



# I CAN'T BREATHE

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BAPTISTS REFLECTING ON  
RACIAL JUSTICE IN 2020



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# WE WANT TO ENSURE THIS DREAM IS NEVER DEFERRED AGAIN

In his poem *A Dream Deferred*, the poet Langston Hughes asks what happens to a dream that finds itself deferred – in his case, a dream deferred because of racism:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over  
Like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags  
Like a heavy load.  
Or does it explode?

On Monday 25 May, the life was choked out of George Floyd by a white police officer's knee, defiantly asphyxiating his beautiful black body - in the full gaze of a watching public. It took the police officer just eight minutes and 46 seconds to complete this brutal killing, but it certainly did not defer George's dream. Instead, it launched his dream with explosive power.

Thanks to mobile technologies, unimaginable only a generation ago, live images rapidly circled the globe, and the whole world witnessed the 'lynching' of yet another unarmed black man by a law enforcement officer.

In this distressing footage - as one African American philosopher and

cultural critic, Cornel West, put it - the world glimpsed a reality that is far from exceptional for black communities in America. The terrifying truth is that, for black Americans, this does not amount to a significant deviation from 'normal'. Black bodies have repeatedly had the life strangled out of them, from the day they first arrived in a so called 'New World' - whether extracted by hard-labour under chattel slavery, whether reinforced by segregation under Jim Crow legislation of the 1930s (which denied black people equal rights in the southern states of America) or by public lynching. These are realities that must never be forgotten.

None of this can be side-lined as an exclusively American problem. The UK has its own terrifying histories of racist brutality. Sadly, it has taken the inexcusable death of George Floyd to alert white people everywhere, forcing them to dig deep into their collective psyche, and to begin to root out some of the endemic discrimination that still lurks only a smidgen below the surface. On an unprecedented scale, protests expressing the anger and longing for change, have finally catapulted race onto the public agenda across a broad spectrum of British society.

George Floyd's death has effected a global exposure of just how black people feel about the discrimination they habitually experience. For the first time in

my life, white people have had little choice but to listen. The truth that 'Black Lives Matter!' is self-evidently a matter of justice – and it will never go away unaddressed.

At the heart of this new series of blogs is a space to listen. Writers from many different perspectives present their stories. Some re-visit their own part in creating and maintaining discrimination. Others recount their experience of being on the receiving end of the very same discrimination.

This blog encourages followers of Christ to grapple with fundamental issues of truth: what it is like living as a person of colour in the UK in 2020, and what it is like from a white perspective to begin, under the Rule of Christ, to address the distortions created by unchallenged privilege and power.

It is unlikely that these blogs will make easy listening, but this is a matter of justice that is deliberately designed to challenge our intuitive preference for ease. Our hope, in the Racial Justice Hub, is that these blogs and the stories they tell will kindle and sustain new and continuing commitments to justice, both in our churches and in society more widely.

In the spirit of poem I quoted in my opening paragraph - we want to ensure that this dream is never deferred again.

## Reflection and study questions:

The night before the 'March on Washington', on 28 August 1963, Martin Luther King requested his aides for advice about the next day's speech. "Don't use the lines about I have a dream", his advisor Wyatt Walker told him. "It's trite, it's cliché. You have used it many times before."

Wyatt was spot on. King had used the refrain several times before. It had featured in an address a week earlier for a fundraising event, and just a few months before that at a huge rally in Detroit. As with most of King's speeches, most were deeply appreciated and applauded but none had been regarded as special. The 'I have a dream' speech was different.

The speech started ever so slowly. He stuck to his text. "I thought it was a good speech" recalled John Lewis – the leader of the student wing of the movement who had addressed the March earlier that day. "But it was not nearly as powerful as others. As he moved towards his final words, it seemed that he too could sense that he was falling short. He had not locked into that power he often found."

King was winding up what would have been an average oration by his standards. Suddenly, behind him King heard the words: "Tell em about the dream, Martin". These were the words of his good friend, Mahalia Jackson. The rest was history, as they say.

For all King's careful preparation, the part of the speech that entered the history books was

added extemporaneously while he was standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

It is open debate just how spontaneous the insertion of the 'I have dream' section was, but the facts speak for themselves, it is among the most famous speeches in the world.

1. Why do you think King's Dream Speech is so famous?
2. The Bible says, 'without a vision the people perish' (Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)). Why do you think this is?
3. What is God's dream for people of colour?
4. What steps does your church have to take to become anti-racist?

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Wale Hudson-Roberts is the Justice Enabler of the Baptist Union of Great Britain

# A TALE OF TWO SPACES

Every time I walk into any space, whether it is a church, restaurant, park etc, I ask the question: *Who has constructed this space? Who is it for? How does this space want us to behave?* This is important for me because so many of the spaces that I inhabit have little to no Black or ethnic minority people there, and as I look deeper I notice some really interesting things about how the space is constructed and how people are required to perform.

When I walk into churches I often find myself looking at the photos that display an all white leadership team or

pictures on the walls that represent our Christian story with images of a white, western-looking Jesus. I will be conscious of our Bible readings and songs that we sing where it suggests that to be pure we must be 'white' as the driven snow. When I find myself in these spaces it leaves me with a feeling that I am not seen, that I am somehow less.

Our values and rituals that we associate with our spaces are often very sacred to us. If someone enters our space and starts to subvert it by 'acting out of place' we can find ourselves very challenged and threatened. I want to explore this in more depth by starting with my own journey as a pioneer missional team leader in Birmingham.

In 2001 my wife and I moved into the Welsh House Farm community as part of a church plant initiative. The area has around 4000 people living there, and has lots of

social and emergency housing that is home to many people from different countries, ethnicities and cultures. In 2003 we set up the Haven Centre, which is a small community project that aims to work alongside and support the local community. It is at the Haven Centre where this story begins. I want to call this 'white space'.

I was doing a piece of research exploring food, hospitality and the Eucharist meal in marginal spaces. On this particular occasion I had invited several members from the Caribbean community to join us. One person, I will call CJ, straight away began to subvert the normal practices around this meal. When I explained about the Christian tradition of breaking bread and drinking wine as a way of remembering and participating in the Easter story he told me "We don't drink wine, we drink whisky, and what's this stuff called bread? We will be eating Jerk Chicken."

The day before the meal, members from the Caribbean community came to the Haven Centre to season the chicken. It's important to season it the night before to get all those great flavours soaked into the chicken. I then watched in alarm as they took the raw chicken out of the box, slammed it on the work surface and started to wash it with lemon and vinegar.



“What are you doing” I said, “the food hygiene course has told us that we are not allowed to wash raw meat, you will end up contaminating the place.” They all looked at me and laughed, then carried on washing the chicken. Once again practices and rituals that I had previously believed were wrong and unclean were subverting the space.

When I eventually calmed down we started a discussion about the importance of washing the meat. CJ said, “For me we need to wash away the years of oppression and slavery.” Another woman told me that to not wash the meat would invoke a feeling dirt and contamination if she were to eat it. Over the next two hours we talked a lot about systems, values and institutional racism. During these conversations I had come to realise that the Haven Centre’s practices and rules were based on white western values of economics and food hygiene. We had failed to see the deep traditions and practices of the Caribbean community that had been passed down from generation to generation.

My response to this was to leave my comfortable space at the Haven Centre and resituate the meal in CJ’s flat. As we drank whiskey and ate Jerk Chicken we talked about issues that centred around identity, race, spirituality, faith, power and white space.

“Christianity is a white man’s religion used to justify slavery and oppression to Black people”, he would say. I asked him a question, “For you to give Jesus any consideration at all what would need to change?”

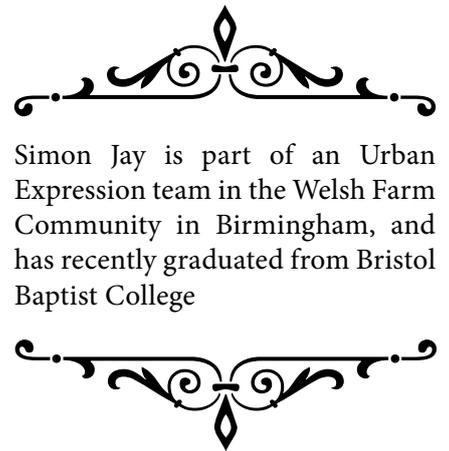
He said, “He would need to be Black”.

It was in this new space that we had the freedom to talk about a Black Jesus who stood in solidarity with the suffering and oppression of Black people. At the end of the evening CJ embraced me and gave thanks to the God that he recognised had been with us in that space.

As I reflected on how it felt to be in these different spaces I was left with the notion that at the Haven Centre something needed to change. It wasn’t just the way we prepared our chicken that created barriers of exclusion. The way we ran our meetings, appointed our staff and trustees and prioritised our values of time keeping and productivity failed to make room for people from different cultures and ethnicities. If we were to take seriously the issue of diversity and inclusion within the Haven we would need to allow our space to be disrupted and subverted by people with a different set of values and world views.

This is an important question for our churches. For many of us we have no idea that our spaces are places that exclude. It is often not until someone from a different culture enters that this sense of disruption begins to emerge. Unfortunately my experience has taught me that when this happens our temptation is to assimilate them into our way of thinking and behaving.

In her book *Making Room*, Christine Pohl encourages us not to reject or assimilate those that are different from us. Instead we should welcome them in and celebrate all that they bring. In doing so a new space is created that’s a little bit different, yet makes room for everyone.



Simon Jay is part of an Urban Expression team in the Welsh Farm Community in Birmingham, and has recently graduated from Bristol Baptist College



# REPENTANCE GROUND: AN AUTHENTIC LAMENT

Micah 6:8 (Amplified)  
He has told you, O man,  
what is good;  
And what does the Lord  
require of you  
Except to be just, and to love  
[and to diligently practice]  
kindness (compassion),  
And to walk humbly with  
your God [setting aside  
any overblown sense of  
importance or  
self-righteousness]?

**A** Shona proverb reads 'mwana asingachemi anofira mumbereko', in English this proverb translates, 'if you do not cry for help or give a voice to your complaints, no one will know or assist and your distress may worsen'. The context of the proverb uses the case of the baby that has no other way of communicating other than crying. The voices and cries of oppressed Black children, women and men have been echoing like trumpets throughout the ears of history, yet at times there has been failure to respond immediately to those cries from the Body of Christ, the church. Keeping silent in the face of injustice should bring us to our knees on the repentance ground of an authentic lament.

