

Notes from a Black and White Island, Personal Reflections on Dialogue and Black Lives Matter

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During the first lockdown, the decision of the Diocese of Hereford to initiate discussions entitled, 'Racial Justice and the Church,' as a response to the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement was heartening. As a priest in the Church of England, who came to Craven Arms, a small agricultural town in the Hereford Diocese, after over thirty-six years' stipendiary ministry in urban and inner-city ministry in diverse communities and congregations, it was encouraging to realise that less diverse communities were addressing the same issues. The third of these sessions was with Dr Joel Edwards and called for the creation of safe spaces where white people could be set free from 'White liberal nervousness of getting things wrong.' I write as a white liberal with plenty of experience of getting things wrong. I write as a Christian involved in interfaith relations for many years and am aware that issues of intolerance and racism are encountered within and across different faiths, not least the long history of anti-Semitism within the Church. These comments and reflections on my personal journey explore a vision of a safe space.

During this pandemic, creating a safe space has taken on a different resonance; social distance, shielding the medically vulnerable, and preventing infection have been priorities. Before this, a safe space has often been associated with offering somewhere where victims/survivors of abuse, particularly women, children, minorities, and vulnerable groups can come together to find support, build resistance, and share experiences with confidence and without judgement. Interfaith dialogue has not, in my experience, sought to be a safe space in this sense, rather a place of trust, exploration and growth in understanding – not always comfortable but a place of challenge and change. Among the reasons that the Interfaith Network lists for being involved in dialogue are 'tackling prejudice and countering hatred' and 'looking for ways to work together for the common good on a sound foundation of understanding'. Faith identity is part of who we are, and so is the experience of racism and prejudice.

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As I reflect on my identity as a white person, my earliest memories growing up in a working-class area of Luton include black people living in the next street, friends of the family who were black and seeing black people in and around the town centre. In the 1950s I do not remember any black children at school with me. Moving to my father's home village in rural Essex in my senior school years meant there were few black people to be seen. The Civil Rights marches and music in the 1960s provided my first consciousness of racism. I remember listening to Josh White singing 'Strange Fruit', a song about public lynching of black people in the USA, but it was not until a black work colleague loaned me a copy of the prison letters of George Jackson, 'Soldad Brother', that I began to think about my racism. The TV series based on Alex Hayley's book, *Roots*, was being shown at this time and was raising black consciousness among young people I was working with in Wolverhampton; there were stimulating discussions in the classroom and fights in the playground!

As a Christian, I was aware of the experiences of Caribbean migrants who had experienced racism in the churches and I met some of the leaders of what was then the largest of the Black Majority Churches, the New Testament Church of God, (National Overseer Oliver Lyseight, Curtis Gray, Ira Brooks and Rocliff Joseph) and attended their Annual Convention at Bingley Hall in Birmingham. While they had their own stories of encountering racism in the churches in England, it was listening to the experiences of Black Anglicans that made me aware of the deeply entrenched racism in the Church.

Few Anglican Churches were safe spaces for these Anglicans! They challenged me to look at myself, my church, and my faith through listening to their story. Seeing their resilience, their faith and their willingness to help me begin to understand how racism works was and is one of the deepest and most unsettling experiences in my Christian faith. Their long experience of racism and insights were summed up in the words of one church member who said to me, 'David, we have been watching white people for five hundred years.' It was not just their experience of racism, but their lived out Christian faith that I could not fail to notice each time we met. This became more apparent when I was ordained and served in parishes where many Black Anglican were present.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Black Anglicans often described being caught in the middle – spoken of by some Black Christians as not real Christians or worshipping in the 'Master's' church and often perceived as not real Anglicans or simply ignored in Church of England churches. By the time of my retirement from stipendiary ministry in 2016, many urban churches faced new issues in Black and White encounter. In my last congregation most younger Black families were from Africa, though the different generations of those who had arrived from the Caribbean were still present in church. We also had families from Eastern Europe, particularly

those who had no obvious connection with churches elsewhere in the town.

John Wilkinson in, 'The Church in Black and White', contends that Black and White are terms in relation to racism and in particular to colonial history, transatlantic slavery and present racism experienced by Black people in White-dominated society. It is in this context that, I see colour: it matters whether someone is Black or White because of racism. It is not a term about humanity, which is one human race and 'The Race Gallery' by Marek Kohn in the 1990's and more recently Adam Rutherford's 'How to Argue with a Racist' expose the pseudoscience that racism is based on.

As terrible a wrong as racism is, it is not undefeatable. While it may be easy to say this as I do not experience racism, it is not easy to continually be aware of how insidious racism is in our lives. That racism exists makes me less of a person. Many black people are rightly tired and angry of waiting for change. In dialogue we have to show our commitment to challenge all human diminishment, of which racism is a part. Our personhood is bound up with the personhood of others. To not act in a racist way is not enough, we must challenge racism and we must change. If there is the experience of racial disadvantage, and this is one of the things that racism does, then the corollary is that there is racial advantage. This too I must challenge.

