

2. With regard to the Black Lives Matter movement, what one issue, concept, topic or idea has challenged you, or required you to think again? (White privilege, micro aggressions, unconscious bias or institutional racism?)
3. What should racial justice look like in the church?