

Sermon on Wednesday 10 June 2020

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Black Lives Matter

'Twice a day, I walk my dog Ace around my neighborhood with one, or both, of my girls. I know that doesn't seem noteworthy, but here's something that I must admit: I would be scared to death to take these walks without my girls and my dog. In fact, in the four years living in my house, I have never taken a walk around my neighborhood alone (and probably never will).'

Those are the words of American Shola Richards, who goes on to explain that if he were to take that same stroll alone, 'instead of being a loving dad to two little girls, unfortunately, all that some people can see is a 6'2" athletically-built black man in a cloth mask who is walking around in a place where he doesn't belong'.

This young father was prompted to tell his story after the outrage that followed the brutal murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests. It's but one snapshot into the fear and prejudice experienced by so many Black, Asian and ethnic minority people, not only in the US, but here in our own green and pleasant land. A few months ago, on the recommendation of a friend, I read the book 'Why I

no longer talk to white people about race' by Reni Eddo-Lodge.

In it, the author documents the history of racism in this country and talks openly of her own experience, not least within the liberal press and their unwitting collaboration with systemic racism. It was a deeply sobering and uncomfortable read which, I have to say, surfaced a certain amount of defensiveness in me. I felt accused and angry with the author at times. I found myself trying to justify my feelings – I'm not a racist – so why am I feeling so 'got at'? Eventually, I came to the conclusion that while that label 'racist' isn't always helpful, I needed to recognise the white privilege I enjoyed, the unconscious bias within me, and, yes, the racist thoughts I dare not admit to others. And I realised I had a choice. I could retreat into my comfortable corner of denial, or I could ask myself where that anger and prejudice comes from, and what I should be doing about it.

However enlightened or guiltless we believe ourselves to be, prejudice is programmed into us all. And often we're blind to it, because it's subtle and because, like the proverbial goldfish, it's the waters in which we swim unawares.

Right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he sets out his mission statement in what we sometimes call the Nazareth Manifesto, by quoting directly from Isaiah 62.

*'The Spirit has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor
....release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

And that is exactly what he went on to live and live for – for justice; especially for the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed; and to open the eyes of those blinded to injustice. In his encounters with others, and in the stories he told, often the heroes, the ones who reveal truth and compassion, are the outsiders; the minority. Jesus sides with the powerless and used what power he had to honour and speak for them.

Each one of us who were born white automatically have a privilege and power that most BAME people do not. The question, then, is how will we use that privilege and power?

You'll have heard it said, there is only one race –the human race. And if one part suffers, then the whole race suffers. Despite so much progress, racism is still very much with us. And it's not enough anymore to say we're not racist, we have to become actively anti-racist – to call it out in whatever form it takes, beginning within ourselves.

If you've found what I'm saying uncomfortable, then that makes two of us. The challenge I make to myself, and I'd encourage you to join me, is to try to set aside anything that makes us defensive (however justifiable we think it might be).

This will perhaps include:

- the rights and wrongs of mass demonstrations during a pandemic
- the criminal damage and looting that has blighted some protests
- the unhelpful argument of 'reverse racism'
- the smokescreen of insisting that 'all lives matter'

And then ask ourselves:

- why do our BAME brothers and sisters feel so victimised and unsafe?
- where is my unconscious bias?
- (if I'm white) what will I do with my white privilege?
- and, how can I seek to not only stand in the shoes of those living with racism, but also to speak for them; to call out all forms of racism I witness and model a deep respect for every child of God?

May our manifesto be the same as the Christ we claim to follow, that by grace we may begin to create the kind of world where an adult man doesn't need to hold the hand of an eight year old to feel safe.