Stephen Lawrence was murdered in a racially motivated attack while waiting for a bus in Well Hall Road in 1993; George Floyd was subjected to inhumane and merciless brutality resulting in yet another death of a Black man as a result of systemic and

institutional racial injustices; Paulette Wilson, a prominent Windrush campaigner, was wrongly detained and threatened with deportation due to the 'hostile environment' - this demonstrated yet another Black woman fighting for justice for those affected by the Windrush scandal. Sadly, Paulette died unexpectedly at the age of 64. The cries of Stephen Lawrence, George Floyd, Paulette Wilson and many others continue to echo until true justice is achieved.

Desmond Tutu once stated, *"if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."*

With all the accounts of racism and racial injustice in health, education, employment, housing, public services and immigration, we need to call out sin as sin, and racism including all forms of racial injustice is sin. And amid these injustices we lament, pray and seek God's direction for practical action.

I often reflect on what God's Word says about the attitude of my heart, my innermost thoughts and intentions in responding to God's personal utterances. I am commanded to love my neighbour as myself (Mark 12:31) to seek the good of others over my own self-interest (1 Corinthians 10:24) to genuinely love others, hating what is evil and holding on to what is good (Romans 12:9). These commands are not only relevant to me but all believers

in Christ who are called to an authentic walk of sincere obedience to God's Word. Failure or ignorance to obey is disobedience.

God's Word helps us to recalibrate our priorities, values and self-interest in light of seeking the good of our brothers and sisters who remain oppressed and at the receiving end of racism and racial injustices in our churches and communities.

True change starts from within, there is a need to confront the difficult and uncomfortable exercise of reviewing the reality of white privilege and inherited white supremacy. True repentance will happen when genuine and honest introspection occurs, that leads to a deep lament and confession of committed sins. This lament is the passionate expression of grief when brokenness is experienced

as the result and impact of racial injustice; calling us to cry aloud, weeping and wailing that our Black brothers and sisters are being subjected to dehumanising and inhumane treatment. The actions that will follow from prayer and true repentance will be liberating and transformational.

The repentance ground of authentic lament will enable honest, humble and heartfelt prayers of confession, asking God for forgiveness. Therefore, we need to be intentional about understanding the reality, the history and facts about racial injustice if we are to address it. True repentance is about confession, an agreeing with God that what has been done in perpetrating racial injustice or keeping silent in the face of injustice is wrong. The evil of racism, oppression, slavery, killings and injustice will continue if we remain silent, and at present, we have not sufficiently dealt with the past so as to learn from the past.

The stench of the sin of racial injustice should strike at the heart of every believing Christian and we cannot be silent or look away. An African theologian, St Augustine of Hippo wrote, *'hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are'*.

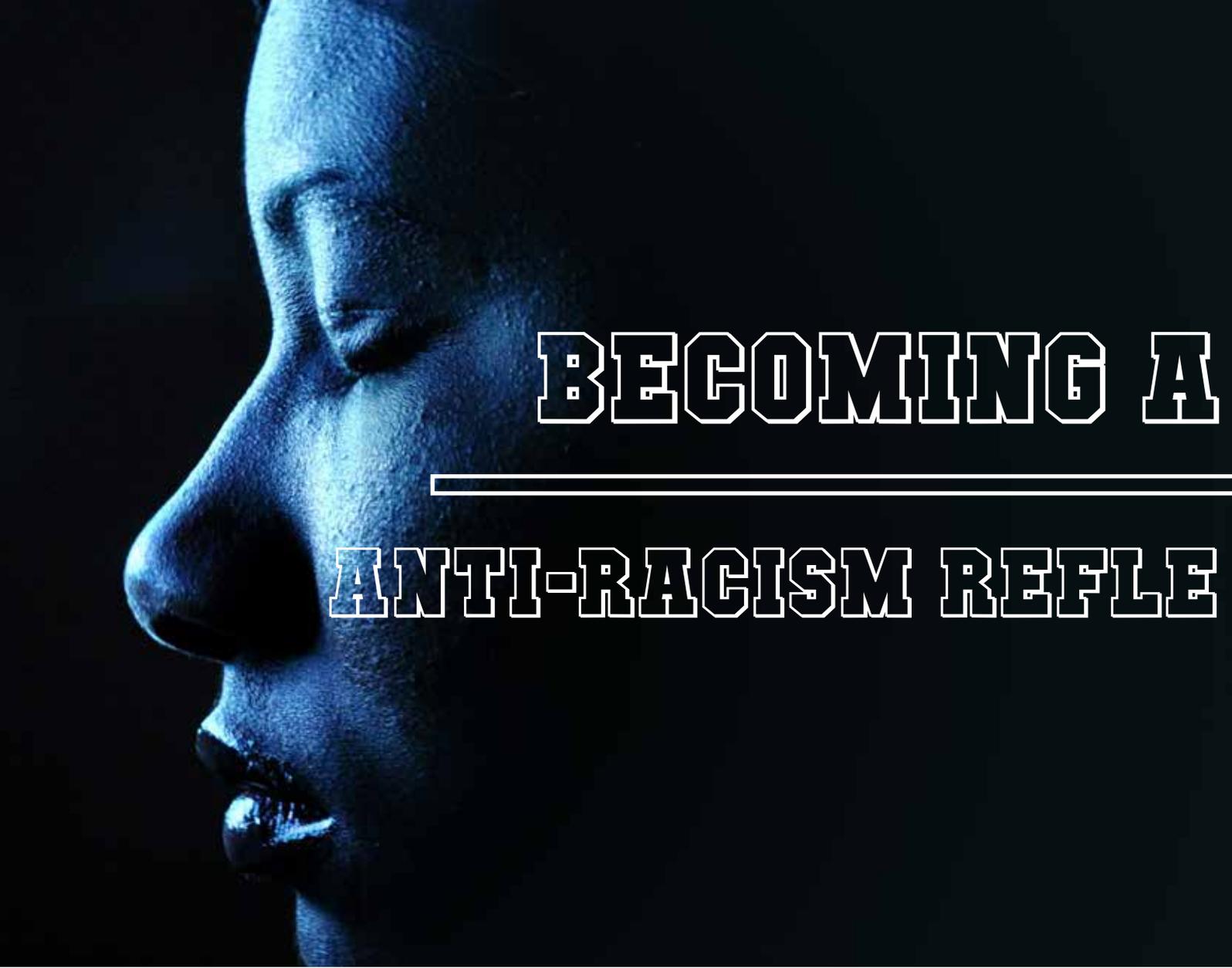
Christians are living stones and living sermons that need to stand up in anger, enraged by the racial injustices that we see and speak up courageously calling out racial injustices for what they are - sin.

An authentic lament before God will require actively, attentively and sensitively listening to the hurts of those who have had to suffer and continue to experience racial injustice. Safe spaces to articulate the impact and hurt will need to be on the foundations of truth and reconciliation.

Black people have been crying out for justice over the centuries, the question is: are you ready to listen?

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Charmaine Mhlanga is a Minister in Training at Sundon Park Baptist Church, Luton, Bedfordshire. She is currently studying for a Masters in Christian Thought and Practice at Spurgeon's College



# BECOMING A

# ANTI-RACISM REFLE

Hayley Young and Rich Blake-Lobb introduce the Anti-Racism Reflective Action group, formed to help Baptists set aside time to reflect with God and others about racial bias and how that is reflected in our ministry and mission

**I**n the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's murder in June, many of us reflected on how we could be part of a change of culture to really embody Black Lives Matter.

Justice Enabler Wale Hudson-Roberts wrote: 'As Baptists Together our tradition should fly in the face of superficial platitudes about racial justice, often from the comfort of our homes, churches and Baptist Associations. Rather, it should commit white Baptists to participate in sacrificial protest with your black

and brown sisters and brothers around the world. God is no neutral observer in matters of justice, racial or otherwise. God sides against injustice, with countless numbers of people of colour in this country and everywhere, where people cry out in pain: "I can't breathe ..."

These are powerful words and laid down a call to change to white ministers, pastors and members of Baptist churches that we move beyond the hashtag, or temporarily turning profile pictures black, and be committed to sacrificial protests.

Many of us (white ministers) felt ill-equipped as, to our shame, we hadn't done the work of becoming anti-racist. Many of us leading churches, felt that we weren't negative or racist, but we had not set aside time

to reflect with God and others about our own racial basis and how that is reflected in our ministry and mission.

So, a group of ministers, regional ministers and college staff came together via Zoom to create the 'anti-racist reflective action group'; we started by reading together *Me and White Supremacy* by Layla F Saad.

This book was incredibly challenging as daily we were confronted with our unconscious biases and caused to think about our background, culture and how that impacts our thought-process.

The book challenged and convicted us, as white people. At times we felt uncomfortable, but acknowledged our discomfort is as nothing compared to the daily racism



# ANTI-RACIST

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# ACTIVE ACTION GROUP

experienced by our black brothers and sisters. It was a process that we needed to start, and should not end with the reading of a book, but in our own changed behaviours, ongoing listening and actions.

We continue to meet weekly over Zoom to reflect, lament, and give space for us to be challenged.

The book spoke to us about our thinking and I think all of us who took part can say that we have been changed by the challenge the book presented to us.

We acknowledge that this is an ongoing process of us becoming anti-racist and now, out of that reflection, we are continuing to journey together as a group of Baptists on Zoom, to work through *We Need*

*to Talk about Race* by Ben Lindsay. And we move our reflection to how we can lead and be in churches and communities and model being anti-racist.

We acknowledge as a group of white ministers and college staff that our work has only just begun. We recognise that despite previous appeals, reports and recommendations for change (such as the *Journey Report* (2011), BUGB: Faith and Society) we have failed to heed these calls or action the proposals and therefore failed in our commission to love our neighbours. As we continue to challenge, change and motivate our places of influence we acknowledge that saying sorry is not enough, we must move beyond the platitudes and into positive action.

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Hayley Young is the Regional Minister (Mission Enabler) for the South Wales Baptist Association

Rich Blake-Lobb is Minister at Yiewsley Baptist Church, London.

