Third Sunday before Lent 2022
Racial Justice Sunday

Jeremiah 17.5-10
1 Corinthians 15.12-20
Luke 6.17-26

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.

— Word from the Gospel according to St Luke, the sixth chapter.

I have always loved African American spirituals: those hymns written by an enslaved people, and sung not only in church on Sunday, but also out in the fields and rivers, on the railroads and in the mines. These songs were for everyday life, just as faith is, or should be.

There came a time, however, when I would feel embarrassed, I guess, at how many of my favourites were about heaven. *O Happy Day*; *I'll Fly Away*; *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*: these tell of escaping this world into a better one. It smacked of that old but pernicious heresy sometimes called Gnosticism, which denigrates the physical world and yearns for a purely spiritual existence.

But that's not really what's going on here. And of course enslaved people would sing of a world better than the one they knew all too well, knew with their sweat and their blood too. In their place, I too would sing longingly of heaven.

Indeed, it is still the best argument I know for supposing that there might be a heaven, hinted in our gospel reading, though I know what the cynics and sceptics will say about this: the opiate of the masses, and all that. But if God is just, as we insist: then there must be recompense, real reprieve, reparation, for those who have suffered as they did, these men and women and children dragged across continents and consigned to be property, treated as beasts of burden and worse.

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It is Racial Justice Sunday, which falls on the second Sunday of February: a recent innovation in the ecumenical calendar, having begun only in 1995, but one we will keep every year in this Benefice, not least because you now have a priest who looks like me, who have in my thirty-six years and three continents never once lived in a place where most people—and certainly those in positions of power—look like me.

On this day every year, we will remember the sins of our fathers and mothers, which have percolated, propagated, perpetuated to our own day; and we will repent of these sins, and take seriously our duty now to those here and elsewhere upon whom these sins continue to redound, to do unspeakable violence, inconsolable injustice, and irreparable harm. We will take seriously our duty to repair these harms, which have served to benefit—directly and indirectly, in small ways and large—all the people of this country: whose Majesty's Government for centuries reaped fortunes on the naked and striped backs of enslaved people of colour, and turned this wealth into public infrastructure and a healthcare system and a welfare state, and a pension scheme, and so let's not pretend that our lives even now are unstained with blood, we who have received our consolation.

Slavery is, of course, the most obvious manifestation of racism, and persists even now in updated guise to keep our food and clothes and gadgets affordable. Sadly, Wilberforce did not end slavery, which has proved much too politically and economically convenient to abandon. But racism takes other forms too, some overt and others subtle. Most of us who look different from everyone else take it for granted as the price of admission to this country, or an additional tax to pay for the privilege of living and working here: we take for granted that we have to put up with

discrimination in the workplace and elsewhere, and with annoying stereotypes, and the occasional slur: off-colour comments tossed off-hand.

And perhaps that is not very high a price to pay, but every so often, there is the threat of physical violence, as the East Asian community experienced here in the early days of the pandemic: there was then a spike in hate crimes against us. The first case I saw was of a student from Singapore named Jonathan, assaulted in London, a scapegoat for our times. The coincidence of our names and backgrounds sent chills down my spine. Back then, I had noticed that people would cross the street to avoid walking past me—a Chinese man, and therefore obviously directly off the boat from Wuhan, filled to our eyes with virus. How sad is it that I was grateful that at least they weren't threateningly walking towards me?

It sends chills down my spine to remember that in the nineteenth century, the Chinese in Britain were accused of spreading disease, and of stealing jobs and even of stealing women, as if White women could never choose us for themselves. And as much as I would like to believe that society has moved on since those bad old days, sometimes I'm not so sure. Sometimes I think that the targets have changed, and maybe the tactics too, but little else.

Certainly, the way we—and if not we ourselves, then the governments we are responsible for voting in—continue to treat South Asians should make us hang our heads in shame. Just as the Jews were in the Middle Ages, British Asian Muslims now are treated with suspicion, as if they are all potential terrorists, especially if they take their faith seriously. They are caricatured and made the target of cheap jokes, including by the most powerful politicians in the land, whom we—the people—democratically elect: and these jokes would not be funny anyway, but they are despicable in a context in which their victims are also daily subjected to abuse and injustice.

It is uncomfortable, I am sure, for a society to be confronted with racism; and indeed a backlash has begun, in this country as elsewhere. Having been involved a little in the Church of England's efforts towards racial justice, I have seen that even in the Church, there is grumbling that we should leave the past in the past, which is most unusual for an organisation otherwise obsessed with things that happened thousands of years ago. But things are better now, they say: to which the obvious response is that they are not yet good enough.

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Which leaves us with that most important question of all, which is about what we ought to do about all this.

The first thing to do is to allow our minds to be tested and hearts searched for our own part in racial injustice. We have inevitably imbibed attitudes from the culture around us that spill out in various decisions that we make, things we say and do. We are inevitably complicit in societal structures and processes that keep racial prejudice and discrimination alive even now.

A part of this work is the work of self-reflection. I mentioned just a moment ago some people's reactions against efforts towards racial justice. Consider how you react when you hear about such efforts—whether it is about the replacing of statues and renaming of buildings; or about policy proposals concerning reparations and open borders. Consider how you are reacting now, at this confrontation from this pulpit. Do you feel defensive? Do you feel unduly put upon? Such reactions are worth interrogating: the heart is devious and perverse.

And there has never been a better time to learn about racism and racial justice, as people of colour are finding their voices: and we should listen to them. I have conveniently left a list of recommendations at the back of the church for you. And having considered

these things, we should allow ourselves to feel discomfited. I said not long ago that we should attend to things about the Christian faith that we find embarrassing; and today's message is cut from the same cloth.

But it is important to move on from discomfort to action, just as we move each Sunday morning from the penitential rite to the dismissal, having been nourished by Christ of his own flesh and blood, to carry his good news into the world. This good news must be good news for those who have suffered and continue to suffer racial injustice: and it is incumbent upon us to work towards that kingdom in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, which is to say in which our racial divisions are well and truly abolished, and our cultural differences joyfully celebrated.

The work of racial justice is, like those African American spirituals, the work of prayer to be sure, but also work to be done out in the world, in dining rooms and newspapers, in shops and voting booths. It is by no means *easy* to talk about race and racism; nor is it easy to be discerning consumers that avoid the products of modern slavery as best we can, or to be conscientious voters, when racial justice is rarely very high on any party platform. But Christian moral duty is never promised to be easy: all that is promised is that we will find ourselves alongside those whom Christ

himself called blessed, whose earthly lives have been marked by suffering, not least at the hands of their fellow human beings. I reckon it reward aplenty to be counted among the company of the blessed.