

Black Lives Matter – Why now?

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*Speak words of hope. Be human in this most inhuman of ages.
Guard the image of man for it is the image of God.¹*

My sisters and brothers, for a while now these words have travelled with me, have encouraged my heart while at the same time torturing my spirit. As a disciple, how do I speak words of hope when I feel so hopeless and helpless?

Recent events of the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd have left me grief-stricken for all the tens of thousands of people who have died in this country and across the globe, and the death of a stranger at the hands of those who should be protecting all of us.²

Yet I feel the collective responses from us as the Church were often the usual platitudinous niceties. I have seen and heard the same echoes from yesteryear: policy enactments that do not offer practical applicability; knee jerk reactions as opposed to Christ-like chain breaking, table turning, the Sabbath as resistance.³

The pandemic has highlighted the inequalities that exist across our society. Analysis has shown that people of colour, already subject to racial inequalities in health, education, housing and employment, are far more likely to die from Covid-19 than their white counterparts. Strikingly such inequalities are even more marked in medical and social care staff.⁴

The Kairos Hour

Yet, why now? Whilst the pandemic has changed so much, history seems to be repeating itself. In his essay, 'Letters to a White Liberal', Merton describes a *kairos* hour, 'not merely of the Negro, but of the white man', 'this critical moment' that is strikingly similar to the racial climate of the US and UK in 2020:

It can be the hour of vocation, the moment in which, hearing and understanding the will of God as expressed in the urgent need of our Negro brother, we can respond to that inscrutable will in a faith that faces the need of reform and creative change, in order that the demands of truth and justice may not go unfulfilled.⁵

The tension is palpable – people of colour and their allies have been demanding racial equality. The increasingly angry demonstrations and counterdemonstrations have resulted in legislation severely restricting people's right to protest, whether peaceful or not, thereby eroding the civil liberties of all.⁶ My comment here refers to society preferring to maintain the status quo, though that's not to say that black people are not included in the comforts provided by civil liberties, the same liberties, however, that uphold white privilege. The power of civil disobedience and protest has never been so visible and unquestionably immutable. But this time around, and particularly where I live in Birmingham UK, the solidarity of both black and white has been deeply moving and heart warming. This is an observation of the general public rather than the Church in particular to which I belong. Another astonishingly positive aspect of the protests has been the leadership and participation of young people, not unlike the remarkable leadership of so much of Climate Justice protests.

The death of Mr. Floyd has reawakened many of us to the pain that is felt by people of colour not just in America, but also in the UK and the world over – and hence the protests that followed. We have heard how Mr. Floyd was characterized as 'scum' by a Florida deputy sheriff, who also claimed that Floyd 'killed himself' and that he had a history of violence;⁷ but this is not about the behaviour and character of Mr. Floyd. If George Floyd had been caught committing a crime, had been charged, faced trial and sent to prison, this would not even be on the news, because this is how things ought to be. But that is not what happened, as we all know. And this is a narrative that is true for so many people of colour in America.

Systemic Racism

The death of Mr. Floyd was caused by systemic racism – not just racist individuals, but a system that does not treat all people equally and allows that mistreatment to be normalized across society. It is about a system that upholds whiteness as normative, perpetuating endless manifestations of white privilege. I argue that this is how society at large

has come to accept and normalize racism, whilst allowing those who hold power to manipulate and exploit the electorate – preferring to divide rather than unite – in order to benefit and enhance their chances on election day. Systemic racism is present in our British society too – and consequently in our churches. In Britain, some would argue, Brexit is one manifestation of these undercurrents.

I am describing a system that allows for institutions and people to get away with racism and discriminatory practices, and allows some police officers to get away with mistreatment and brutality against people of colour. Systemic racism is embedded and ingrained in the fabric of society and begins as far down as the education of children, with young boys unfairly treated and eventually ending up excluded.