A friend recently put it this way

'I am from _____ where for most of my life, especially in my youth, most places I lived or went to I was one of the only Black people. I was attacked several times in primary school by white children who hated my skin.

There were some parts of our town where, as mixed-race Black children we knew we were not welcome (often Swastikas and National Front signs were painted on walls and garden gates), and we walked through those areas in fear. You never ever forget that feeling, you just learn to live with it, like grief.

When I first visited my London cousins, I could not believe there were so many people who looked like me just going about their daily business. It felt so nice not to stand out and I felt 'normal' for the first time in 18 years.

I went to a club in London with my cousins and a guy who worked with them. The club was almost entirely black people and the guy was white. As we were going in the guy said he felt really weird being the only white person he could see. We reassured him and I said, 'That feeling for you is just in one club, for one night: welcome to my life.' If you are wondering, I think this is what people mean by 'white privilege' – how lovely it must be.

I'm not looking for sympathy or to take anything from your own experiences – that won't bring back a childhood blighted by racism or stop the doubt in the

back of my mind that I try to suppress even now as a fifty-odd-year-old every single time I walk through a village or town I don't know; but to my white family and friends I would say this: please challenge racism when you can. Don't leave it for me, as the only black person in the room, to do it.' Mary C

While it is important that as a white person, I own the reality of past and present racism, it is not a place to stay. This is not a guilt trip, rather I have to critically evaluate myself, society and its history, resist racism now, and build new relationships. I draw on the Christian understanding as experienced by the disciples of Jesus after they had forsaken him at the Cross. His appearance to them in the Upper Room begins with the word, 'Peace'. He does not say, 'I forgive you.' There is no recrimination. He is offering a new relationship, not founded on their past failure, nor on forgetting what has happened but on the possibility of a new beginning. While we cannot expect that many Black people will greet this possibility with great enthusiasm, for many are tired of hoping for real change, it can be a shared hope. What might this mean in terms of racism today? Rowan Williams defines oppression as the transaction that leads to exclusion, to the severance of reciprocity. In the possibility of true mutuality, I will need to listen, learn, and continually develop a critical awareness of racism. Any safe space must lead to inclusion and restore reciprocity so that in the context of Black and White encounter the accusation of racism does not become a trump card that ends all further discussion but one that looks for change, growth in understanding, and the pursuit of a just outcome. Rowan Williams writes that Christ's action on the Cross, is 'an act of self-displacement in which the ultimate source of sacred power declares itself free to restore any and every breakage of relationship, irrespective of what human beings try to do to mend things.' This is a place, Williams continues, 'where the act of God and human reality are allowed to belong together without fear or rivalry... a place where human competition means nothing ...a place where the admission of failure is not the end but the beginning, a place where no one is excluded in advance.'

The use of 'place', rather than 'space' in this quotation may be particularly telling in the current pandemic. The restrictions on people meeting, worship and prayer being held online, and loss of communal life appear to diminish the importance of place.

David Haney observed, 'the continuation of turning places into spaces – and the manner in which they enriched people's lives is lost.'

Walter Brueggemann said, 'The sense of being lost, displaced and homeless is pervasive in contemporary culture. The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place is a deep and moving pursuit. Loss of place and yearning for place are dominant.'

A sense of place remains important. Though there is considerable academic debate regarding the meaning of 'place' rather than 'space', Ken Leech in 'Prayer and Prophecy'

offers an understanding that is useful: 'I see space as a scientifically measured location, while place involves the encounter between space and the human interpretation of its significance.' It is the interaction and the association of people and place that gives it significance.

Dialogue between people of faith can be the safe space that Joel Edwards asks for. It is not an easy nor short journey and will include seeking to establish equality with justice. It is my hope that in dialogue we will take up this challenge with renewed vigour. Personally, this encounter continues to give me some of the richest experiences of my life, some of the deepest challenges to my faith, assumptions, cultures and values. It has been a journey of getting things wrong, rebuke, humble learning, and the discovery that my liberation is bound up with the liberation of all people.

Joel Edwards encouraged those responding to Black Lives Matter to find out the historic background of racism. With it may come the realisation that something of our spiritual foundation has been built upon racism. For some this has led to exposing a new culture, history, and identity that would open the way for God's purging of our spiritual roots and bring a different identity where these gifts could be shared.

As we listen to the experience of victims of racism, we must hear both the pain and anger of past memory and present reality. Miroslav Volt's book, 'The End of Memory', wrestles with his memories of having been tortured under the former Yugoslav regime. Its emphasis on his theological reflection of being oppressed left me thinking of how memory and being part of oppression is part of the Black and White journey. Much of what he writes has application to both oppressor and oppressed – the duty to remember, to remember truthfully, to remember to empathise, and to remember for a redeemed future. It means we still affirm the claims of justice but hope for the repair of the damaged relationships: 'Right remembering, remembering that is truthful and just, that heals individuals without injuring others, allows the past to motivate a just struggle and a grace filled world of reconciliation.'

We still have a long way to go for a grace filled world of reconciliation.