

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

**2<sup>nd</sup> May 2021**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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It seems particularly apt that our first reading set by the Lectionary today should be the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. It's one of the most vivid passages in the New Testament and, in every generation, throws down the gauntlet to the Church about its attitudes to inclusion.

Almost a year ago I offered a reflection at this service ten days after George Floyd died under police arrest in Minneapolis. We meet again today, ten days after Derek Chauvin, the policeman who had knelt on his neck in the course of that arrest, was convicted for his murder. Yet if any of us might have thought that the kind of racism which the events in Minneapolis brought into focus belonged to another culture and context, we meet this morning conscious that the last ten days have shone a spotlight on the Church of England's own record on racism, particularly in the report from the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Task Force that was set up this time last year, in which that record was found grievously wanting. Writing of the sin of racism, the Task Force noted: 'Racial sin disfigures God's image in each one of us. Racial sin dehumanises people by taking away their fundamental God-given human dignity.'

And if that weren't enough, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, with which we have a close relationship here in Marseille through the local War cemetery, has in the last ten days also been the subject of a report into its discriminatory treatment of different ethnic groups a century ago. A reminder that discrimination happens even among the dead.

All these events remind us of the presence, and the constant risk, of unconscious bias in public and private life: the bias that operates in our unconscious minds when we make decisions, and which is revealed in the ways we recruit, promote, include or exclude. Each one of us operates with a degree of bias that is the product of our hopes, fears and prejudices, and we need a lot of self-awareness in order to counter it effectively.

The imperative to do so is stated in our Epistle this morning, from the first Letter of John. The two great commandments which Christ gave us - to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves - are actually inseparable. Unless we love our neighbour, we cannot say that we love God. The problem is that, both as societies and as church, we have shown time and again that we are not good at embracing human diversity.

And it doesn't stop at ethnicity: unconscious bias affects many different aspects of human diversity. Ask anyone with a disability who is a churchgoer. The Church of England's record on including women in its ministry has been fraught with foot-dragging, opt-outs and an acceptance that in some quarters has been grudging at best. For people who are LGBT+, significant parts of the Church remain openly hostile to them, at a time when Western society as a whole has come to accept them as part of human diversity and therefore entitled to the

same rights, freedoms and responsibilities as everyone else. Is it cause for wonder that so many people under the age of fifty have come to regard the Church of England as a quaint irrelevance or, worse, a place that will be unkind to you if you belong to one or more minority groups?

Into this mix the Lectionary puts the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. It is an almost comically exaggerated reminder of how radical the Gospel's demands are in our response to human diversity, for in Jesus's time this individual would have been an outsider for a whole host of reasons. The Acts of the Apostles begins by recording Jesus's parting instruction to his disciples that they are to witness to him in 'all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8). Ethiopia was regarded as 'the ends of the earth', where the map ran out. Eunuchs were often employed in positions of trust by ruling families, as their sexual status meant they were not considered a threat in proximity to royal women. This one was no exception - a court official in charge of the Queen of Ethiopia's treasury. Yet for all the trust placed in them by royalty, eunuchs were excluded by the religious authorities. The Book of Deuteronomy (23.1) stated that eunuchs could not 'be admitted to the assembly of the Lord'.

But this person seems to have been drawn to God, interested in faith, and the text notes that he was on his way back from 'worshipping' in Jerusalem. Significantly, when the Ethiopian eunuch met Philip, he was reading not the laws of Deuteronomy but the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah had written that God would 'recover the remnant that is left of his people ... from [among other places] Ethiopia' (11.11), and that 'eunuchs who keep my sabbaths' would be welcome in the house of God and receive 'a name better than sons and daughters' (56.4-5). Philip was able to show the eunuch that the good news of Jesus Christ was

even better than Isaiah had promised. Not only did God know and understand the eunuch's own experience of humiliation and ostracism, but Jesus had taken on that condition himself. And yet that suffering had turned to joy.

The eunuch asks: 'What is to prevent me from being baptised?' A bystander might have said: 'Well, there's a list of things. You belong to the wrong nation, you have the wrong ethnicity, you hold the wrong job, you come from the wrong background and you have the wrong sexuality' - all things that somehow still preoccupy the church today. But Philip felt the Holy Spirit give a different answer. 'There is nothing at all that prevents it.' And so the one who had been excluded found himself included and, we are told, 'went on his way rejoicing'.

Someone asked me recently: 'when will the Church of England stop regarding human diversity as a problem and begin welcoming it as a blessing?' When indeed? This week's report of the Anti-Racism Task Force, entitled *From Lament to Action*, sets out a series of recommendations. The Archbishops have welcomed them, acknowledging that the Church must be held to account for their implementation. On the issue of human sexuality, this year the House of Bishops has issued a 'teaching document' called *Living in Love and Faith*. Among other things it sets out the different ways in which the Bible can be understood in relation to LGBT+ identity, and the range of views it is possible to hold with integrity as a Christian. Every parish in the Church of England has been asked to study the document, so we will be holding a course on *Living in Love and Faith* online in the autumn, and I hope you will take part in it. Meanwhile the Archbishops have called on the Church of England as a whole to offer a message of 'radical Christian inclusion' to those who are LGBT+. This chaplaincy is one which offers such a message.

Last year, in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd, I suggested that the Church could do worse than heed these words of the American theologian William Stringfellow: ‘Baptism [which is what unites Christians in all their diversity] doesn’t abolish difference, but it transforms difference from a cause for fear into a manifestation of abundance’. That, surely, is the message of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. As the writer of the first Letter of John points out: ‘There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.’

Questions of exclusion and inclusion are not easy territory. We are also called to love those who see things differently from us. But Christ is insistent. Unless we meet that imperative of love, we will wither like dead branches of a vine. Fortunately, we do not have to do it alone. We do it in Christ, whose heart is bigger and more spacious than ours. And our Gospel reading today indicates how that works. If we are to receive the fullness of life that Christ offers, we must abide in him. It’s about an attitude of the heart as well as the mind.

We need to be constantly alert to the dangers of unconscious bias, and there is much for the Church to repent of. We are part of an institution that has somehow failed to implement 23 reports on racism in 35 years. But let us never give up until we have done all that we can to proclaim God’s inclusive love in a world in need of loving. We ask this in the name of the one who suffered, died and was buried, and is risen, ascended and glorified.

Amen.