# REFLECTIONS ON MY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE, BLACK LIVES MATTER AND THE FUTURE

In the space of a few weeks, many of us had to adjust to a new way of living, working and interacting. Lockdown meant that my final A Level exams were cancelled (and that did admittedly feel like a silver lining), but what really surprised me was how capable we all are of making changes to our lifestyles.

As we move forward I am optimistic that these changes will reflect the spirit of the Black Lives Matter movement and the treatment of black people in our society. We've all seen the videos, the posts and the protests, but on a day-to-day level what does this mean? And how can we ensure the momentum of the BLM movement creates a lasting change to the way black students are seen in places of education?

Throughout secondary school, I experienced a dismissive attitude

towards race. I went to a fairly diverse girls' school, so in a way it was difficult to pinpoint why we black girls felt at a disadvantage; we rarely ever had to deal with overt racism and on a personal level, teachers didn't seem to treat us any worse because we were black. However, looking back I am able to see why many of us felt that way and why it's important that other black students are equipped with this insight.

Secondary school is naturally a lot more competitive than primary school; you're ranked based on academic ability almost as soon as you step through the doors and systems such as class sets (usually started in the upper school) and programmes for 'Gifted and Talented' students are introduced. I was well behaved and by Year 9 I was placed in most 'top set' classes, but I noticed

the absence of black girls in those spaces, chosen for special opportunities and in positions of responsibility.

The 'Gifted and Talented' programmes excluded many black students because they were dependent on teacher opinions towards students and subsequently their biases. When the few black students were chosen to be on those programmes, it was because they were literally the best at their subject, whereas other students were also judged on their perceived potential. In some cases, grades weren't even a factor for white girls getting opportunities, it was clear that likeability was good enough.

The problem with academic programmes like that was the way they allowed teachers to categorise and profile high achieving black students as if they were somehow different to the rest of the black community, like we were just an exception to the rule. Once these

categories had been established, there was no flexibility in the system to allow other black students to move up and there were countless times when the efforts of the academic black students were ignored while other students were publicly praised and rewarded.

By Year 11 I had decided to organise the annual Black History Month assembly, but it was made clear to me that it was a tradition teachers wished to stop. They let us know we were also being judged on the perceived 'disorganisation' of the previous Year 11s. I was keen to base the assembly on positive black British history, educating people on inspirational figures they may not have heard of with a film I had made myself, and I was excited to involve other people in my year group, retaining the 'fun' celebratory aspect of the annual event with African drumming and singing.

I distinctly remember the Deputy Headteacher trying to convince me that it wasn't a good idea, but to ensure I didn't think she was racist, she told me she 'didn't see colour', and that in her family they didn't mention race when referring to people. Though she'd meant to reassure me with that statement, in my opinion mindsets like that contributed to the disadvantages we faced throughout our time there. In that particular instance, the teacher was not able to comprehend why the assembly was important and she could not see that for the black students, it gave a sense of community and recognition. In the long term, through pretending they had no biases and no awareness of race, teachers could overlook the recurring lack of opportunity for black students.

It was the one hour in the year that we could tell people that we were

different, that we don't all have an equal starting point in life but that we did have a history beyond slavery. I realise that it had become 'disorganised' and centred on entertainment in the past because of the pressure of trying to fit thousands of years of information into one event without proper support and to an audience that was reluctant to learn about black history. Had the curriculum been more diverse, we wouldn't have felt the need to educate teachers and students ourselves - it shouldn't have felt like our responsibility.

I believe the BLM movement will help students because acknowledgement of race is the first step for schools. Furthermore, reminding people that the movement does not take away from the experience of other ethnicities, and shutting down counterproductive statements like 'all lives matter', has been a great turning point. This is because schools often boast a one-rule-for-all system with punishment and opportunities but it is a similar extension of practising ill-informed equality over equity which often ends up with a disproportionate number of black students being punished and a disproportionate number of white students being rewarded.

Many people have understood that it is not enough for individuals and institutions to pretend we are all on an even playing field, and schools are no exception. It isn't enough for white teachers to ignore their privilege and the privilege of white students when they label us 'intimidating', deny us opportunities and underestimate our grades and trajectories. This also means acknowledging that, even if they don't understand our

experiences, there is a wider problem - and that there is a myriad of ways they can help to correct it.

We need teachers to recognise our blackness, to understand that our experiences are different and question why so many of us continuously end up at a disadvantage. We also need to see a more diverse range of role models in the curriculum and in the classroom. I was lucky enough to have had two excellent black female maths teachers who inspired me to study Maths A-Level, but I know more role models like that would have encouraged others and may have prevented staff undervaluing black students as well.

With schools now reopened for all students, I hope the conversations and ideas we've had in lockdown have been brought back into the classroom and, given that many young people are on social media, I think open discussions about the impact of what we've witnessed over the last few months would be invaluable.

I dedicate this piece to readers who have lost loved ones to Covid-19.

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Tabatha Crook is an 18 year old first year student currently studying Architecture at University College London. Outside of her academic study, Tabatha has been working with her local mental health service to improve care for children and teenagers, and does her best to raise awareness about the issues which affect our lives such as racial inequality.



# RESPONSIBILITY

**R**esponsibility. That is a word that has been on my mind since George Floyd was murdered, though it has shaped my life and thought since Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson on 9 August 2014.

Who is responsible? It might seem like an easy answer. The guy who shot Michael is responsible. The officer whose knee choked George's neck is responsible. But what about the three other police officers who stood by? Oh yes, they are responsible too. And here lies the heart of my reflection.

When the individual, George Floyd was brutally murdered in an act of racist violence by a group of four white men, almost

the entire global black community felt something. It seems they felt the life strangled out of his body as though it was their own. They felt the pain, the lack of air, the injustice, the evil. They relived the senselessness and moral failure of systems and structures which exacerbate such atrocities, or which are simply complicit in the destruction of black bodies.

I have close friends who struggle to express themselves because they feel George's death so tangibly, as a collective who bleed in solidarity with yet another victim of white violence. Black lives identify with George Floyd, with his story, his plight and the grief that remains in the wake of this event. Black folks truly can't breathe because George

Floyd no longer can, and this stems back centuries. I don't fully understand this, but I perceive it, I acknowledge it, I believe in it, and I lament everything around it.

In contrast though, when the individual, George Floyd was brutally murdered in an act of racist violence by a group of four white men, the general posture that was taken within the global white community was to point the finger at the officers involved. How intriguing, that as white bodies, we attempt to disentangle ourselves from any association with a group of people who wear the same skin as us, in an attempt to absolve ourselves of any responsibility.

What's noticeable is that one individual was murdered, but a whole community suffer. Yet, a whole group effectively commits that murder, and a whole community retreats from any identification with the killers.

Why? What is going on here? I'm sure there is far more to this than I can understand, but for now, I want to raise the issue of responsibility. Talking about blame is too sharp, possibly too abstract and therefore, unhelpful for going anywhere. Plus, white fragility is a real thing and some of you may have already stopped reading, so I'll try and be gentle with us!

I could say, "I'm not racist," but that is missing the point in a world where our entire story is already shaped for us, from geography to politics, and family to theology. We are all born into a world that carves out our norms and customs, so that we do things without even thinking about it half of the time. We are all participants in a world that has already decided how we should live. Saying, "I'm not racist" does nothing other than highlight the profound individualism that we are born into as white folks, and which keeps us from being faithful to Christ over and against the world's story. Let me explain what I mean.

Of all people, Jesus is not to blame for racism, or any evil for that matter. Hopefully we can all agree on that? Jesus is the self-revelation of God within creation's time and space. In Christ, God both affirms the world that he loves, and also judges it for failing to be the world he created it to be. To paraphrase

Karl Barth, Jesus is God's Yes and No to creation. Jesus could quite legitimately walk around and point the finger at everybody, highlighting how their issues are their own fault, and explain who is to blame for this or that problem. However, he doesn't do that.

No, Jesus takes a crazy approach, by making himself personally and solely responsible for all sin, suffering and sorrow. He freely postures himself towards it in Gethsemane, in order to bear it fully on the cross. I don't have space to discuss how to construe this in terms of atonement theory, but that's not my main point. We believe that Jesus is not to blame for evil. However, he bears the responsibility for it while also becoming its ultimate victim through his Passion.

What does this mean for us? Well, I can't say everything I want to, but let me ground my thinking.

If Jesus demonstrates who he is by bearing responsibility for the world's sin and suffering even though he is not actually responsible for it as an individual, then surely, as those who are called to participate in his life, death and resurrection, we are to bear responsibility too for that world.

Moreover, I believe white folks bear a genuine responsibility for present conditions around racism, even if only in the way we inherit them from our ancestors, and so the way I do or do not respond makes me in some ways responsible.

As individuals, we are called by Christ to pray, speak and act

with a world that God loves, and not be held back by our own individual self-justification (which we are apparently meant to be saved from anyway!). As a white man, I believe I am called to proclaim with all my heart that racism is evil and not in accordance with God's kingdom, whilst simultaneously repenting of my innate desire to avoid any responsibility for it. My individualism must die, so that I, as a free individual, can learn and grow in redressing these patterns and stories which perpetuate my ignorance and destroy black bodies today. On the cross, God in Christ bore all black flesh, and he bore all white flesh as well, binding us together, and making us all responsible in him.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains, 'We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians it means that we are to take part in Christ's greatness of heart, in the responsible action that in freedom lays hold of the hour and faces the danger, and in the true sympathy that springs forth not from fear but from Christ's freeing and redeeming love for all who suffer.' (*Bonhoeffer Works English Edition* Vol 8, page 49)

Let's recognise our responsibility in Christ for, and with, a world reconciled only in him.



Tim Judson is pastor of Honiton Family Church in East Devon. Having trained at Bristol Baptist College, he is writing a PhD thesis exploring the place of lament for the Christian community in dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

# WHY IT IS A LIE TO SAY ALL LIVES MATTER



**T**he obscene murder of George Floyd on 25 May shone the spotlight on the glaring inequalities and injustices in our society. The shocking scenes of a black man being suffocated by a white police officer, who had his knee pressed down on Floyd's neck for several minutes, provoked shock, grief and outrage around the world. The horrific spectacle of a black man being suffocated to death was rendered all the more distressing by the faint sound of Floyd's plaintive pleas to his murderers. "Officer, I can't breathe", Floyd pleaded repeatedly as the life drained out of his crushed body.

