

Sunday 7th June 2020

Dear Friends

I am writing a very personal letter this week, so please bear with me. I have been so saddened by the news coming out of the United States, and particularly Minneapolis, of the riots following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a policeman. In the late nineties I lived in Minneapolis for two years and it is a fine city. We still have good friends there. But my experience of living there was, for the most part, as a privileged white person.

Although I certainly do not condone all the tactics and excesses of the rioters, I can attest to some of the longstanding prejudice and discrimination that black people have suffered.

In the first few months of arriving in Minneapolis I was taken (I must admit reluctantly) to a Baptist church in one of the poorest black areas of the city. As I walked in I found myself surrounded by smiling and welcoming people – four hundred of them, and I was one of only three white people present. As the worship began, I was swept up with the sheer joy of the praise, the singing and the warmth of community there. Soon I too was dancing, singing, shouting out ‘Amen’ and ‘Alleluia!’ with the best of them. I became a regular attender and never once was my colour mentioned, nor was I made to feel self-conscious. The only times I was made to feel self-conscious was when some of my white friends expressed shock and puzzlement as to why I would venture into an ‘unsafe’ area of the city to worship with black people.

Over the coming months I got to know some of the congregation and their community. I visited one of the local High Schools. The stories I heard from the young people of the struggles they had as poor black students and the continual and systemic racism they encountered in many areas of the city were certainly eye opening. Then, the teenage son of two members of the congregation was shot dead, the innocent victim of a drive-by shooting, almost certainly gang-related. The indifference of the authorities to this tragedy was alarming, but more shocking was the total indifference of many white people I spoke to. Young black men killing young black men was, they said, inevitable and typical.

However, back at the church, I was so moved by the dignity of the boy’s parents and the whole congregation who stood by them.The sermon that the Minister of the church preached after the event was one of the most moving I have ever heard, he spoke of courage, hope and forgiveness, and in response to everything he said there was a resounding ‘Amen’ from his congregation. I felt really privileged to share this moment with them.

Many of you will be thinking, well that’s all a long way from here, we’re not like that, and anyway we have more important things to care about right now. I leave that to you.

What I will say is that racism is not simply about the colour of our skin. Racism is a closing of the mind and heart to those who are different to us, those who are ‘other’. We all have prejudices and preconceptions about other people, individuals or groups, that we hold on to mostly out of ignorance, fear or laziness. It would be a help if we could, as a starting point, at least admit that to ourselves.

However, the Christian faith tells us that we are allmade in God’s image, and if that is the case then we must assume that we are all equal in God’s sight. We all stand under the same judgement and we can all be recipients of the same abundant forgiveness.Surely this is the truth that we should be telling everyone.

I am fearful for what is happening in the United States. But here in Somerset, we have been given the opportunity (albeit in the unwelcome form of a pandemic) to rethink how we might live as a community and as neighbours. All we can do is start by looking into our own hearts, then to one another and out into our community. However, we can pray for our brothers and sisters across the Atlantic and for a more just society for all.

I am sure that the congregation of Pilgrim Baptist Church will be praying for that, and they will, I am sure, still be praising God, even amid tragedy and despair.

Today is Trinity Sunday and we come together to praise God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the service I lead I talk about the dance of love between the three members of the Trinity. I was certainly invited into that dance at Pilgrim Baptist and I owe them a great deal.

Next week’s letter will be from Katharine and it will be her last Sunday with us. I hope as many of you as possible will communicate with her in the next two weeks as she prepares to move.

Blessings.

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