A report published in June 2020 by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) confirmed that the IOPC was looking at several incidents following increasing community concerns. Regional Director Sal Naseem stated:

Right now, communities across London are expressing real and growing concerns about disproportionality and use of force. Only a few weeks ago we highlighted increasing community concerns about the use of Taser. We are also hearing increasing levels of concern about stop and search and, most recently, fines issued during lockdown being disproportionate to black people.⁸

I have heard of well intentioned and quite privileged fellow disciples opposing recent protest marches, suggesting instead dialogue and intentional listening. I very much want to question the motive behind this disingenuous and myopic view of history and its waste products. As Merton wrote in his essay 'From Non-violence to Black Power' over 50 years ago:

The people who have been most shocked by the Black Power movement are the white liberals. And of course they are right, because the whole impact of the movement is directed against *them*. It is a rejection of their tender and ambiguous consciences, their taste for compromise, their desire to eat momma's cherry pie and still have it, their semi-conscious proclivity to use the Negro for their own sentimental, self-justifying end.⁹

The privileged white person assumes the role of arbiter, dictating how people of colour can and cannot protest. The privilege is the cause of this myopic view, where denial of the existence of racial inequality — in the hearts of white people — protects them from facing any need for repentance and salvation. The denial and platitudes appear to suggest that the 'beat of the drummer' heard by people of colour is heard very differently by their white counterparts. In his essay 'The legend of Tucker Caliban', Merton argues that 'it is imperative for him [the white man] to pay attention.'¹⁰ Otherwise he runs the risk of making the worst decisions where it most matters. It appears that Merton is urging his hearers/readers who deny or can't understand white privilege, to listen to the times and get in step with the beat of the drummer who is playing for both white people and people of colour. The distinction between personal guilt and collective responsibility must be highlighted. Merton asserts that not many white people consciously seek to oppress or to be racist towards people of colour, but that nevertheless:

We have all more or less acquiesced in and consented to a state of affairs in which the Negro is treated unjustly, and in which his unjust treatment is directly or indirectly to the advantage of people like ourselves. ... We all collectively contribute to a situation in which the Negro has to live and act as our inferior.¹¹

In Bristol, UK, I witnessed the outrage at the so-called 'violence' perpetrated on an inanimate object that feels no pain, injustice or oppression. The statue of Edward Colston, a philanthropist who had made his fortune in the slave trade, was toppled and thrown into the harbour. The presence of that very inanimate object symbolized the colonisation, subjugation, dehumanisation and oppression of people of colour. Just by its existence, it did great violence to the core of the spirit of people of colour. So, what was that outrage all about? For Merton, commenting on the racial violence that exploded in the summer of 1967, the causes are clear:

For the penniless and hopeless Negro who stood aside and viewed it from afar, non-violence simply reinforced the feelings of hopeless passivity and despair which were his. On the other hand, an appeal to violence, an assurance that he could burn houses and loot stores with relative impunity,

proved an outlet to suppressed hate. ... In short: the Negro considers that it is impossible for him really to acquire a place as an equal in this society of ours.¹²

As it was then, so it is now.

A Theology of Good Intentions

There seems to be at play here what *Anthony G Reddie*, a British Black theologian, calls a 'theology of good intentions'.¹³ A narrow and myopic theology offers a God who loves all in a generalized way, rather than the God of justice who prioritises the cry of the poor and marginalized. This God of power and might judges the rich whose own tables are too high and who make it impossible for the poor to access God's open table.

Black lives do not matter if we are outraged by so-called violence towards an inanimate object, rather than systemic racism and real violence against members of our communities and humanity at large. What is the meaning of Merton's call to us 'to be more human in this most inhuman of ages, to guard the image of man for it is the image of God', the image of God that is in all of us?¹⁴ The prophet Micah compels us 'to act justly and to love mercy': an active compassion, an expression of our humanity, that can only be expressed in humility and intentional listening - listening beyond our own experience and open to learning from others.¹⁵ Humility presses us to enter into relationships that engender mutual vulnerability, rather than maintaining our power and privilege. Merton describes the *kairos* moment as 'a conviction of *vocation*, of a providential role to play in the world of our time', our call to seek justice, our call to peacemaking, our call to love without qualification, and our call to guard and hold the sanctity of all those who bear the image of God — all humanity.¹⁶

Justice-seeking is what God requires of us, 'to proclaim good news to the poor', 'to proclaim freedom for the prisoners', 'to set the oppressed free'— a prophetic call which undergirds all our discipleship, all our missional work.¹⁷ As disciples of Christ, we forfeit the option not to care or to love. So we seek to bring about transformation within our communities, where social justice is not an addendum to our missional work, but the basis of the Good News to the poor. We seek to bring transformation to our communities by bringing compassion where there is none, where there is pain and brokenness. We seek to bring justice where there is injustice; and we seek to bring peace where there is anxiety or unsettledness. What destabilises communities and robs them

of their peace is a whole array of inequalities: poor distribution of wealth; poor access to education and employment; poor access to health care or to the justice system; race inequality, homophobia and more.

