

Reflection for the First Sunday after Trinity (14.06.20) Revd Steph Nadarajah

You came down easy in the end.
The righteous wrench of two ropes in a grand plié.

Briefly, you flew, corkscrewed, then met the ground
With the clang of toy guns, loose change, chains, a rain of cheers...

...Colston, I can't get the sound of you from my head.

Countless times I passed that plinth,
Its heavy threat of metal and marble.

But as you landed, a piece of you fell off, broke away,
And inside, nothing but air.

This whole time, you were hollow.

An extract from 'Hollow' by Vanessa Kisuule, Bristol City Poet

And so, the dramatic events of the last few weeks continued on Sunday, in Bristol, with the tearing down of the statue of Edward Colston, a 17th century slave trader, from the plinth where he has stood in a position of honour for 125 years. A man who helped to oversee the transportation into slavery of around 84,000 Africans, of whom around 19,000 died on his ships, only to be cast overboard to be eaten by sharks.

Moved by Paul's sermon last week, I've spent the last week reading and listening to things that, I hope, might deepen my understanding about some of the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. I count myself among those who have been ignorant of the prominence accorded to people like Colston in cities around the world, including London, where a statue of Robert Milligan was hastily removed a couple of days later. Debates have ensued about how history is written and then reflected later in society; about whether and how monuments to the errors of the past should be cast out or preserved in museums; and, intriguingly, whether a person's good acts should be balanced against their bad ones.

It's a question that those of us who revered the spiritual teacher and founder of the L'Arche community, Jean Vanier, have been pondering for months. In February, it came to light that over a period of 35 years, he had manipulated and coerced six women into sexual activity. And so he, quite rightly, toppled off the plinth that many of us had put him on, while we came to terms with the truth about the man and lamented for his victims.

Of course, Jean Vanier did good things elsewhere in his life. But as the priest and theologian, Sam Wells, has written, 'Life isn't a balance by which you bargain to offset your mercies against your crimes. The truth is, his great deeds make his evil deeds worse.' (*Tell me it isn't true*, 26.02.20) And it's even worse, I think, when those evil deeds are conducted under the guise of faith and godliness.

All of this might make us wary of putting other people on pedestals. But it might also invite us to turn our attention to the values we live by in the 21st century, and to - as someone put it this week - identifying 'those aspects of exploitation and discrimination that still linger as weeds in our present context.' (Akhandadi Das, *Thought for the Day*, Radio 4, 09.06.20).

This is such an important task for us, as Christians, for our Christian faith is deeply embedded in social, political, historical and cultural narratives. And Christianity has colonialising tendencies, which have led to exploitation and discrimination both in the past and in the present. In many times and places, we have forgotten that we Gentiles were always outsiders in God's plan for God's chosen people, Israel (as our reading from Exodus reminds us). In many times and places, we have forgotten that we were first learners, grafted into a wider vision, and not teachers. As the black theologian Willie James Jennings has said, 'We have preferred to impose theological knowledge, denigrate indigenous knowledge and present a God who knows everything and wants to learn nothing.' (*Overcoming Racial Faith*, Divinity Magazine, Spring 2015)

When we look at our Gospel reading from Matthew today, it's not difficult to see how Christians could have got it so horribly wrong when it comes to mission. 'If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words....shake off the dust from your feet...it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.' It's not difficult to see how Christian mission could so readily lead to the imposition of one thing and the denigration of another.

Perhaps, then, we need to hear those words of Jesus afresh today. It's tempting to overlook the names of the twelve whom Jesus sends out, in favour of focusing on the task list before them. It's a list full of ordinary details about twelve ordinary people, that places them firmly in history: a tax collector, a Cananaean, the one who betrayed him. These are not heroes, but ordinary, flawed individuals with a past, a present and a future.

The other really interesting thing about this summons is that the motivation for it comes not from the head, but from the heart. Or, more specifically, the bowels. 'Jesus saw the crowds and had pity for them *in his bowels*.' That's a more accurate translation. This mission isn't about active teaching: it's about feeling the needs of the people amongst whom they've been placed and finding practical ways of meeting them.

And, in all of this, the apostles mustn't forget that they are as much in need as anyone else: dependent on the hospitality and grace of others. The particular ways in which they would love and serve might be dangerous, controversial or even unpopular. But the Spirit would be with them - working even when they got it spectacularly wrong, to do good, true and beautiful things in spite of them.

To hear Jesus's words afresh, reminds us that we should not only be wary of our heroes, but equally wary of seeking to become heroes ourselves. There'll be times when we might feel strongly that we are doing God's work - that we're doing good and worthy things in God's name, growing the church and building the Kingdom - and they're precisely the times that we should be cautious of. That's when we need to fall back into God's arms through prayer, so that we don't get carried away by our own delusions.

The things that Jesus asks of us are relatively simple, and he asks us to do them with openness and with humility, recognising that we work from the edges and from the margins, always more ready to learn than to teach. 'Sin', continues Sam Wells, 'is where you know you're doing wrong and either can't stop yourself or try to put it out of your mind until it catches up with you. Evil is where you've actually persuaded yourself what you're doing is good and right.'

So, may God's Spirit continue her work - not just in and through us - but in the wider world, casting down the mighty from their plinths and lifting up the lowly.

Amen.