

REFLECTION

with reference to Genesis 21: 8-21 & Matthew 10: 24-39

by Revd Paul Timmis

21.06.2020

A couple of weeks ago in this reflection slot, in the wake of the protests following the brutal killing of George Floyd, I dipped my toe into a broader conversation taking place in society and around the world about racism and privilege. On the same day the statue of slave trader Edward Colston was pulled down and unceremoniously dumped into Bristol Harbour.

When Steph last week reflected upon the removal of that statue, I hadn't necessarily thought of returning to the same subject today. But statues of historical figures tainted by racism and slavery have continued to fall this week - toppled by protestors or removed by institutions and governments - and the conversation hasn't gone away. And nor should it. If there's to be lasting change, we can't speak about something a couple of times and then simply move on.

In any case, our Bible readings today surely demand that we don't - given that the word 'slave' leaps out of both of them.

But let's get something out of the way up front. For those of us taught from an early age to respect other people's property, it's perhaps an instinctive reaction to reject acts of vandalism and criminal damage and to say, "This isn't the way we do things." But if the majority of us were affronted by something, we know that we'd have recourse to channels of communication that would allow our complaints to be heard and taken seriously.

As British-Nigerian historian, broadcaster and film-maker Professor David Olusoga, OBE has said this week:

"What these statues do is that they tell people from marginalised groups that their views don't matter. That they need to adapt...and tolerate living under the shadow of men who oppressed their ancestors. What's happening now is that people are listening. That's the big difference. Many of these statues have been the subjects of campaigns and petitions and appeals for many years for them to be removed. And all of those appeals have been rebuffed. Some people will tell you that to remove a statue is to erase history. But the problem with that is that statues aren't

very good at telling us our history. What statues tell us is one very simple message - that the man that they depict - and it almost always is a man - is a hero."

Oxford Professor and leading black theologian Dr Anthony Reddie invites us to see the pulling down of Colston's statue as prophetic action. "For many years we have suffered in silence the indignity of having a statue of - and many things named after - a slave trader, as if somehow that is a morally neutral activity that this individual was doing", he said, before adding, "We don't have statues to Nazis. We don't have statues to child abusers. We don't have statues to those who create genocide but somehow a statue to a slave trader... being pulled down...is worse than the fact that it existed in the first place."

That last point is hugely important. If our immediate response to the removal of a statue is indignance and outrage, we need to check ourselves. Because if we make this *the* issue, what we're actually saying is that property matters more than black people and their feelings, that we care more about the proprieties of law and order than we do about justice. And the question of property is an incredibly sensitive and emotive one given how slavery saw black people themselves becoming the property of white people.

What we understand by words can change over time, of course. And just because we hear the word 'slave' used in Scripture doesn't mean that we can draw easy comparisons between the transatlantic slave trader of the 16th-19th century and the practices of slavery in ancient Israel.

I get that. But I think we can leave those comparisons to one side today because, whatever the differences, in each case we *are* still talking about about one human life being deemed to be of less worth or value than another, we are still talking about the subjugation of a human being.

Take Hagar. We heard something of her story earlier. We know rather more about Abraham and Sarah, of course. And of how in old age they're blessed with the miraculous birth of a son, Isaac. Tradition has honoured rather less the story of Hagar - Sarah's African slave who was used to bear Abraham a son when he and Sarah had given up all hope of having a child themselves. Hagar had no say in the matter - raising the question amongst modern scholars as to whether she was raped. And, years later, when the miracle happens and Sarah does finally conceive and bear a

child, Hagar is given no voice when it's determined that she and her son Ishmael are surplus to requirements, an inconvenient presence, an uncomfortable reminder and they are subsequently cast out into the wilderness to fend for themselves.

That Jesus uses the term 'slave' seemingly without question or comment highlights that he doesn't appear to see its existence as problematic. It's an embedded and acceptable part of life in the world that he's grown up in. And Jesus has been shaped *by that world* - as we have been by ours. It also reminds us that Scripture needs to be carefully examined and wrestled with - but then we knew that already, of course, because we know all too well that, over the years, down the centuries, the Bible has been used to both defend and oppose the existence of slavery as we've come to define it.

A couple of weeks ago, we were reflecting upon the claim made in Genesis that we are all - each and every one of us on this planet - created in the image and likeness of God and therefore equal in God's sight. The most reassuring part of the story of Hagar and Ishmael is that, however shunned by others they might be, God's love and care for them is unrelenting. God protects them in the wilderness and sees to it that their future is secured.

In all honesty, the gospel reading isn't about slavery at all - it just happens to use the word. But the passage does speak of resistance and opposition to Jesus' way. In the face of such opposition, Jesus implores his followers not to be afraid, to remember that we are of inherent value to God. As we seek to engage as best we can with the *Black Lives Matter* movement, such knowledge can help us. But so too can Jesus' words that follow – for here he says that we can't go through life always looking to take the path of least resistance. We have to stand for something even if that makes life difficult. And not just "out there" in the world.

Carrying and embodying Jesus' message of love will cause us to step into uncomfortable places when those closest to us - family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues - find what we say difficult and react against it. Now, of course, and as Steph touched on last week, we always need to be prepared to listen to the views of others rather than assume that we hold the whole truth. I know that - but surely there will be some things in this life that we instinctively know are right or wrong and we'll need to speak up for or against.

If we take seriously the belief that we are all created 'in the image and likeness of God' then the statement 'black lives matter' is self-evident. It shouldn't need to be said. The fact that it does is a sad indictment of where we are and have been for way too long and it suggests that we have a long way to go. Black lives matter to God, absolutely. Whether they matter in our society and world is a different question.

For all that we desire to be carriers of Jesus' light and life and love in the world, those of us who are white need to proceed with care. As David Lammy, MP once famously said, 'The world does not need any more white saviours' – and surely he's right. The *Black Lives Matter* movement certainly doesn't need white people hijacking the agenda or the microphone - black people are more than capable of speaking for themselves.

But, if we desire to be good allies in the ongoing struggle for justice and equality, then, we not only need to listen and hear what black voices are saying to us, we also need to act. And our task - especially when there is not a black person in the room - is to speak up and call out racism and challenge racist behaviour and practices. We can't let things go - be it a racist joke from an otherwise kindly relative, a dubious Facebook post by a friend or a questionable decision or judgement made in the workplace.

And, in the same way, we need to be open to the possibility that we may well be pulled up on something that we've said or done and respond with grace and humility that we might continue to learn, grow and become better human beings. For me, all of this is the work of Christ and to reject it is a denial.

Some things have to be worth carrying a cross for. And living in such a way that each and every person on this planet has a right - and the opportunity - to at least try to find their life has to be one of them.