

Sermon 14 June 2020

Listening to 'others' Romans 5:1-8 and Matthew 9:35-10:8a

Last year at Greenbelt, a Christian Arts Festival, I was given a sharp lesson in what it is like to be a black muslim woman of faith.

I went to a talk called 'It's not about the burqa'. Three young black muslim women were talking about their experiences of living in the UK. Living the sort of lives many young educated women live, juggling family life, children and careers. I went to it as I was intrigued by the title, and assumed I was going to hear about feminism and faith. It quickly became apparent that as a white woman of faith I had no concept of the triple whammy of discrimination that these engaging women face. The triple discrimination of misogyny, racism and islamophobia.

I was challenged to realise how privileged I am, and my nieces and those I work with, we all face misogyny at some level, but the added burdens of racism and islamophobia are way beyond anything I have experienced. I realised that I had assumed a common ground by reason of gender. It was hard to listen to someone telling me that there was little common ground and that I certainly could not presume to speak on their behalf, or understand their perspective, simply by reason of gender. Indeed, their gender issues are likely to be different from mine, simply by reason of the colour of my skin. That gives me a privilege, one that I had been aware of, but I hadn't realised the depth of that privilege and the way I am blind to it. I had to put aside defensiveness and to listen and to listen well, for the hour of the talk

I recommend the book by the same title: *It's not about the Burqa*, a collection of essays by a variety of young black muslim women, from around the world, edited by one of the speakers: Mariam Khan.

But you know, while the talk and the book gave me insight, it got tucked away in my consciousness, and I quickly became absorbed in the things of my everyday life. After all, I don't come across many young black muslim women of faith in my everyday. I live in a very white city, in a white area, the Church of England is pretty much a white community. It quickly became something that affected 'the other', not me. But, of course these women, and other women and men of other ethnic and religious backgrounds **are** my neighbours.

We've talked a lot about the care we've received from and have given to our literal neighbours in the past few months. But loving my neighbour means more than doing their shopping and it's wider than the person next door. It's about making sure every one's lives have as much value as mine does.

Jesus told us to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. And that's why, having heard about the lives of women who are similar yet different from me, I should not have put them so far back in my mind. For their lives are as important as mine.

In the passage from Matthew, Jesus has been moving around through cities, and villages, teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news and curing every disease and every sickness. Everywhere he goes, the crowds come out to greet him, to watch him at work, maybe to be one of those needing to be healed. And Jesus sees that the crowds are looking for something, someone. They are like sheep without a shepherd. They are need of compassion; they are in need of hope. Paul describes that hope as coming out of suffering, which produces endurance, which produces character, from which comes hope. The hope that God brings does not disappoint, for it is God's love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus tells his 12 disciples to start doing his work, to go out themselves to proclaim the kingdom and to heal. To rebuild fractured lives.

Those of us who joined in the conversations this week – Where is God in a coronavirus world? – talked about morality – good and evil – the extent to which fear gives rise to hatred - and the extent to which there is always suffering. And of course there is always suffering, but should we, as Christians, be prepared to perpetuate suffering, or stand by and do nothing, where that suffering is happening to 'the other'. Suffering that has an institutional cause. Suffering that says it's ok for people to be policed differently from the way I would be, for such high levels of death among black youths from knife crime, for the higher impact of Covid 19 deaths among key workers from BAME backgrounds? Is it

right to stand by and do nothing? Should we hear Jesus' instruction to his disciples to go out and heal as applying to us? And if so, what do we do?

Catherine Okoronkwo's reflection, reproduced in the weekly sheet, tells us that we can do more than just read the statements and tweets of Archbishops and Bishops. This is where we can become the voice for the voiceless and to transform the lives of the oppressed.

She sets out 5 things we can do. And they are things we can do in our own homes. Some of them don't even need much courage. But they ask us to do what I found myself doing last August at Greenbelt – to be open to listen and not to be come defensive when something hurts me or challenges the way I live or think.

She says: Pray: Examine. Engage. Challenge and Stand Up.

Pray: We can be intentional in praying against the unjust structures and systems which impact people of colour adversely.

Examine: We should examine our hearts and our conscience, being honest about our unconscious biases and the position our privilege grants us.

Engage: We can engage with the discourse (no matter how uncomfortable it feels), do the work by increasing our knowledge and educating ourselves on the issue of racial injustice

Challenge: We should challenge racist and derogatory comments (even those said jokingly or flippantly) because indifference and complacency is an evil that is destroying the fabric of our society

Stand Up: We can stand up against all forms of racism, whether covert or overt; including societal injustices that result in socioeconomic and health inequalities

Maybe we need to understand more about how unconscious bias works. Maybe we wonder how all this fits into other injustices and suffering that we are already engaged with.

Maybe we are angry or disappointed or encouraged about some of the things that are happening in Bristol, conversations about the history of this place and how we honour, remember or change our perception of the practices of previous generations. Practices that have given this city great wealth. Caitlin Moran writing in The Times yesterday said this: for some people history is still an active thing. We are finding out new stories about our past all the time. History isn't a sealed set of facts. Instead it's something we are in constant conversation with.

In the same way, aren't we in a constant conversation with God? Is the Bible a sealed set of facts, or something that we can talk about, learn new things about things we might have thought were settled. Does the Holy Spirit convince us that all lives matter? All lives have a value? Are we afraid of those who are different from us?

How might we engage – increase our knowledge? I'm certainly not an expert and I was disappointed to see that Sam Well's book published in 2016 How then shall we live? Christian Engagement with Contemporary Issues, doesn't have a chapter on Racism despite covering issues from ecology, inequality, social media, family, marriage, domestic violence LGBT, bereavement, dementia and so on. And Jim Wallis' Gods' Politics is too American focussed to be helpful on the situation in the UK. So I have a few simple suggestions to start us off – watch A House Through Time – set this series in Bristol – 10 Guinea Street In Redcliffe – read Michelle Obama's autobiography – 'Becoming' – have look at the Bristol Festival of Ideas website – you can listen to past talks – several of which touch on living as a person of colour in the UK - read Catherine Okoronkwo's poem in the weekly sheet and use it for prayer.

Maybe add your own suggestions, we can put in them in the Weekly Sheet.

We have learnt since lockdown, if we didn't know it before that the buildings are not the church – we are the church. Jesus, as he sent his disciples out, saw the foundation of the church – across continents and millenia – and the church will change, the world will change, when we begin to look at people as Jesus did – when we look closely at their suffering and when we see them with the eyes of mercy rather than with fear'.

Amen

Sarah Thomas 14 June 2020