

Racial Justice

Series: Like a Mighty River: the Bible on Justice

Date: 3 October 2021, 18th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Luke 10:25-37

*He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
 He has brought down rulers from their thrones
 but has lifted up the humble.
 He has filled the hungry with good things
 but has sent the rich away empty.* Mary's song, Luke 1:52-54

When I studied theology my next door neighbour was Alfred. Alfred was from Uganda doing a PhD. I remember him telling me about when he was studying in the UK that someone had called him a monkey while he was walking down the street. I was shocked. I asked a friend this week what it was like for her as a Vietnamese Australian growing up in Hobart. She said that in the last week someone had spat at her and run at her with a car. In 2015 one of our greatest sportsmen, Adam Goodes, felt forced to retire from AFL due to the persistent racism of crowds at his matches.

This is our 6th sermon in our series *Like a Mighty River: the Bible on Justice*, and today we're looking at the topic of racial justice. These stories show that racial injustice remains an issue in our society. What does the Bible have to say on the topic? Quite frankly an awful lot. Our text for today is perhaps Jesus most famous parable - the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells the story to illustrate what it looks like to "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love your neighbour as yourself summarises the whole of the Bible's moral teaching. This morning we're going to look at 3 points

- Who is my neighbour?
- Why love your neighbour?
- Learning to love your neighbour.

So let's get into it.

1. And who is my neighbour?

We are not going to understand Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan unless we look at the context in which Jesus told it. The parable is Jesus' answer to the lawyer's question. "And who is my neighbor?" The text says he asked this because he wanted to justify himself. What does it mean that he wanted to justify himself? He wanted to define the command and make it more

manageable, something he could accomplish to assure himself of God's favour. He wanted to draw a boundary to say "here is my neighbour. These are the ones I am to love, and no further."

In response Jesus tells him the story. Notice how the story describes what it means to love your neighbour. Unlike the priest and the Levite who passed by, the Samaritan saw him, took pity on him, went to him, bandaged his wounds, put him on his own donkey, took him to an inn to take care of him and paid for his care. To love your neighbour is to meet their material, physical, and economic needs. It means being sacrificially involved with the vulnerable, like the Samaritan who risked his life by stopping on the road. Jesus refuses to put a limit on how we love. And he also refuses to put a limit on who we love.

The parable confronts the man because the Samaritan is the neighbour. Jews and Samaritans hated each other like Palestinians and Jews today, or Protestants and Catholics in Ireland. They were ethnically and religiously different. We instinctively think of our neighbours as those who are like us - the same social class, same skin colour, same language, same faith. With this story Jesus says anyone who is in need - regardless of their difference from me - is my neighbour.

The lawyer's question to Jesus' betrays a cultural, ethnic and religious pride. There is nothing wrong with having a sense of pride in the good things in your family or tribe or culture. The problem comes when that pride means you look down on those who are different, and when your tribe or culture becomes a god who cannot be questioned. One of the main ways we do this is when we take cultural differences, which are neither good nor bad, and we make them virtues. We see cultures who lack what we have as inferior in order to bolster our own self worth. That cultural and racial pride and self righteousness can be passed down through the generations and embedded in how people see the world and in the institutions and systems of society such that they benefit some and disadvantage others. All of which is to say that corporate and intergenerational responsibility is something we must reckon with.

Some of you may have heard me talk about my predecessor at St George's, Thomas Quigley. In 1920 he preached a sermon against the White Australia policy. He said that the "unequal treatment of other races was the very negation of the religion of Jesus Christ" and that "the phrase 'yellow peril' should be forgotten."¹ The White Australia policy began in response to the influx of Chinese to the goldfields in the 1850s. It was formally adopted by the newly federated nation in 1901 to limit immigration to Europeans. Here's what Australia's first Prime Minister said in supporting the policy:

¹ Quoted in *The Advocate*, 10.5.1920

I do not think either that the doctrine of the equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality. There is no racial equality. There is that basic inequality. These races are in comparison with white races – I think no one wants convincing of this fact – unequal and inferior.