This horrifying footage of a black man literally being crushed to death triggered a wave of protest and brought issues of racism and social injustice to the forefront of the political and social agenda. Many churches and Christian organisations issued statements condemning the brutal murder. However, although it was encouraging to see some Christians taking an unequivocal stand against racism, it was also frustrating and disappointing to see many others taking refuge in the bland, universalising cliché that 'all lives matter'. In this blog, I want to explain why I believe that this seemingly noble statement is in fact wrong, misleading, and misses the point, as the footage of Floyd's murder made so clear.

What was required from churches

in response to the murder of George Floyd was not liberal, pseudo-inclusive clichés and high-minded moral platitudes, but resolute and unequivocal solidarity with black people, whose bodies and souls continue to be blighted by the curse of racism. As a vague aspirational philosophical statement of liberal universalism, it is in some sense true that 'all lives matter'. But in a more profound sense – the sense of compassion, empathy and solidarity – the statement is a lie. It is wrong and is a diversion from what really matters at this time: tragically, it does not express the harsh reality of the world today in which Black lives are routinely devalued by racist attitudes that find expression in unjust social and political systems.

The inadequacy of seemingly inclusive statements can be seen by analogy: If I am attending my grandfather's funeral, I would not be comforted if someone were to say to me, "it's sad about your granddad, but everyone's granddad dies eventually." Likewise, after the Manchester bombing atrocity in May 2017, the tagline, 'We Stand with Manchester', was shared widely in the media. It would have been completely tactless, even offensive to the people of Manchester, to have said, 'We Stand with All Cities'.

No matter how 'true' (in the most superficial and banal sense) such universalising statements might be, they would be seen as totally crass and inappropriate for the occasion. This is why the platitude, 'all lives matter', is a similarly thoughtless and insensitive response to the murder of a black brother at the hands of racist thugs, masquerading in police uniform as the forces of 'law and order'.

What black brothers and sisters needed from the church after the murder of George Floyd was not expressions of sympathy or vague platitudes about how 'God values the lives of all people'. What was needed was resolute solidarity and costly repentance.

The lame response of many churches to George Floyd's murder reminded me that the duty of solidarity has not been adequately emphasised in our theology or preaching today. This may partly explain why solidarity has become something of a forgotten virtue in our churches. It's a word that we don't often hear, even though it is one of the key moral imperatives of the Christian faith. If one part of the Body of Christ is bleeding, the pain should be felt in a visceral way by all other members of the Body.

Yet instead of solidarity and empathy, we have complacency and ignorance. Apathy is prevalent even among Christians – those who are supposed to be 'the salt of the earth'. The world is weeping from



the constant assault of inhumanity and cruelty. Tragically, George Floyd was just one example of the crucifixion of black people in the world today. Christ, therefore, remains on the cross today. God continues to be crucified anew every day because of the racism and cruelty that people inflict upon their fellow human beings.

So we need to ask the question: What's the point of claiming to be a Christian, a follower of the Suffering Servant, a disciple of the Crucified Messiah, if we have nothing to offer but sentimental platitudes that express a thoughtless indifference towards suffering people? Indifferent Christians – apathetic ‘believers’ whose hearts don't rage with indignation at the injustice of a sin-intoxicated world that can put its knee on the neck of a person who bears the divine image – such

‘Christians’ are denying their God-given calling to promote and live God's Kingdom here on Earth. They are ‘no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot’ (Matt 5:13).

As well as solidarity, our black brothers and sisters need our repentance and they need to see the fruits of such repentance. By repentance, I don't mean a verbal apology that we say once and then we're finished. Repentance from a biblical perspective is a way of life that actively confronts sin whenever it gains ground in our thinking and behaviour. Repentance is a way of living, rather than a one-off event.

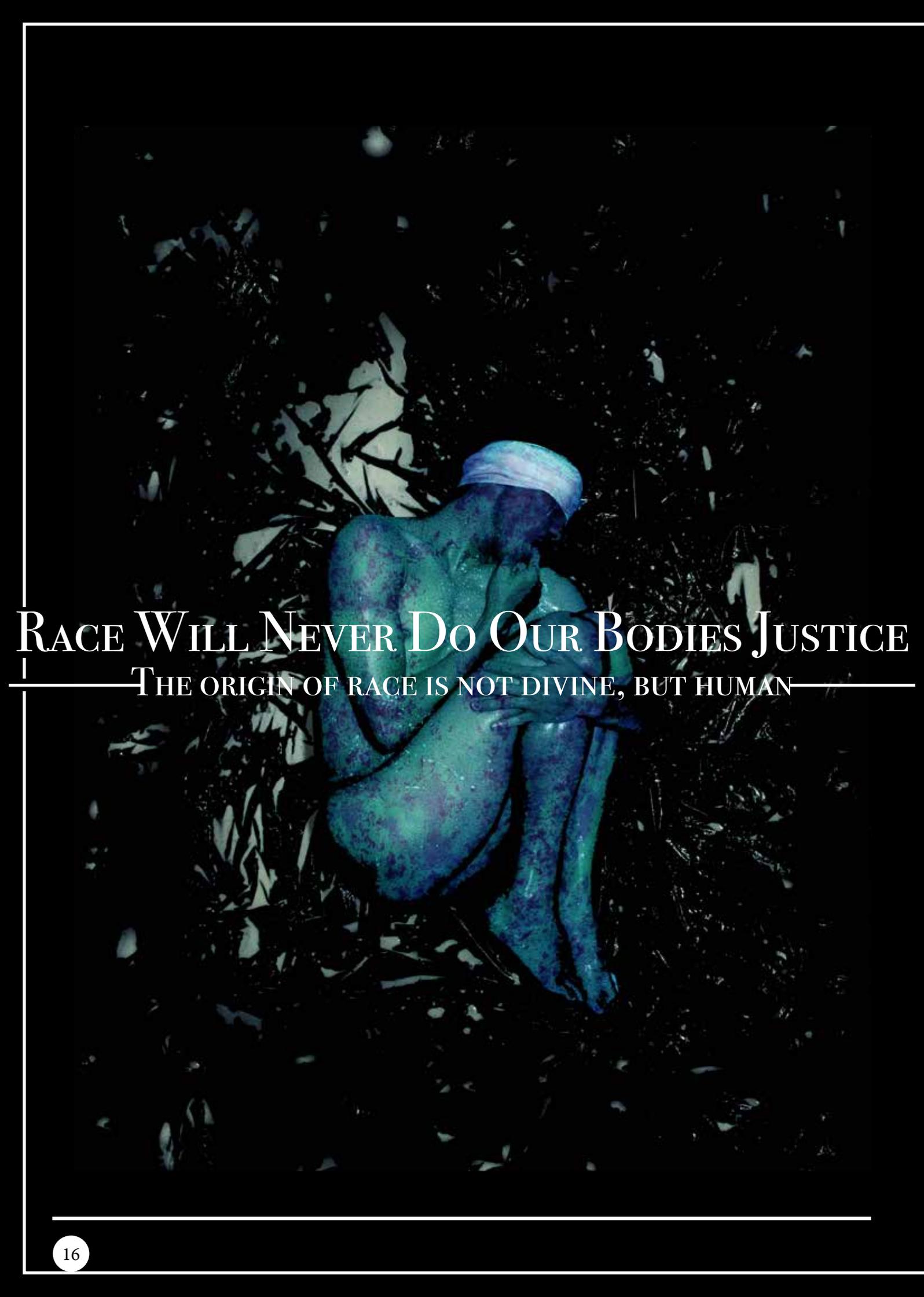
Similarly, the sin of racism is not a one-off event, but is something that we encounter every day in our dealings with individuals and with

systems and organisations that are institutionally racist. Whether we're aware of it or not, we all live with and participate in the patterns and practices of racism. What the Apostle Paul calls ‘the dividing wall of hostility’, which creates enmity between people of different races, is continually being rebuilt and needs to be continually torn down.

When we, the church, have become accustomed to tearing down this wall on a daily basis, then, and only then, will we be in a position to say with truth and integrity that, ‘All Lives Matter’. We're not there yet and there is still a huge amount of work to do. God, have mercy upon us.

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Joshua T Searle is Tutor in Theology and Public Thought; and Director of Postgraduate Studies at Spurgeon's College

A person with intricate, colorful body paint (red, yellow, and black) is sitting in a dense, dark forest. They are wearing a white headband and have their hands clasped in front of them. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the person against the dark background.

RACE WILL NEVER DO OUR BODIES JUSTICE  
— THE ORIGIN OF RACE IS NOT DIVINE, BUT HUMAN —

Where does race come from? It is not innate, not natural, not as up close and personal as we make it. And this is a part of the problem. It is the fact that the Church identifies its members' bodies and consequently, the Body of Christ, with the sociopolitical construct of race.

What do I mean by 'sociopolitical construct'? We made it up. The origin of race is not divine— but human. Race was not 'in the beginning'. Brian Bantum says in *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World*, race is 'a word made flesh'. He says, 'Race is a tragic incarnation...'

We have chosen an idea about identity over the imago Dei. It is the way that we have agreed to relate. Charles W Mills calls it 'the racial contract'. He writes, 'The peculiar contract... is not a contract between everybody ('we the people'), but between just the people who count, the people who really are people ('we the white people').' These socially coloured white people have agreed to dominate other cultures and we accept it. Nod our heads in agreement every time we refer to ourselves as coloured people— because white is a colour too.

Never mind the words of the once scale-eyed Apostle Paul who wrote to the Galatians: 'As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (3:27-28 NRSV).

One. And there's no need to feign deafness because Paul says it again to the Colossians: 'Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its

practices and have clothed yourself with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the creator. In that renewal, there is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all (3:9-11)!

All. No wiggle room and no way we are getting out of this truth.

This has already been debated and resolved at the Council of Jerusalem with Peter and Paul, Simeon and James (cf. Acts 15.1-21). These differences were settled in Christ and through our baptismal identity. We belong to him. We begin again. New creatures, erasing all that we were back then. All these divisions are brought together in him; he consumes them all when we go down in the waters with him.

