

Racial superiority & humility

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, a while back, we invited the Revd Karlene Kerr (now Racial Justice Officer in the diocese) to speak to our deanery synod. [I noticed not everybody warmed to what she had to say; but I found that I gained from listening attentively to someone who looked at and experienced our Church and society from a different background and perspective.]

One of the traits she highlighted from some of her interactions with white people was their (our) innate sense of superiority. That struck a chord with me. As a child, my stamp collection presented me with the world view of the British Empire: the Queen or King's head, and sometimes the name of the country, proclaiming British dominance. Film and television located on other continents generally focussed on the story of white people; with native people portrayed as subservient, or savages. Even if consciously I want to reject that distorted or one-sided view of the world, its subconscious influence is hard to shift.

October is Black History Month. This originated in the United States as an attempt to redress the balance, celebrating notable black figures and highlighting the contributions made by black people to wider society. That is affirming for black culture; but for those who are white it can present us with a healthy challenge to our inherited assumptions and view of history. There is an African proverb: *Until the lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter.*

I recall marking the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, with its emphasis on the legacy of William Wilberforce. He has a lesser festival in the calendar of the Church of England. But he now shares his day with two other named campaigners: Olaudah Equiano and Thomas Clarkson. Equiano had himself been enslaved, but was given the chance to buy his freedom. Making his home in England, he became a significant black contributor to the abolitionist movement. I can see how putting all the emphasis on white abolitionists like Wilberforce is suspect: does it suggest that only white people have the power to change the course of history; that only white abolitionists resisted; and they, by receiving all the credit, get white people off the hook for creating this industrial exploitation of other human beings in the first place? While black people are merely pawns in the process? Bishop Rosemarie Mallett, Bishop of Croydon, herself black, comments on people who have written to her who *did not seem to know of the work of African abolitionists in the UK, or the enslaved who fought against slavery in the Caribbean, many of whom were murdered for their advocacy and activism.*

In the way we celebrate history, are we perpetuating the superiority and oppressive actions of our ancestors?

In the prophecy of Joel, the Lord promises to pour out his spirit on *all flesh*: not only on the family of Israel, young and old, but on their slaves, male and female. As on the day of Pentecost, no one has a monopoly on the spirit of God; the utterances of all contribute to the full expression of God's praise and purposes.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, it is the Pharisee's blindness to his own sense of superiority which prevents him receiving from God. He gives himself all the credit for his fasting and tithing; but discounts the likes of the tax collector on the other side of the temple. In contrast, it is the tax collector's honesty and humility which commends him to God.

Humility is a virtue we can benefit from in the tangled world of racism and unconscious bias. Humility to listen attentively to the perspective of others, without rushing to refute, even if we don't see things that way.

Here is Bishop Rosemarie again: *'Well-meaning' people who think they are are being encouraging, may say something like, 'It's great to see a black person in that position.' But what they may come over as is 'I didn't expect someone like you to be able to apply for that or achieve that.' A lot of it is unconscious bias.*

Now, is she reading that into what those people are saying? Or, with the sensitivity of someone who hears such statements too often, is she picking up evidence of that hard-to-shift, unconscious superiority? What is someone like me, who means well, to say?

The tax-collector's humility lies in his appreciation of the wretchedness of his position, making his living colluding with the imperial power of Rome; exploiting, as they would see it, his neighbours. Black History Month has its purpose and its place, but I'm wondering if the humility we all need, black or white, is to recognise that we are all victims of this shameful history of white dominance and exploitation, which continues to infect our attitudes, responses and relationships in the present.

And together, in partial fulfilment of Joel's prophecy, to dream dreams of and reach for a kingdom where racial distinctions are no longer a barrier, or cause of discomfort: where we can live and work and worship alongside each other in peace and mutuality, on earth, as it is in heaven.