

Response to recent anti-racism protests

It can't have escaped anyone's notice what's been happening around the world in various countries this week, following the shocking death of George Floyd in the USA. Many demonstrations and protests have been taking place, despite the ever-present danger of the spread of coronavirus.

These demonstrations have been mostly peaceful, but powerfully passionate, expressing genuine outrage and frustration. With events on the street like that, there is always the risk that some criminal elements will take advantage to loot and steal and riot, but the vast majority of people have been law-abiding and are there simply to make their views known.

It's really important to realise that this was not just about the death of one man, tragic and abhorrent though that was and is. But that death is a powerful symbol, a trigger for renewed and urgent expression of a genuine long-term frustration. It was a flashpoint, a crossing of the Rubicon, where the hurt felt by black and minority ethnic people, not just in the States but in countries including our own, has come right to the surface and refuses to be silenced.

At this point, I have to be open and confess that I have not always had these issues at the forefront of my mind. As a white person, I barely have to think about it in the normal course of my life. But in seeing all these protests, and in reading about the issues and hearing people voice the hurt and disadvantage that they experience daily, simply because of the colour of their skin, it has been a powerful reminder that I cannot be silent. I am my brother's keeper.

When I first travelled to South Africa and walked down the street in Cape Town, I suddenly became aware that I was in a minority. My white skin set me apart. I found myself wondering, "What are people thinking and assuming about me?" "Do they think I am an Afrikaner – part of the system that used to dominate them?" "Do they see me as a European colonialist, a white oppressor, a racist?" "Do they assume I am wealthy, and withholding my wealth from those who need it?"

I said to my wife, "You know, I feel as though I've had a tiny inkling of what it might feel like to be in the minority in our own country." Normally, as a white man, if I go out of my house and walk down the street, I give not a second

thought, not even a first thought, to the fact that I am white. It never even crosses my mind.

But if I were a black man, and went out of my house and walked down the street, I would be conscious that the colour of my skin would be shaping many people's view of me. If it was dark, some people might even cross the road because they were nervous of me. I might even cross the road for them, to make them feel safe.

If I were applying for a job and sent off a CV, and my name happened to not be a "white-sounding" name, I would be aware that my CV is likely to be treated differently and less favourably than one with a "white-sounding" name. That is a statistical fact in our country.

If I have a job interview as a white person, my ethnic origin is never discussed. But if I were to have an interview as a black, Asian or minority ethnic person, I would be likely to get questions about "where I come from" or otherwise shaped by a person's perception of what I "must" be like, given my skin colour.

BAME people make up 13% of the UK population of 68 million – that is a huge number of people who regularly experience disadvantage in some way, obviously some more than others.

We have had many friends over the years from different ethnic backgrounds, but it was eye-opening to speak to an Asian parent a number of years ago concerning their aspirations for their children, who were friends of our children. It became clear that their determination to see their kids get the best possible qualifications was driven by more than just the usual parental hopes.

They understood that in order for their children to get good jobs, they would need to have better qualifications than their white counterparts. They were conscious that simply because of their skin colour, they would be at a permanent disadvantage in the job market. This was normal for them.

As a white person, if I see a police officer on the street, I instinctively trust them. But if I were black, I may well be wary of them because I would know that my chances of being wrongfully arrested, searched, or treated with suspicion would be many times higher.

Now, these are very complex issues, and obviously there are many interlocking problems, attitudes, and societal issues in all communities, including real problems within black communities, that will all need to be addressed in the fullness of time if we are going to properly resolve all this.

However – at this precise moment in time, all we need to do, all we must do, is stop, listen, and acknowledge that there is a problem. This is so important!

If we hear the voices of protest, and start saying “Yes, but you have problems too in your community”, or we hear the chants of “Black lives matter” and we respond with “Yes, but all lives matter; you do realise that?” then we are actually deflecting attention from the pressing issue at hand, and, if we are not careful, we become part of the problem instead of helping find a solution.

Just in the last few days, I have heard and read in three different places, and in three slightly different ways, the following illustration, which is helpful here.

If my house is on fire, and I am standing in the street, and there is a row of houses with mine the one on fire, and I am standing next to a firefighter with a firehose, and I say, “My house is on fire! Pour water on it!” And if the firefighter does nothing and I start saying, “Look, my house matters!” and the firefighter says, “Look, you do realise that all houses matter don’t you?” and then starts pouring water on all the other houses in the street, but not mine that is burning down right now, I would be very frustrated and angry at that response!

Now is not the time to deflect attention; now is the time to say, loud and clear to those protesting at the treatment they have received over centuries, “We hear you, we agree with you, we are listening, what can we do?”

On behalf of the Core Leadership Team within King’s Church, I want to put on record that we believe all people are equal under God, that no one should be treated differently according to their skin colour or ethnic origin, that racism does exist, and that we find it abhorrent and stand totally opposed to it, whether it is conscious or unconscious bias.

At the same time, I am mindful of what Bryn Jones said, which is that racism is an issue of the human heart, and that no one is immune from it. This calls for great humility, and a reassessment of our attitudes, allowing the Holy Spirit to

reveal to us any areas of thought, speech or assumptions that have any racist component.

I want publicly to ask God for forgiveness for any times when I have fallen into the trap of racism, however unconsciously. And I would like to suggest that we all use this moment to ask the Spirit of Jesus to renew our minds and enable us to love unconditionally those who look and sound different to ourselves.

Paul the apostle, in Colossians 3:11 said, “Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”

Every human being has been created in the image of God. Whoever we meet, whatever their skin colour or ethnic origin, we need to see them as the image and likeness of God. Whether they acknowledge Jesus yet or not, their inheritance, their birthright, is to be the image of God and to walk in dignity and forgiveness and righteousness because of what Jesus has done for them.

One of the defining features of church is unity in diversity, people from all walks of life, all nations, every tribe and tongue, in union with Christ and with one another. That is the image of church that we need to strive for and live out on a daily basis. That is the body that Jesus died for and that the Spirit of God brought into being on the day of Pentecost when every nation under heaven heard the wonders of God being spoken about in their own native languages!

That passage alone shows God’s heart for and acceptance of all nations in his eternal purposes in Christ.

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