Hatchets and our hatreds buried.

The same can be said of the sociopolitical construct of race. Here are no longer beige (ie bi-cultural) or brown people. There are no longer black or red people, yellow or white people. Paul said to the Corinthians, 'Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings...' (15:39, NRSV). Amen. Amen?

But I cannot get an "Amen" in most churches. Why? Perhaps, it is because the Church has coloured in God's face and Jesus's face, coloured in sacred space. Black Church. White Church. We live in black and white. We live these racialised identities — not the baptismal one offered through Christ. Born again, we are not. Instead, we offer more of the same differences.

Segregated on Sundays even; there is no such thing as race relations. Because race makes us strangers

to ourselves first and then to our neighbour for no other reason than our physical appearance. We let the eyes have it and they determine which bodies count. And the body count for crimes committed in the name of race, sacrificed to this idol of aesthetic supremacy are unknown as the bodies keep piling up in the middle of city streets and in their homes.

In North America, the names include George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and Elijah McCain. They are the most recent but this has been happening for a long time. See Ida B Well's *The Red Record*, published in 1895, where Frederick Douglass writes in the preface:

If the American conscience were only half alive, if the American church and clergy were only half Christianized, if American moral sensibility were not hardened by persistent infliction of outrage and crime against colored people, a scream of horror, shame and indignation would rise to Heaven wherever your pamphlet shall be read.

But I haven't heard much. Because race won't allow it. Race will never do our bodies justice.

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Starlette Thomas presently serves 160 churches as the Minister to Empower Congregations with the District of Columbia Baptist Convention, USA and is pursuing a Doctor of Ministry at Wesley Theological Seminary. She regularly blogs on the intersections of race, faith and community-building at [racelessgospel.com](http://racelessgospel.com)

# WHY RACISM IS NOT ONLY SINFUL AND B

**T**he banality and superficiality of some of the responses from churches and Christian organisations to the murder of George Floyd reminded me of the urgent need for theologians to grapple with the ugly reality of racism in our society today.

In my teaching at Spurgeon's College, I lead a seminar on racism as part of my module on Christian Ethics. At the start of the seminar, I usually open up the discussion by asking the students a provocative question: "What exactly is wrong with racism from a biblical/theological perspective?"

I'm often surprised at the inability of even the brightest students to articulate a clear response to this urgent question. The responses tend to mimic the patterns of the contemporary media, which criticises racism on the grounds of discrimination and inequality. Rarely are students (of any ethnicity) able to formulate a robust biblical case against racism, using the full weight of Scripture and Christian tradition.

I think it's essential for my students, many of whom will go on to become significant leaders in their churches and communities, to understand that racism is deplorable,

not only because it promotes injustice and inequality, but because it is a blasphemous violation of the sacred dignity of a human being who bears the divine image. Racism is not merely a social problem, but a sin or a blasphemy. Here are the three main reasons, from a biblical perspective, why racism is sinful:

## **1 Racism is sinful because it is a form of idolatry.**

Racism turns racial identity into an idol and the concept of race is defined as the ultimate and immutable defining characteristic of what it means to be human. This is the kind of idolatry that would fall under the condemnation of the Apostle Paul when he spoke of those who "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator."

## **2 Racism is sinful because it defines human beings in terms of superficial biological characteristics.**

Rather than recognising the essential spirituality of all people, racism reduces human beings to biological identity. Christianity defines the human being primarily in terms of spirit, rather than biology. For the racist, a human being is little more than a carbon-based biochemical phenomenon. For the Christian, by contrast,

every person, regardless of their particular biological characteristics, is 'an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God's great universe' – to quote the words of Dallas Willard. Racism is therefore both anti-Christian and anti-human. The gospel issues a resounding 'No' to all forms of racism.

## **3 Racism is sinful because it destroys community.**

The Bible makes clear that God has ordained community as his primary means of building his Kingdom on Earth. Scripture testifies to God's plan to reconcile diverse people into a healing unity in Christ by the redeeming power of the Holy Spirit. This reconciled community stands in stark contrast to the sinful politics of today that exclude people in the name of race, gender, class, ethnicity, nation, etc. This is the essential theme of the Epistle to the Ephesians.

The author refers to the creation of this new



# ONLY WRONG, BUT ALSO LASPHEMIOUS

redeemed community as 'the mystery of Christ' (Eph 2:14) – ie the reconciliation of distinct races into one new humanity by breaking down the walls of hostility and making peace between them. Racism perpetuates division and enmity by dividing humanity into groups. Racism is therefore inherently destructive of community. When we use such categories as Black, White, Jew, Gentile, etc. to define ourselves in opposition to those whom we perceive to be inferior, we impede the coming of God's Kingdom. We obstruct and frustrate the will of God to create a new reconciled humanity.

Students, pastors and all members of Baptist churches should understand that from a biblical perspective, racism is not merely a social problem, but constitutes a grievous violation of God's plan for the reconciliation of the nations.

We would do well to remember the life and teachings of Martin Luther King Jr who, had he still been alive today, would have celebrated his 91st birthday earlier this year. His legacy has so much to teach us today about how to

confront the sin of racism in the post-George Floyd era.

Liberal secular campaigners engage in commendable work by protesting against discrimination, inequality and other social problems. But King's perception of society's ills was and is far more profound and true. With the eyes of faith, King saw that racism was not simply a social or economic problem, but a *metaphysical disease*, a spiritual malady and a symptom of a nation whose soul was steeped in sin and idolatry. Racism, he claimed, had brought divine judgement upon all people – black and white. As well as harming the bodies of black people, racism was also rotting the souls of white people, and leading a whole nation down the road to that leads to damnation.

As is well known, this brave and principled prophet was assassinated. For a racist society that was propped up by a rotten crutch of lies and prejudice, the truth to which King, the prophet, testified was too much to bear. It is now time to rediscover the prophetic spirit of Martin Luther King Jr., who was not merely a prominent campaigner for civil rights, but also a Baptist minister and a prophet for his (and our) times.

This is why I continue to tell the story of Martin Luther King Jr, as well as the lives of other anti-racist martyrs such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in my classes at Spurgeon's College. My hope is that these modest classes will be part of a much larger movement within our Baptist denomination. I pray that in the power of the Holy Spirit our Baptist churches will reap a mighty harvest of dedicated Baptist leaders, a new generation who understand that justice for our black brothers and sisters is not merely a social requirement, but also a non-negotiable gospel imperative.

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Joshua T Searle is Tutor in Theology and Public Thought; and Director of Postgraduate Studies at Spurgeon's College



# A View From — Oxford

It is a privilege to live and work in Oxford, and to be a very small part of one of the world's great universities. Of course, it would be disingenuous to pretend that 'privilege' wasn't a term with layers of meaning in Oxford. An Oxford education is, and confers, privilege. And an Oxford education is more accessible to those who already have certain privileges.

Denominationally, I am also conscious that I occupy a privileged place in several spaces. I lead a College; I am a minister. Both of these spaces are overwhelmingly white. It is only recently that I have begun to see this. White privilege is invisible. We (there it is again) assume it's normal. Complacently assuring myself that I was not racist, I failed to notice the absence of black faces and voices around me. In consequence I also failed to ask myself why this should be so, what

barriers prevented people of colour from sharing ‘my’ space.

In the aftermath of George Floyd’s killing and the wave of disgust and protest that followed, Oxford has been facing up again to some uncomfortable reports about the experience of students of colour here. Mostly taught by white tutors, with white bibliographies, in institutions governed by white people, confidence and self-esteem is eroded by a thousand casual and often unconscious put-downs. So when one College head reported on an initiative to change the way we think about these things from the top, and to do it *now* by appointing at least two people of colour to every senior board and committee, it seemed like a genuine *krisis* moment.

I have become convinced that some form of affirmative action is required if we are to address these things. Waiting for some ‘trickle down’ or ‘percolating up’ process to take place prolongs injustice, though it conveniently preserves existing privilege too. Quotas for university places; a curriculum that does not simply justify and entrench whiteness; reserved seats on trustee bodies and the main committees and boards of Baptist Union of Great Britain and College life. And if we are to tackle the problem of a

curriculum that entrenches a view of the world through the eyes of white privilege as normative, then we have to make sure that every reading list has a similar provision.

This sense that whiteness is the norm, when combined with the exploitative attitude of colonialism to the world and its people, and the historic wealth that has flowed to Europe and North America - all this entrenches what some now call ‘white privilege’. It is a slippery term, and when we try to define it we find that it’s fuzzy around its edges. But it captures something of the taken-for-granted confidence (even, *entitlement*) which is the natural outlook of those who do not find themselves in a minority group which suffers structural racism and those casual slights, who find their voices not heard in spaces where decisions about them are taken. It means I can drive a nice car through a city centre without being stopped on suspicion of theft. It means I expect my children to thrive and flourish rather than have to prove themselves of equal worth at every step.