The White Australia Policy was only reversed in the 1970s by the Whitlam government. Australia is now a very multicultural country, particularly in our large cities. Proximity to people of different ethnicities gives opportunity for friendship and the breaking down of prejudice and hostility. Hobart has become more multicultural since we arrived here, but Tasmania is still very white. I know talking with non European migrants that they face discrimination when it comes to finding a job or renting a house. As we've seen in this series there is a huge amount of material in the Bible on how, as God's people, we're called to care for the "foreigner", the "immigrant". In the Old Testament, this went to the heart of Israel's identity.

"You are to love those who are foreigners," God commands Israel, "for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt."²

This if you like is one side of the question of racial justice. The other is the question of justice for the First Australians, our indigenous neighbours. Behind the British invasion of Australia lies the history of European colonisation that began with Christopher Columbus going to the New World. In 1493 Pope Alexander gave his blessing to Columbus and issued a papal bull which said that lands not inhabited by Christians were available to be 'discovered' and conquered in order that they be "brought to the faith itself".³ Columbus presented his exploration as having 2 aims: the propagation of Christian civilisation and the acquisition of wealth.

*Your Highnesses have here another world in which our Holy Faith may be so propagated and whence may be taken so much wealth.*⁴

The form this "doctrine of discovery" took in justifying Britain's colonisation of Australia was the fiction of *terra nullius*. That is the claim that because Aboriginal people did not use the land like Europeans, the land in Australia belonged to no one. This is really putting fancy dress on Cultural Pride and Greed. That cultural pride and greed meant that many colonists regarded Australia's First peoples as sub human. Lancelot Threlkeld, a missionary in the 1830s to the Awabakal people in the Port Macquarie area wrote,

*It was maintained by many of the colony that the blacks had no language at all but were only a race of the monkey tribe. This was a convenient assumption, for if it could be proved that the Aborigines...were only a species of wild beasts, there could be no guilt attributed to those who shot them or poisoned them.*⁵

That history of dispossession and destruction still affects the lives of indigenous Australians, just as the shadow of a "white Australia" still whispers in our cultural imagination. Here the question

² Deuteronomy 10:19

³ Cited in Celia Kemp, *A Voice in the Wilderness: Listening to the Uluru Statement from the Heart*, Anglican Board of Mission, 2018: 15

⁴ Cited in *A Voice in the Wilderness*, 81

⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

“and who is my neighbour?” has more the feel of Cain’s sullen retort to God after murdering his brother Abel, “am I my brother’s keeper?”

How can we counter the cultural pride and self righteousness that produces and perpetuates racial injustice? On one level we need to tell a better story. The story of the Good Samaritan offers a window into the rich resources in the whole story of the Bible to combat racism. And that brings us to point 2.

2. Why Love your neighbor as yourself?

Here I just want to touch the chapters of the Biblical story that speak for racial justice.

i. *Creation*. The fountainhead of all Biblical ethics comes in the first chapter of the Bible where God creates humanity, male and female, in his image. This says 2 things. First, that there is in fact only one race, the human race. As the apostle Paul says to the Athenians *he hath made of one blood all nations of men*.⁶ Second, that each person bears the image of God is the fundamental basis for human equality - regardless of ethnicity, class, language, ability, sexuality, whatever. That truth, however fragile and contested, rises again and again wherever the Bible is read.

ii. *Israel*. God’s choice of the family of Abraham threatened to sanctify Israel’s ethnic pride. Yet that choice was that they be his instrument through which all peoples on earth would be blessed. Her calling was to be a light to the nations. Indeed God explicitly condemned her temptation to self-righteous pride. *Understand, then, that it was not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people*.⁷ God’s blessing was a gift, not a birthright.

iii. *Gospel*. The Gospel itself, the good news of Jesus’ incarnation, death and resurrection, contains within it the greatest power for racial justice. First it declares that God not only made all people in his image, but he also loves all people to such an extent that he became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ and died for the forgiveness of our sins. That love is not dependent upon race or culture or ethnicity, but is freely given to all.

Second, as Christ’s death reconciles us to God, so it also reconciles us to each other. St Paul writes,

*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ... His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, **16** and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility*.⁸

As such the church then is in its DNA a multi-ethnic, multicultural community.

