

Merrylea Parish Church Glasgow

Pastoral Homily by the Locum, the Rev'd Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 21 June 2020

Second Sunday after Trinity.

Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who ill-treat you. If anyone hits you on one cheek, let him hit the other one too; if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well..... Love your enemies and do good to them ... You will then have a great reward and will be sons of the Most High God. For God is good to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful as your Father is merciful." (St Luke 6: 27-36).

It was so unexpected. Perhaps because the enforced detachment of a monument from its plinth in Bristol and tipped into the nearby harbour is not something that usually happens. More likely because decades, indeed, centuries of controversy stemming from profound and inherent feelings of anger, injustice and division suddenly erupted to the surface.

All it had taken to ignite simmering resentments was for a white police officer in Minneapolis to exert nine fatal minutes of pressure on the throat of a black African-American called George Floyd. By virtue of social media protests against Floyd's apparent murder flared up across America and, before the day was out, similar protests spread across Europe and our own country. Supporters of *Black Lives Matter* were in supremacy.

Edward Colston was a successful merchant, philanthropist and member of parliament who lived in Bristol in the seventeenth century. Much of his wealth, however, came from involvement in the slave trade. Interestingly, following his death in 1721, Colston's statue was not erected by his contemporaries. It was not until 170 years later that a Bristol businessman, James Arrowsmith, fundraised to erect the statue in 1895. The fact that Arrowsmith had to pay the £150 short-fall suggests the people of Bristol were not at ease with the proposed project. The statue has been a focus of controversy in Bristol ever since.

Now the attention of *Black Lives Matter* has turned to historic statues across the nation demanding their toppling as an assuage to their history. Initially, knee-jerk support was voiced but, gradually, more reasoned and knowledgeable voices have spoken out such as that of Sir Geoffrey Palmer, former professor at Heriot-Watt University and respected black human rights activist. He told the *Black Lives Matter* rally in Edinburgh last week that such statues ought to remain on their plinths along with a record of their part in the slave trade to allow children to learn about its abuses and indignities and not permit such a thing to become part of their future. These are symbolic actions aiming to sever the present from the past; not policies designed to fashion a different, better future.

It is certainly a different, better future for which we would all hope.

Debates have begun about the racism, prejudice and discrimination black, Asian and minority communities experience in the UK. With our civic nationalism and welcoming attitude towards migrants and refugees, we in Scotland like to regard our society as being relatively free of structural and institutional racism. Members of BAME communities however, point to systematic racial discrimination in areas of health, education and criminal justice. Many of the elites within Scottish public life are almost

completely white, with scant BAME representation across business, legal and political sectors. They claim this exclusion defines what is debated, the variety of opinions expressed and experiences considered; and excludes representation. Anti-racism activists and campaigners are now demanding that debate is held to open up issues too long shut down. Such an exhumation of our nation's historical record and society's contemporary reality will take a steady nerve, balanced perspective and enlightened sensitivity.

Persecution, whatever its guise, is the lowest form of human degradation. Whether it be racial discrimination, class prejudice, personal indignity, social injustice, whatever. Jesus lived all his life under suppression enforced by occupying forces. The temptation for him, as for his people, was simply to collaborate, to acquiesce in order to stay safe. Day and daily he and his fellow countrymen knew and experienced the indignity of servitude, of being press-ganged into carrying heavy loads of weaponry or supplies for their Roman masters. There was a degradation the like of which human history has witnessed repeated time and again: from mediaeval times through the Middle Ages to the tyranny of the Russian Bolsheviks, Lenin and Stalin to the show trials of Mao's China and other regimes to the horrors suffered by the Jewish community at the murdering hands of the Nazis. And, still, it goes on throughout the world today.

Can you imagine the surprise of those who heard Jesus' response to this situation? "*If you are forced to carry a pack (for a soldier) one mile, carry it two.*" and "*If a soldier asks for your cloak, give him your shirt as well*".

Jesus says this, not to encourage his fellow Jews to store up merit in heaven, nor to show extra-ordinary piety, nor to kill their occupiers with kindness. He was trying to help his oppressed people find a way to *protest* and *survive*. He is teaching his hearers a method of *non-violent resistance* that will wrong-foot their oppressor. He is formulating a spirituality through which people at the bottom of life's ladder, ignored in society and held under the heel of the powerful can somehow recover their dignity through shared humanity one to another.

Black Lives Matter. Yes, they do.

ALL lives matter. And nothing matters more.

Let us hope that, through our actions, we can better share our common humanity with each other. Only then, will we be able to rejoice in the dignity which is the birth right of us all.

Prayer:

Holy God of love, Jesus expanded the narrow vision of his disciples. During this strange time of lockdown and restriction, help me to see beyond the confines of my everyday to respect, understand and care for all people, cultures and traditions. Keep me, and others, alert for those who would take advantage of the vulnerable, poor and weak. Guide the leaders of our government as they struggle with problems unimagined only a few months ago. May decisions made support those who need help most. Uphold all who watch or wait with heartache the illness of those they love. Especially those scared and fragile in mind as in body. Thank you for the love in which you hold all people regardless of our colour, creed or circumstance. You are the God of all and so, within the family of your Church, I pray ...

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and for ever. AMEN.