

Black Lives Matter to the Christian Church

This morning I wanted to recount why Black lives matter to anyone who calls themselves a Christian. At a time where race relations are asking the world to face questions about equity and justice and change let us remind ourselves why a '*Black lives matter*' movement should find itself at home in the Church.

As Christians our story of faith emerges at a location in the Mediterranean when Abram, a Turkish man from the town of Harran which still exists on the border of Turkey and Syria today, sets out towards his destiny in the opposite direction to Athens, Rome, Paris, London or New York or any other hub of Western civilisation. I have been to Harran about 20 years ago and I was the whitest person there that is for sure.

If we wished to start our reflection earlier in the wider human story of which Abramic faith is a part we would similarly observe that it emerges a long way from the world of white majority in the West. Whether we imagine humanity begins with the wanderings of early anatomically modern humans out of Africa from south of the Zambezi River or we instead begin our narrative with interactions between Adam and Eve in a garden located in southern Mesopotamia (now Iraq) where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers run into the sea, our human story starts with a skin tone closer to black than white.

Returning to the chronicles of the Israelites we see the travels of Abram's children soon take them to Africa through famine and war and circumstance. God's people sojourn in north Africa, in Egypt for many years. Indeed the whole of the Old Testament in which we find the roots of our faith is a story of black and brown people living in Africa, Persia, Babylon and Arabia. Whether it is King Solomon inviting the African Queen Sheba to visit his kingdom or Jonah preaching repentance to the people of what is now Mosul in Iraq in Nineveh or Daniel exiled in Persia facing lions and fire .. there are few white faces to see and even less that matter as much as those which are black and brown.

Turning to the New Testament and our encounters with Jesus the Galilean we do not find our setting changes too much. The Arabian ethnicity of Jesus and his disciples is far from insignificant in the Bible. The whole setting of the New Testament reflects a community where race and skin colour are incredibly important whether Jewish or Samaritan, Roman or Greek your race was a large part of your identity. Whether you were black or white or brown it mattered. And the characters we encounter know this. Can anything good come from Galilee? Can any Samaritan be good? Can a Canaanite be allowed to receive the teachings of Jesus or were the Canaanites more like dogs under the table? Can an Ethiopian eunuch be baptised? The question of equity and justice in race and colour was asked in many and varied ways.

The answer of course for Jesus was that no one is excluded from God's love and purpose. And building on this St Paul goes on to tell us that there is "neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ" God's love concerns, involves and speaks to all people inclusively. And this message we must acknowledge then allows white people to join with black and brown people in the worship of the living God. White people begin to matter to the early Church.

Black lives matter in the subsequent development of the Church. Whether Simeon called Niger as an early prophet and teacher in the Church in Antioch; or Lucias of Cyrene praying and fasting for Paul and Barnabus on their missionary journeys; or Apollos of Alexandria on the North African coast. Or moving on from the New Testament to the councils of the early Church which established our theology and liturgy in its most fundamental forms we find Africans including Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Athanasius and Augustine of Hippo all of whom stand out as the founders of Christian doctrine. These are black lives that matter to the Church beyond words.

The subsequent history of Christianity in Africa and of African Christians across the globe is rich and deep and therefore matters. It matters not least because of the sufferings which have been endured for the sake of the gospel. From its inception Christianity faced persecution in North Africa and martyrdom has been a feature of faith for many black believers. The timeline of black Christian suffering begins with the Diocletian persecution in its first few hundred years after Jesus, it then traces the Church through the Muslim conquests of North Africa, to the more recent holocausts of Ugandan Christians and the present suffering of Christian believers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and martyrs in Southern Sudan.

Let us therefore in the headlines of this week be reminded that black lives matter because they are at the heart of the Christian message and the Christian Church and its mission. This is not a new message but a reminder of a truth that must not be forgotten in the conversation and actions of white lives. Let us embrace our common and shared journey of faith with every person who has ever sought to love their neighbour and themselves regardless of race or colour.