Yes, I know that there are many white people for whom these are problems too. James Cone was right: they are ‘ontologically

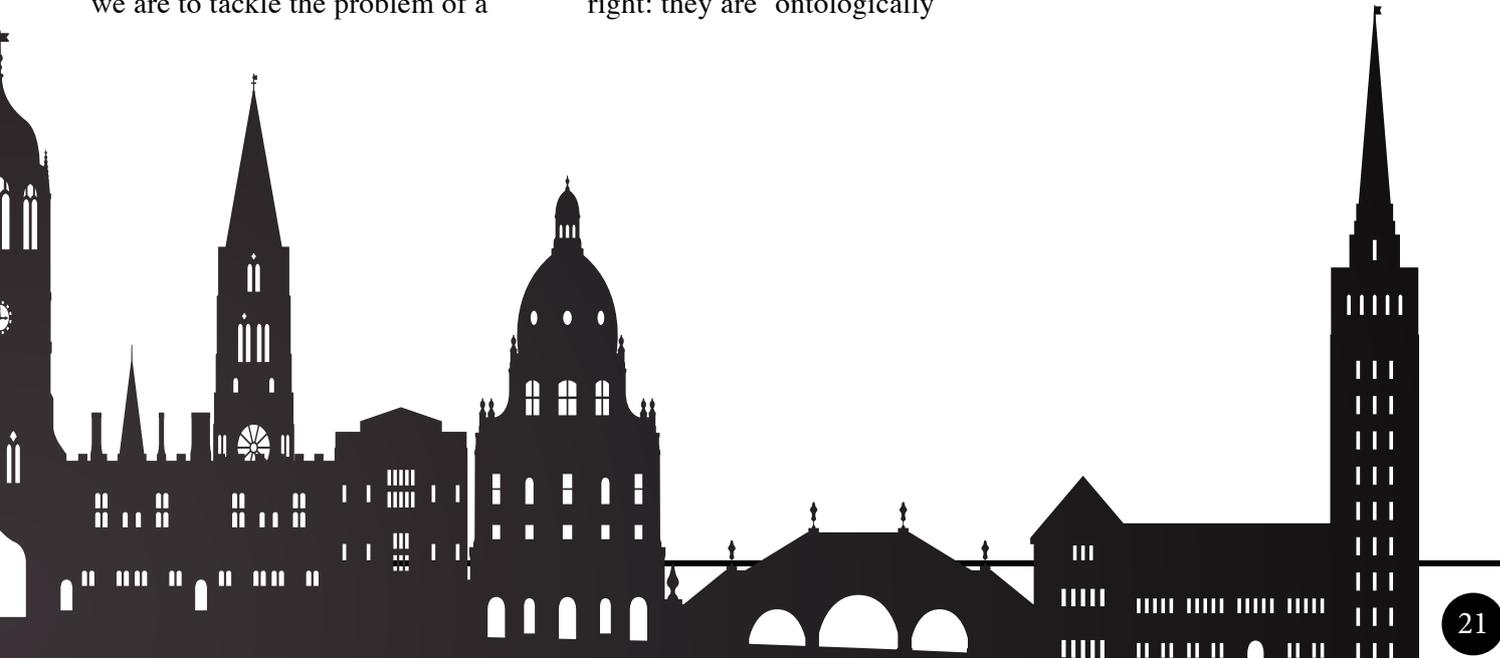
black’, and the designation jolts and jars us because it challenges our ‘normal’ calibrations, sending us back with Cone to Exodus, the prophets and Jesus. Or so it should.

I also know that there is a danger that we will deploy the term ‘black’ in a totalising way, somehow seeming to suggest that all black experience is the same. But while we must be alert to that, it seems to me that the greater danger is to hide behind this observation and use it to shore up that white privilege for a little longer. All this, everything said and touched on so far, has a peculiar capacity to produce defensive reactions. Our privilege is fragile, and we hang on tight, playing dirty.

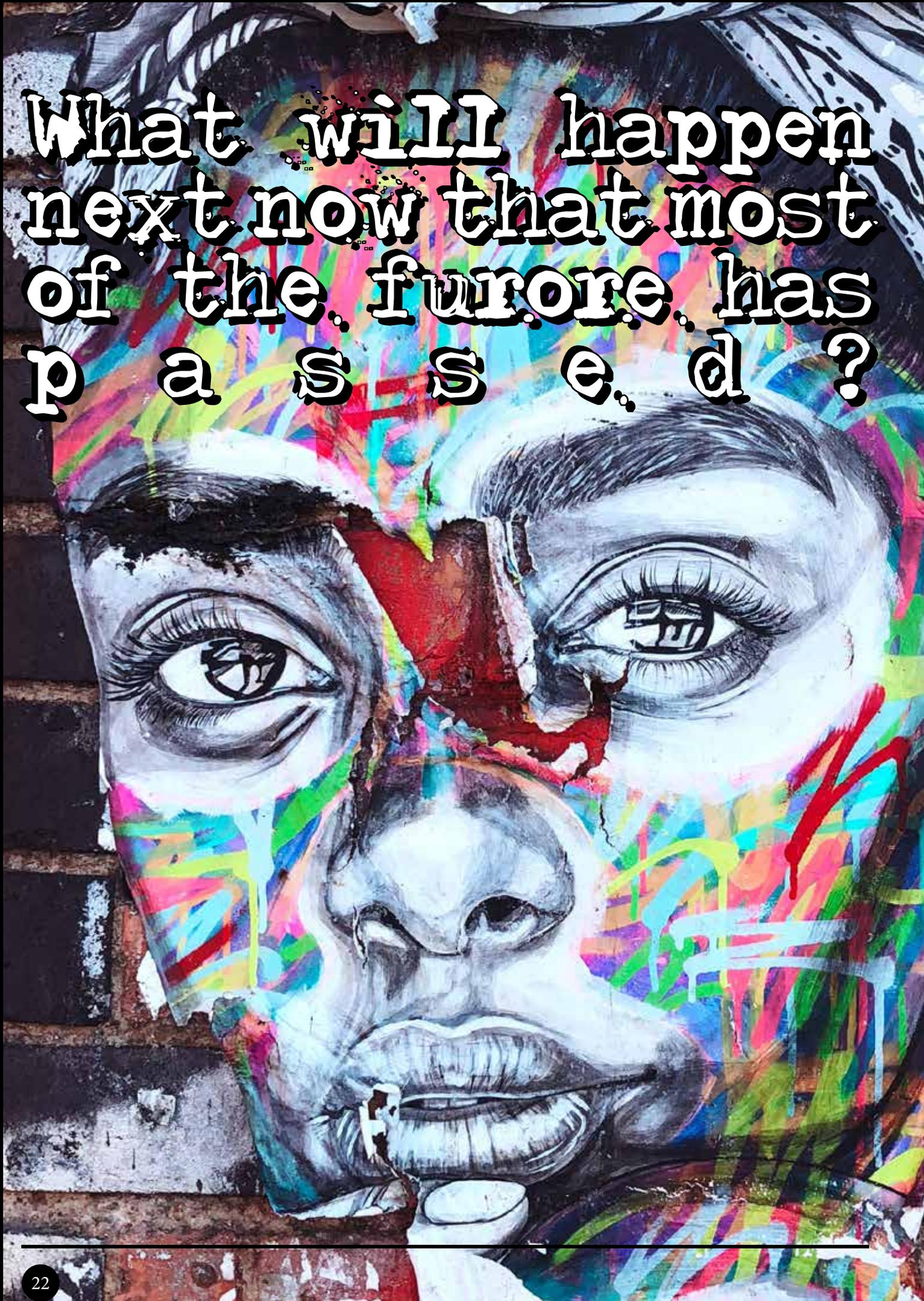
There has been much talk of a ‘new normal’ as we endure this pandemic. But there is another new normal which we need to begin to create. One where white spaces become rainbowed spaces, and where by listening in patience and humility we begin to learn to see and experience the world in new ways.

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Rob Ellis is Principal of Regent’s Park College, Oxford



What will happen  
next now that most  
of the furore has  
p a s s e d ?



**T**he murder was committed in 8 minutes and 46 seconds. Then came the outrage and international demonstrations, webinars and the largely lacklustre statements, the shameless band-waggoning from various denominations and multi-nationals, the immoral

**"We didn't know!"**

and

**"Help us understand..."**

and my personal favourites

**"What should we do?"**

and

**"How should the Church respond?"**

Yes, this sounds cynical. I don't have a problem with that accusation. However, it is usually the accusation of those who have absented themselves from the real lives of black and brown people. Black and brown people who have not been afforded the luxury of looking the other way or pretending that, as long as they play along, the horrors will not visit their door.

Unfortunately, over at least the past 40 years, we as a country have already been here in one form or another. The statements of sorrow or regret are well-worn and to knowledgeable black and brown ears, insubstantial at best and disingenuous at worst. However, there is one difference that cannot be ignored and that is the activism of young white people. Time will tell if that activism develops and grows or if it will sink into the pit of nostalgia.

So, what will happen next now that most of the furore has passed?

Well, the train has already left the station. Calls for, and the setting up of, commissions and enquiries with experts giving evidence. This will then be followed by the re-wording and repackaging of old recommendations that will be passed off as new or innovative but with no budget or accountability. Lots of work will be produced around those recommendations, then the whole thing will be shelved and folk will move on to the next shiny thing because 'We've done that now'.

And what of the Church, the body of Christ? Why are we once again caught napping on the crucial matter of racial injustice and inequality? Why are we being led by wider society and not the other way around? Why is the perennial question "*What should be the Church's response?*"

One thing that would make this old warrior less cynical would be when something like this happens again (and it will), Christians across the country would already be the leaders on good practice, equity, diversity and inclusion, advice and activism. Imagine what it could be like if society turns and asks the churches

**"How are we doing?"**

It's simply being salt and light, the way we are called to be. Remember that one?

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Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed is the National Minority Ethnic Vocations Officer, Archbishop's Council of the Church of England. She was formerly the first Racial Justice Co-ordinator for the London Baptist Association

# White Evangelicals and Racial Justice

I am one of those African pastors who have decided to work and serve within what I would refer to as white spaces. The particularity of the context of the white spaces I work with are that of white evangelicals through mission agencies, theological colleges and church networks. As a reverse missionary who prides himself in serving in multicultural multi-ethnic contexts, it has been a pleasure serving in these spaces, contributing something different on mission theology and praxis.

White evangelicals are a broad spectrum covering reformed, charismatics, conservative, progressives, ecumenicals and radicals. These tags or labels are not exhaustive, but it is a start. While some have been on a journey of conceiving mission only in terms of evangelism and discipleship and later adding social-political responsibility, there still remains a reluctance to engage racial justice issues as a paradigm for mission. Some have engaged gender justice very well, while others have embraced environmental justice issues, but there is still a reluctance I see in engaging racial justice concerns.

There are some who are seriously engaging and championing racial justice causes in Britain, but the question is why has it not become the norm? To put the question another way: why are racial justice issues not an important part of white evangelical mission theology? One obvious reason is that racial justice conversations are very uncomfortable for white evangelicals because of immediate white guilt. Another obvious reason which other people have commented on is white privilege or hegemony, which becomes a blind spot in seeing racial justice concerns. This is rightly so, but white privilege needs to be nuanced because it is a massive subject area as it manifests itself in different endeavours of life.

Another reason for the reluctance is how white evangelicals read and interpret the biblical texts and do theology. If white charismatics spiritualise the scriptures so that there is more emphasis on growing in discipleship through our giftings, white reformed move in the other direction of growing in discipleship through biblical exposition.



