

Sermon written by Julyan Drew and delivered by Revd Andrew Yates on January 21st 2018

On Monday, Martin Luther King's birth was celebrated in the US. I can remember well my shock at his assassination three months short of my 13th birthday.

Having led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott in the year of my birth, when I was eight, King gave his great "I have a dream" speech. I cannot listen to it even now without a quickening of my blood and a dampening of my eye.

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character."

I grew up, cut my social and political teeth, on events and words like that; my reaction to them formed at least in part by my family & Methodist church upbringing, and an early awareness of injustice. Inside and outside of church since, that awareness has deepened, and with it a passion to counter injustice wherever I see it.

Anyone who thinks this is not the work of a Christian minister indeed every Christian needs to throw away their Bible as a waste of good bookshelf space.

Justice and its counterpart, righteousness, run through the Bible like a seaside resort name through a stick of rock.

Amos condemns the people's festivals and songs as a stench, a foul smell. True worship, he says, is to "let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

Hear that: no mere drips of justice; no mere lip service, but justice running through our world as the very source of its well-being.

Matthew tells us that Jesus will "proclaim justice to the nations... lead justice to victory."

In Luke, the Pharisees are criticised for holding to religious law while ignoring justice and the love of God.

To avoid the charge of self-righteousness and being smugly moralistic, Christian righteousness must be driven by a compassionate, grace-full love. To act justly towards oneself is to recognise one's own failings while seeking to act justly towards another who may have his or her own failings.

During Lent there will be an opportunity to read and reflect on a book titled "A Bigger Table – Building messy, authentic and hopeful spiritual community."

The author, John Pavlovitz, wrote in the first chapter of his upbringing in a close, caring, loving Christian community. I was moved by his realisation, when he went away to college, that the closeness of his community effectively shut out people not like him. He wrote, "Along with my stories about a big God who loved little me, and an affectionate family who (were) for me, I also inherited some false stories too, about people of colour, about gay people, about poor people, about addicts, about born-again Christians, about atheists.

In my handed down narratives, these people were all to be avoided or feared, or at the very least approached with great scepticism, because something about the stories I'd learned told me that I was just a little bit more deserving of the love of this big God than they were."

Pavlovitz had been reared to see such people as "other" –not so much with considered malice, but rather with that unexamined worldview with which most of us grow, and many of us retain.

Whether we recognise it or not, we each view the world through lenses fashioned by our upbringing and surrounding culture, our "handed down narratives". I am the product of my context just as you are, and Christians through history and still today have held the vilest of views or turned our backs on injustice because we have not opened our inherited eyes!

Christians engaged in slavery because they saw those they traded as "other"; the Klu Klux Klan carried crosses as they lynched black people because in their minds God favoured white skin; Britain First parades crosses through Muslim majority areas of Britain areas spouting their hatred because of a corrupt view of the Christian faith; a pastor in America with a Neanderthal view of human gender identity, to whoops of support from his congregation, can say parents should punch and beat their effeminate sons and that girly four year old boys are cockroaches.

Wesley's challenge to the slave traders of his day gets to the heart of where a wrongful view of others can lead us. He wrote to the slavers: "Are you a man? Then you should have an human heart. But have you indeed? What is your heart made of? Is there no such principle as compassion there? Do you never feel another's pain? Have you no sympathy? No sense of human woe? No pity for the miserable?"

When you saw the flowing eyes, the heaving breasts, the bleeding side & tortured limbs of your fellow-creatures, was you a stone, or a brute? Did you look upon them with the eyes of a tiger? When you squeezed the agonizing creatures down in the ship, or when you threw their poor mangled remains into the sea, had you no relenting? Did not one tear drop from your eye, one sigh escape from your breast? Do you feel no relenting now?

If you do not, you must go on, till the measure of your iniquities is full. Then will the great GOD deal with you, as you have dealt with them, & require all their blood at your hands. And at that day it shall be more tolerable for Sodom & Gomorrah than for you! But if your heart does relent, though in a small degree, know it is a call from the GOD of love."

Our material for this week comes from the Caribbean whose "contemporary context is deeply marked by the history of the colonialism which stripped people of their identity, dignity and freedom.

Christian missionary activity, closely tied to the colonial system, seemed to support, encourage and excuse it. During five-hundred years of the colonial system, scripture was used to justify the enslavement of the indigenous people. In a dynamic reversal, those same scriptures became the inspiration and motivation for people to reclaim their liberty. Recognising the hand of God in the ending of enslavement, the Caribbean Christians offer Exodus 15, a song of triumph over oppression, as the motif of the Week of Prayer."

Slaver and enslaved read the same Scripture, but they read it with different lenses.

"When parliament voted compensation in 1833 - to former slave owners rather than the slaves themselves - the church of England received ... about £500,000 in today's money, for the loss of slave labour on its Codrington plantation in Barbados. The (then) Bishop of Exeter and his business associates received" the equivalent of £750,000.

Today, and in the book that I hope many of you will read during Lent, we are challenged to read our scriptures with new vision, examine our inherited views, build a church marked by a bigger table that practices "radical hospitality, total authenticity, true diversity and agenda-free community."

The Abolition Project wrote of Wesley that under "his direction, Methodists became leaders in many areas of social justice."

Our churches today sometimes act to ameliorate the effects of injustice as when we collect for food banks or give money to MRDF or Christian Aid. But that is surely not enough; it may indeed be tantamount to continuing the injustice by masking its effects.

Have we an active and prophetic faith for today, or do we peddle a spirituality so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good?

Are our churches mere places of escapism irrelevant to those around us and their situations or are we living parables of justice in the way we are together and for others?

The call is clear: Let justice flow like river; righteousness like a never-failing stream.

That way is freedom, for us and for all. Amen.