

Reflection at HURC Mid-week Service – 23 September 2020 – by Michael Tillett

Grace & Colour

In recent weeks and months, we have heard much of the Black Lives matter campaign. A series of flashpoints in America have brought Racial prejudice and inequality very much into the forefront of our minds.

Violent protest and deeply held feelings have exploded together and not just in the USA.

In our own country the strength of feeling has surprised many and the reaction against an imperial and colonial past has been both understandable and challenging.

What brought it home to me was the reaction to statues!

I have to confess when I saw the statues of Confederate General being pulled down, my feelings were ambiguous for a while. My love of history meant that I knew something of the character of those men that the statues reflected. They were not all bad men ... many were men of deeply held faith. I was sad that history was being erased. What I did not know was that many of those memorials were erected not as an immediate consequence of the Civil War but much later and apparently at time when the Civil rights movement was gaining ground in the US. It's as if the statues are there to rebuke those who seek equality and freedom rather than commemorate brave men. They were often erected by those who sought to remind black people of the south of their place in the world. Appalling!

I almost cheered when the slave trader's statue (Edward Colston) came down in Bristol! While we would all have reservations about such direct action, it was powerful challenge and a symbol about righting wrongs which I have to say I applaud. What the people of Bristol had in their minds when they erected such a statue in the 1890s one can only wonder at!

Now this may sound all too political but the points I want to make are not.

My first point is this;

As Christians, as people of faith, we believe that God made human kind in his own image. All human kind is in God's image. How can anyone detract from that understanding by behaving in a way that diminishes a human being because of the colour of their skin? It is abhorrent! All Christians everywhere should see in the other the image of God, the likeness of Christ.... The divine spark bestowed and received.

In Christ we are a new creation.... St Paul writes to the Galatians,

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female for all of you are one in Christ”

In Christ, the colour of our skin should never influence the way we treat others all are equal and of equal worth and value in the sight of God. Our words, our actions, our prayers should always work to that understanding

My second point is this God's grace reaches out to all. I don't know whether Edward Colston repented of his trade. We do know that he spent many thousands on Charitable works in Bristol. Maybe that was a sign of how he sought to repay the debt he owed to human kind.

We do know another slave trader when he came to Jesus realised the awfulness of what he had done. And that was John Newton the writer of our first hymn,

How could he, as a follower of Christ, have traded in human flesh and blood. How could he, as a Christian, have profited from the slave trade? That is when he wrote amazing **grace**. The amazing grace came after realizing the awful grace of God's forgiveness that even while he was a follower of Jesus, he could sin so badly as to capture and trade slaves. John Newton wrote a hymn to God's amazing grace

God's Grace reaches out to all.... And that is why it is so amazing. There is no one beyond God's grace, no attitude beyond restoring no crime that is beyond redemption. For us that is all too often difficult to hear and accept.

Yet it is the best news in the world.

To the Woman caught in adultery.... A chance of forgiveness

To the criminals justly condemned and crucified with Jesus A place in paradise.

To the blind man.... sight

To the Pharisee bound by petty rules and restrictions, a new beginning....

To each of us hope for now and all eternity.

Just as we are called to see in all humankind the image of God, so I believe that God sees in each of us the image of Christ.

In Jesus God reaches out to restore and redeem, He did it in his earthly life in Palestine, He does it still in this time by His Holy Spirit.

We receive forgiveness and salvation not by any good that we do, but by the amazing unearned, unwarranted love and grace of God.

On the cross God's love and Mercy are revealed. The punishment that humankind deserved is absorbed by the amazing love of God. Jesus reverses our No to God, in a life and death in perfect obedience to his Father's will. Jesus becomes our Yes to God.

God's Grace reaches out to you and to me.... However many times we fall or fail....it is the loving grace of God that lifts us up and restores and redeems us.

It is, I believe, that wonderful truth that brings hope and certainty, in these fearful and uncertain times. Thanks be to God.....