These are not bad emphases, but what is sometimes missing is a post-colonial reading of scriptures that situate the text in colonial thinking. This means it is possible to talk about God using Moses' staff as a gift but not dwell on the slavery context of the children of Israel. It is possible to expound on the book of Daniel but miss the crucial points that nevertheless, Daniel and the three Hebrew children were colonised by the Babylonians.

There is the need for white evangelicals to decolonise their mission theology and a good place to start is to re-examine what is taught at our theological institutions. As someone who lectures and teaches in various theological institutions, I see some good signs but more work needs to be done. This can be done by introducing the history of colonialism and imperialism into our history of mission curriculum or modules.

Another area that needs work is allowing Africans, Asians, African Caribbeans and Latin Americans to not only come in and speak on Diaspora Mission, as if that is all we can offer, but to teach biblical studies and systematic theology. The question is always, but we do not know qualified biblical scholars who are of Majority World (Africa, Caribbean, Latin American and Asia) in Britain who can teach these subjects. The problem sometimes is our limited networks which

constantly draw in people from the same pull, so let us widen our networks so that we can connect beyond people like us!

Another area to consider in terms of decolonising our mission theology is, instead of constantly inviting Africans or African Caribbeans to come in once in a while to teach on multi-ethnic churches, why not employ them as part-time staff or associate tutors? If white evangelicals are going to begin to engage broadly the concerns of racial justice, then we have to seriously think of employment and staffing issues at our theological colleges.

Our theological colleges are where we train the gate keepers: if the gate keepers are not well equipped to discern racial justice matters in their locality then racial injustice will happen under their nose, and they will not even recognise it. It is time to shift our theological colleges in the direction of racial justice and to do this we have to decolonise our curriculum.

## Questions for Discussions

### Read Acts chapter 10

1. Why was it so important for God to have to convince Peter of his blind spot?
2. Discuss which conversion was more important Cornelius or Peter?
3. What can we learn from this story about racial justice concerns?
4. What do we need to change in our theology?

Israel Olofinjana is the minister of Woolwich Central Baptist Church and Director of the Centre for Missionaries from the Majority World [cmmw.org.uk](http://cmmw.org.uk), and the author of several books.

*World Christianity in Western Europe* is a new book edited by Israel and published by Regnum Books, Studies in Mission (Oxford Centre for Mission Studies).



# Overcoming Racism

## THROUGH LEADERSHIP DIVERSITY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

**T**here are various aspects of diversity: gender, cognitive, ethnic and generational which will enrich the body of Christ. Although we should promote leadership diversity in all aspects, our reflections in this article promote *ethnic diversity* within church or organisational leadership. To overcome racism in our societies, our churches need to model the ‘new humanity’ in breaking racial barriers (Ephesians 2:15) within

leadership representation. The church born in Pentecost was diverse (Acts 2:8-11) and their leadership was diverse (Acts 16:11-34). Why are so many churches in multicultural Britain today still so monochrome in our leadership representation?

Generally, most white church folks think of racism as individual overt acts of prejudice and discrimination. This is why they find it so offensive to be called racist

when they have no overt racist intentions against minorities. However, one should think of racism in terms of injustices due to inequality of opportunities and power which systemically and also unconsciously privilege some over others. And one way to overcome racism is to have leadership diversity in our churches and organisations.

Achieving leadership diversity has to be intentional. Each local church needs to review,

set clear goals and outline plans to increase leadership diversity within one or two years. Although we seldom articulate certain values openly, there could be resistance within British churches in welcoming minorities into church leadership. “*They don’t understand our church culture*”, we say, and by church culture, we mean white British culture. This implicit bias becomes the greatest barrier towards appointing non-white leadership.

Over two decades ago, I was invited to speak at the Global Connections UK gathering of 350 mission leaders and I urged for increased diversity among their 95 per cent white leadership. Today, the leadership of our mission agencies (including BMS) is still predominantly more than 90 per cent white, despite rapidly changing realities of global Christianity. In my 10 years of service in Britain, I have personally known of countless stories of gifted diaspora leaders who felt that their gifts were not recognised in UK churches, institutions of training, as well as charities. I am aware that appointing a few BAME leaders does not transform the organisational culture overnight, but I would say it is a good and realistic start.

I am deeply grateful to BMS Trustees for taking risks in appointing me, an Asian, to provide leadership in a majority white British mission. I have

much to learn. Likewise, BMS personnel are often chuffed by how quickly (less than a year?) churches from the Global South graciously welcome them to leadership positions even before they could speak the local language and fully understand the local culture. They too have much to learn from the gracious hospitality of non-Western churches.

In the 1980s, my church in Malaysia appointed a young American (a recent convert of two years) as elder of the church, even though our church membership comprised of Indians and Chinese. Would British churches do likewise in trusting global south leadership? I know some churches have made progress but if we ask our friends from minority cultures, they feel their voices are often excluded from the table of leadership.

Leadership diversity is not only to be implemented for churches in multicultural cities but for churches in white suburbs as well. In doing so, our churches model, disciple and nurture our young people in multicultural leadership. Then, our message of Jesus as the answer to racism in our divided society will be accompanied by credible demonstration of Christ in reconciling all ethnicities.

Therefore, friends, for all our lofty discussion on the complex issue of racism, why not consider my humble challenge to take risk: for example, resolving as a priority

to increase diversity within our pulpit preaching rota and leadership representation by 20-30 per cent within the next two years? Otherwise, it won’t happen. Be biblical like the New Testament church and be truly British because our society is multicultural.

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Kang-San Tan is General Director of BMS World Mission



**“I think it is one of the shameful tragedies of our nation that 11 o’clock on a Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours in Christian America... any church that stands against integration, and which has a segregated body, is standing against the spirit and teachings of Jesus Christ.” Martin Luther King, 1960**

What was true in 1950/60s America will also be true in many areas and churches today. But it’s not the case where I live.

### **DIVERSE**

The church I am a member of, Streatham Baptist Church, is one of the *least* segregated places in our South London community. We have members from over 50 different nations. I think we are more racially diverse than almost any other organisation in the local area.

Whilst this is something to celebrate, there is no room for any complacency. In fact, our diversity charges us with a great responsibility. It means that we have a special and significant role in the struggle to bridge racial

divides and work for justice. Diverse churches exist for such a time as this.

### **FUNDAMENTALLY UNIFYING**

The Church is founded on beliefs which *should* be fundamentally unifying.

After all, firstly we believe *everyone* is created in the image of God and that all people are of infinite worth. Secondly, we believe *everyone* struggles, messes up and needs restoration and forgiveness. And thirdly, we believe *everyone* can find new life and redemption through Jesus Christ.

And this is not just *theory*. The Church is not a think-tank sharing

good ideas: it exists to *embody* this message and live it out. As the New Testament puts it:

**All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.**  
(2 Corinthians 9:18)

This is why so many Christians love being in congregations which are multi-national and multi-ethnic: the diversity in itself reflects the vision of a kingdom of God where people from every tribe and tongue will come together.

### **REALITY OF RACISM**

Since the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter



# THE LEAST SEGREGATED COMMUNITY

protests, many people like me have learnt a lot more about the reality of racism. The main way I have learnt is by listening to the experiences of Black and Asian brothers and sisters in my church.

In a recent online sermon, our pastor, Chris Andre-Watson, told us about the time when he visited a church in the 1990s and heard someone say “God must have run out of white paint when he made him”. And he spoke about how the Police twice raided his home when he was at Bible College ostensibly searching for illegal drugs.

## ANGER AND FRUSTRATION

In the last few months our church men’s group has held sessions to listen to people’s experiences. Now across the whole church we are holding a series of ‘Listening assemblies’ on racial justice. Anger and frustration have been expressed, people have disagreed, at times sharply and painfully. But

we believe these are the places we must go to if we are to make progress as a community.

Almost everyone agrees with the wrongness of the overt, obvious form of racism which is above the surface. The more complex and demanding aspect is to grapple with the covert forms of racism ‘below the water line’.

These often exist in systematic or structural forms: the racial inequalities which remain stubbornly embedded in education, law enforcement and health services. These are both more hidden and more controversial.

## ADMITTING OUR BLIND SPOTS

Some people struggle with the idea of systemic or structural injustice. They often want to reduce wrongdoing to just the personal sphere. But these forms of analysis

downplay entrenched inequalities and tend to serve the status quo. Whether or not you agree with Critical Race Theory, none of us should have an *uncritical* theory of racial injustice. We need to critique our attitudes and our blind-spots. Many of us accept the injustices of history but are reluctant to face up to how they impact the situation today.

My journey is still in its early stages but I am going to continue to listen to those who challenge and help me understand the realities of racism better. And I want to go beyond just listening, and take action which makes a difference.

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Jon Kuhrt works as a Rough Sleeping Adviser to the government specialising in how faith and community groups respond to homelessness, and is a member of Streatham Baptist Church.

# WHITE PRIVILEGE IS

White privilege is existing without the assumption that you are:

A THIEF  
A RATCHET  
A DANGER ...

for me it is accepting I am not the norm, and spending a whole lifetime building resilience for when that is pointed out, it is a change in hair style that isn't just a comment but an experience that leaves your body exposed, the possession of whichever white person takes ownership of the moment, it is watching leadership fights between old white, sexist, racist, exploitative men, knowing it will probably take longer than my lifetime to see someone like myself up there, because someone unqualified is in better than someone brown,

white privilege is where you're more likely to die at the hands of a white man but it's 'black on black' crime that's the problem, it is adopting the Curry as a 'British National Dish' and in the same breath yelling 'Paki go home'...

white privilege is that I see the radical, revolutionary, brown skinned, refugee Jesus as a white man with 12 white disciples in a white world...

is it easier to follow him when he looks like you?

white privilege is being taught your existence is victory

whilst every other colour was to be conquered, in history, the coloureds are passive, we are done to we are civilised, modernised, and we are to be grateful

as if paved roads and concrete buildings were worth what you took from us.

white privilege is being more outraged at property damage of riots rather than the generational damage caused by years and years of living in a system built to treat you like the 3/5ths of a human the US constitution told you you were, it is looting countries of their belongings and displaying the trauma disguised as trophies...

white privilege is having your feelings protected at the expense of others, it is being scared of talking about race, where black people are scared of not returning home, it is being able to walk away from this conversation because the world is designed to protect you.

it is the privilege of knowing that the ground will never hear you cry 'I can't breathe'.