⁶ Acts 17.26

⁷ Deuteronomy 9.6

⁸ Ephesians 2.14-16

*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*⁹

Notice that the ethnic identity is not erased, it is still there. Rather, it is relativised in relation to Christ. Through him we have both God and each other, with all our differences.

iv. *New Creation*. Finally, in Revelation we catch a glimpse of the church, that new humanity, gathered around the throne worshipping the Lamb, made up of people from every nation, tribe, people and language.¹⁰

The Church is thus a new kind of human community, where there is space for all peoples in all our ethnic and linguistic diversity. IN Christ that human tendency to divide over difference is radically overcome and turned to worship. That is because the distinctives of language and culture and nation are not what saves us, nor are they that to which we owe our primary allegiance. “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb”, sing the great multitude.¹¹ Therefore they can be appreciated for the created goods they are. Because of the security we have in Christ we can both delight in and laugh at the peculiarities of our own language and culture, and others too. At least that is what we are called to be as the church. We have and can still fail when it comes to racial justice. And that brings us to point 3.

3. Learning to love your neighbour

At our best the church offers a model for how human communities can work. And the church has produced great champions for racial justice like Martin Luther King and in Australia, William Cooper. How can keep learn to be a community that loves our neighbours? I suggest 3 things. Listening, Repentance, and Hospitality.

I. Listening

If we are to learn to love our neighbours the first thing we need to listen to is the Word of God, the Bible. Although the Bible was brought by the hands of the colonisers, again and again, across the world, it has been embraced by the colonised who have found in it the resources to critique the injustice of colonisation. We all come to the Bible with our own particular viewpoint, shaped by our own history and culture. This is part of the gift of the diversity of the church. We need to listen to the voices of the whole church as together we sit under Scripture. My Aboriginal sister will see and hear and understand things in the Bible that I have missed. So will my Chinese brother. Their interpretations of the Bible are God’s gift to me, as I hope mine is to them. That is to say that all our interpretations are partial. None of us see the whole. We need each other.

⁹ Galatians 3.26-28

¹⁰ Revelation 7.9

¹¹ Revelation 7.10

In preparing for this sermon I read a series of studies reflecting on the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart. This statement from representatives of First Nations across Australia calls for a *Makarrata* Commission. Makarrata is a Yolngu word that means, “the coming together after a struggle”. This commission would supervise a process for agreement making between First Nations and governments and truth telling about our history. The statement also called for a First Nations voice in parliament. “In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard.” The call is for us to listen to our indigenous neighbours.

ii. Repentance.

Learning to love our neighbours means we need to be willing to repent where we have failed to do that. Christ has secured for us the forgiveness of sins. And therefore we need not be afraid if listening to our sisters and brothers expose our sin. Rather, painful though it may be, we can welcome this as an opportunity to repent, to grow in godliness, to work for justice. Repentance is essential for reconciliation and relationship. Therefore we can listen to those who have suffered injustice.

Part of repentance is contrition. That is, grief at the wrong done and the hurt caused. We’re called to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn. I have become increasingly convinced that lament has to become part of our common life as the people of God. Unless we grieve, we will not fully appreciate the impact of injustice. We will not see injustice for what it is. Grief penetrates through our layers of numbness that cause us to turn a blind eye. Lament means we stand in solidarity with those who suffer. It offers that suffering to God, crying out for him to act and seeking his face of compassion. And in that turning to God hope is born. Jesus says, “blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be satisfied.”

iii. Hospitality.

Learning to love our neighbours begins with hospitality. Hebrews 13:2 says,

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

I love the story of how Dahoo and Becky came to St George’s. Dahoo’s first service with us was Christmas Day 2018. Maz invited him for lunch that day. We show that love of Christ as we welcome those who are new, different, in need, just looking for friendship.

In the end loving our neighbour is in response to the God who first loved us. You see it’s we who find ourselves lying half dead on the road. Christ is the stranger who stops, reaches down and binds our wounds, restoring us to life at infinite cost to himself. If that is how he shows his love for us, how can we not follow in his footsteps?