A Discomforting Challenge

Do you have people of colour in the communities that you live in or in your own church family? Do you know how recent events have affected them? As I write, in Birmingham, our city, the West Midlands Police has been under investigation by the IOPC for brutality on black men.¹⁸ How do we respond pastorally, collectively as the Church, to those affected, bearing in mind our call and responsibility is always towards the victim before the perpetrator? Perhaps we cannot wait to go back to 'normal'; but is the presence of racism in our society one of the aspects of 'normal' we can't wait to get back to?

I know all that I have mentioned is going to cause a lot of discomfort. I know in some instances it has already filled us with rage and righteous anger. But rather than pretend or deny our own discomfort, we are better off embracing it. Just remember, friends, discomfort named is discomfort confronted. Discomfort positively confronted without guilt or blame has the potential to be greatly transformative and can instigate change. This discomfort, named and confronted, also holds great potential to propel us into witness and solidarity.

Notes

1. From 'Prologue – The Author's Advice to His Book' in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London: Burns & Oates, 1977), p.6.
2. George Floyd, 46, died on 25 May, 2020, after being arrested by police outside a shop in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Footage of the arrest shows a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, kneeling on Mr Floyd's neck while he was pinned to the floor. Chauvin, has since been charged with murder. Transcripts of police bodycam footage show Mr Floyd said more than 20 times he could not breathe as he was restrained by the officers.
3. In his book, *The Sabbath as Resistance*, Walter Brueggemann offers a transformative vision of the wholeness God intends, giving world-weary Christians a glimpse of a more fulfilling and simpler life through Sabbath observance.
4. In his article in *The Guardian* on 20 April, 2020, 'Coronavirus exposes how riddled Britain is with racial inequality', Omar Khan, director of the race inequality think tank the Runnymede Trust wrote: 'A disproportionately high number of BAME deaths from coronavirus ... track existing social determinants of health. ... Recent statistics suggesting a third of people critically ill with coronavirus were from ethnic minorities have highlighted

this greater risk. ... Even more striking ... is the fact that the first 10 doctors who died of Covid-19, and two-thirds of the first 100 health and social care workers, were from ethnic minorities.'

5. From 'Letters to a White Liberal' in Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 61.
6. Examples from the Southern States are legion. For example, on 20 August 2020, following more than 60 days of demonstrations outside the State Capitol, Tennessee Republican Gov. Bill Lee signed a law that made it a felony to participate in some types of protests, including camping out overnight on state property, punishable by up to six years in prison. In Tennessee, people convicted of a felony lose their voting rights — making the new law a tool for disenfranchisement. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Lee_\(Tennessee_politician\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Lee_(Tennessee_politician))
7. See <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8694465>
8. IOPC – Independent Office for Police Conduct – <https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/>
9. From 'From non-violence to Black Power' in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence - Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Indiana :University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 124.
10. From 'The Legend of Tucker Caliban' in *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 60. The essay is, in essence, an analysis of *A Different Drummer*, the first novel by Negro writer William Melvin Kelley.
11. *Faith and Violence*, p. 180.
12. From 'The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven' in *Faith and Violence*, pp. 172-173.
13. Anthony G Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies – A Practical Theology for Education and Liberation* (Norwich: Epworth Press, 2003), p. 155.
14. See note 1.
15. Micah 6:8
16. From 'Letters to a White Liberal', *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 61.
17. Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah 61:1.
18. 'IOPC launches investigation after alleged police brutality in Birmingham. The inquiry follows six complaints about overuse of force against black men in the city, including the use of stun guns.' <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/may/29>

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