---

Abbie Ametewee currently works for a relief and international development organisation in London. She studied African Studies and English language, followed by a Masters in Poverty, Inequality and Development at the University of Birmingham.

She is interested in work that seeks to dismantle systems of oppression and passionate about pursuing gender and race equality.



# PAIN AND HOPE

I have heard the cries of my black sisters and brothers as they viscerally experienced the pain of a boot about their neck. I have seen the faces of frustration as my brothers and sisters tell me yet again of the struggle for justice, not new. I have heard the cry, "But how long?". "How long must we struggle for justice to be more than just words, to be real?" "How many times must we re-live the pain and re-tell our story?"

I have touched the anger which cries out, "no more fine words" and which calls for lasting change. And I have tasted the salty tears which fall because the Church, the Body of Christ, has been so slow to hear, to respond and to lead in love, with hope and peace, towards the light. I have asked myself so many times, have we failed all God's creation, taking our eyes off our Saviour and have we forgotten that we have been given the task to be the light shining on the hill even in the hardest places?

And so, at the end of this year, this particularly difficult year, I must stand with my head bowed before the coming King and admit that for so long I have not looked or listened well or learned well from my brothers and sisters of colour.

No more. Too often I have turned away from pain; no more. Too often the richness of our diversity has passed me by; no more. Too often the potential beauty of our meeting places is lacking; no more.

No more. For not one of us can flourish when justice for my brothers and sisters of colour is absent. We cannot live well or shine as stars in the world, until together as one we stand.

2020 has seen much and heard many words spoken, but words can never be enough. Here perhaps silence is where we must find ourselves. Silence as we bow the knee and seek the mind of Christ, walking silently towards the cross of redemption and into the glorious resurrection which means freedom for all. From the silence flows action, deep and true. Action that changes me and the world around me.

And so, in this space, as the year passes on its baton, there is hope; there is a bright light shining in the darkness. As the Christ child enters our world, without limit, emptied of all glory taking the place of a servant, so too we come. Starting in the darkest of stables we walk forward, grafted together into the True Vine. Together honouring each other as members of the Body of Christ, in humility regarding each other as better than ourselves and looking only to the interests of others.

At the end of 2020, in the sunset of this year, I will leave the final word with Phillis Wheatley. Sold into slavery at seven years old, she saw in all of nature God's immense glory that called her and others to strive for greater in this life. To remember his calling us out of darkness into his marvellous light to be a royal priesthood and proclaim his mighty deeds.

As I write, 2020 is drawing to a close and we walk towards Christmas hearing the words of love and hope and light and peace. I am sure we will welcome in 2021 with extra enthusiasm, not wishing to look back or re-live the deep challenges of this past year.

BUT ... I do not want to run ahead into 2021. I want to take some time to root myself in the pain of this year. I cannot step forward without remembering, without reflecting and re-learning all the threads that have come to me.

Let me tell you what I have heard and seen this year, from the confined spaces of lockdown.

# PAIN AND HOPE

Here is our hope. My prayer is that in 2021 we grab this hope, embody it and live powerfully so lives are changed.

## A Hymn to the Evening BY PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Soon as the sun forsook the eastern main  
The pealing thunder shook the heav'nly plain;  
Majestic grandeur! From the zephyr's wing,  
Exhales the incense of the blooming spring.  
Soft purl the streams, the birds renew their notes,  
And through the air their mingled music floats.  
Through all the heav'ns what beauteous dies are spread!  
But the west glories in the deepest red:  
So may our breasts with ev'ry virtue glow,  
The living temples of our God below!  
Fill'd with the praise of him who gives the light,  
And draws the sable curtains of the night,  
Let placid slumbers sooth each weary mind,  
At morn to wake more heav'nly, more refin'd;  
So shall the labours of the day begin  
More pure, more guarded from the snares of sin.  
Night's leaden sceptre seals my drowsy eyes,  
Then cease, my song, till fair *Aurora* rise.

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Diane Watts is Faith and Society Team Leader

## Questions for study:

### 1. Matthew 5:14-16

Jesus challenges us to let our light shine so that the glory is given to our Father in heaven.

- What does it mean to be a light shining on a hill in a world where justice for all is not pursued by all?
- What distinctive can the Church bring to a world where disproportionate human value is often decided according to skin colour?
- What are the personal implications of Jesus' challenge to let our light shine before others?

### 2. Genesis 1

The Genesis 1 narrative reveals the diversity of God's creation, and 'God saw everything he had made and indeed it was very good'.

- Do you agree that there is diversity in the creation narrative in Genesis 1?
- Where do you see that we have lost the 'goodness' of diversity? Why might this have occurred?
- What steps would you take to address the problems you have identified?

### 3. John 15

Jesus is the True Vine.

- What are the implications for us to be a part of the True Vine?
- Are there things from which we need to repent as we hear Jesus' words and consider racial injustice in our society?

# A PRAYER FOR WHITE PEOPLE, BECAUSE BLACK LIVES MATTER

Those of us who are white,  
Who, before, might have been  
distracted.  
Who, before, might have thought we  
were too busy.  
Who, before, might have been  
preoccupied with our lives.  
Are noticing the ways injustice has  
happened to people of colour,  
the same way, again and again and  
again,

Now, we have become aware.  
Please, may we be aware.

May we not lose awareness.  
May we not get distracted.  
May we not turn away.  
May we open—really open:

Accepting the invitation to change—  
really change,  
our minds,  
our hearts,  
our world.

May we listen, may we learn, may we  
be open...  
Even if it means rethinking everything  
we thought we knew about the world.

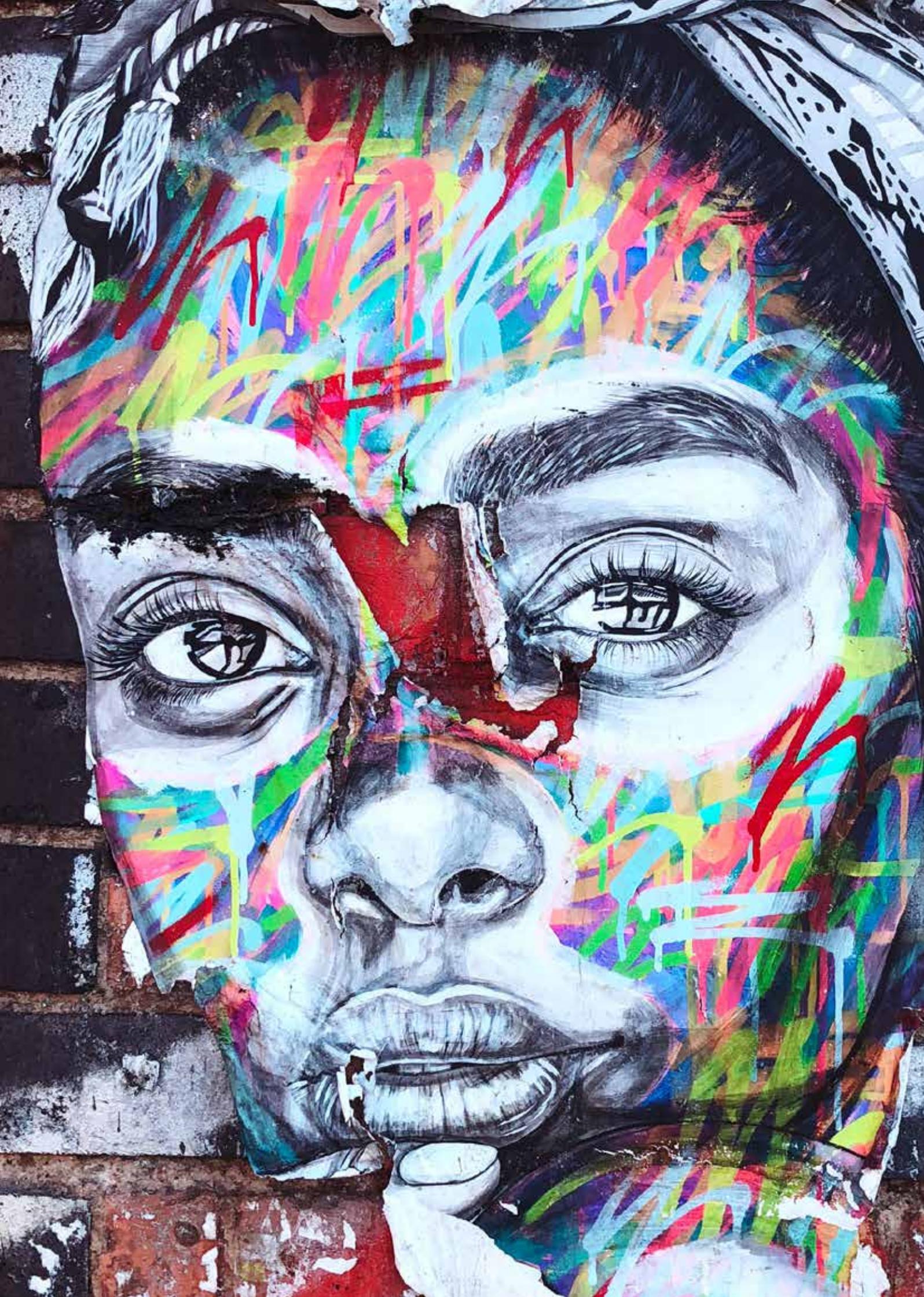
And so  
To change one of the oldest injustices  
in history.  
To change everything.

May we stay vulnerable.  
May we stay tender.  
May we take action.  
Eyes and hearts and minds, open.

For Jesus.

Amen.

A Prayer from Rob Ellis  
*Based on a prayer by Ellen Quaadgras*



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# THE HILL WE CLIMB

“FOR THERE IS  
ALWAYS LIGHT, IF  
ONLY WE’RE BRAVE  
ENOUGH TO SEE  
IT. IF ONLY WE’RE  
BRAVE ENOUGH TO  
BE IT.”

AMANDA GORMAN