13 September 2020: Sunday Worship
The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
Romans 14:1–12, Matthew 18:21–35
Fr Richard Peers, The Sub Dean
‘Resentment, Fairness and Black Lives Matter’

Having worked in schools for much of my adult life I’ve heard the line “That’s not fair.” on multiple occasions. Children and young people have a heightened awareness of fairness. At its best this can lead to the wonderful idealism that the young have and heroic works for justice in the way that Greta Thunberg has been doing. At its worst an unrealistic expectation of fairness can lead to resentment. Fairness is not a reward for good behaviour and is in short supply in the randomness of disease, accidents and tragedies.

The two readings we have just heard are wonderful, but quite complicated. The key to understanding them, it seems to me, is to remember that both Jesus and St Paul were not so much in the business of converting individuals as in creating a community. A community of the converted. A community of disciples. Paul’s letters to the first Christianity communities are almost all about that community-building and how those communities deal with the real, practical questions. In today’s first reading whether it’s ok or not ok for Christians to eat and what Christians should do, if anything, about keeping holy days.

Jesus’ public ministry was relatively short, probably just three years. But that is still quite a long time to be travelling with a group of people. The disciples were a very intense form of community. It’s not surprising therefore that a lot of what Jesus teaches us about is how to be community, and particularly how to deal with the intense feelings that arise when human beings live and work together. One of the key themes of many of the sayings and stories of Jesus is resentment. Fairness and unfairness.

I think Jesus profoundly understands the corrosive nature of resentment as one of the key poisons that can destroy communities and individuals. Over and over again there is a clear reflection on the causes of resentment: The labourers who work an hour at the end of the day
and get paid the same as those who have worked all day; the older son who has stayed faithfully at home but then has to watch while a party is laid on for his younger brother who has just squandered half the family assets; resentment about who is the greatest, the favourite, among the disciples.

Today’s story is also about fairness and therefore about resentment. And it refers to a pattern of resentment that I see over and over again, with colleagues, church communities and across human societies. When someone is treated generously – like the servant in today’s gospel – they resent it and go on to treat others badly. Now there are, no doubt, in-depth psychological reasons for this way in which we human beings sometimes react to generosity. But I want to think very practically about an issue of our own time and how we react to it.

In the twenty first century Christians, for the most part, don’t worry too much about what food we are permitted to eat, although the climate crisis might raise more questions than most of us face on this. And most Christians are pretty settled about how we observe Sunday as the Lord’s Day and when we are most likely to worship. Although changing work and leisure patterns might suggest that we need to question that more than we do.

But we can’t get away from facing up to the crucial justice issues of our own day. I am fascinated by reactions to the Black Lives Matter movement that has swept across not only American cities but around the world and very strongly here in the UK. It’s a matter of justice that resonates deeply in my heart. Not only because we good Anglicans, are, of course, opposed to racism. But also because of my experience as a Headteacher in south east London where my school was a majority black school, and as a priest there at a church where the congregation was also majority black. Hearing the accounts that my friends, colleagues, pupils and their families shared about everyday racism shook me to the core. And noticing racism in action myself.

When I was a school chaplain to a black Headteacher, if she and I were stood together or alone in a room when a visitor came in the assumption was that I was the Head. This happened almost every week. Or taking a group of pupils on a school visit and people walking passed black colleagues to talk to me, the white man at the back of the line. This happened on almost every school visit I went on. And these are minor examples. Casual racism. Every black person I know can tell much more horrifying stories, but those accounts belong to them not to me.

Of course as good Anglicans we are opposed to racism. But are we really? In so many of the conversations I’ve heard about Black Lives Matter someone says, usually not very far into the
conversation: ‘But what we need to teach is that every life matters.’ That is a classic resentful response. Noticing someone else’s need and then switching to universalise it. As if there is some kind of shortage of mattering. As if there is something unfair in noticing someone else’s suffering.

An answer, a solution to this can be found in the passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans that we had as our first reading. It comes towards the end of the reading after Paul has laid out the presenting issues, and then he comes in with a typical major statement: “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.” It’s the sort of sentence from Paul that we are so used to hearing that we hardly notice it. And yet it’s the heart of the gospel. It’s the revolution that is fundamental to conversion. We are no longer the centre of our universe. Jesus is.

When we are resentful it is from a position of self-centredness; it is claiming I deserve that; that’s mine; don’t take it from me. When we don’t live to ourselves; when Jesus is the centre of our universe we realise that we are connected in him with everyone; Black lives matter because there is no longer me and them; there is simply us.

So how do you feel about Black Lives Matter?

I want to suggest a practical thing that we could all do to demonstrate that Black Lives Matter in our churches. It isn’t a revolution; it may appear at first to be a very shallow thing. But doing it can have a powerful effect on us.

So in my sermon available to the whole diocese today online in the Church at Home material I am suggesting that we go into all our churches including this cathedral church and list all the pictures of all the people that you can see. Perhaps it’s the clergy team photos, or the PCC members, list them; then go on to the pictures, in the stained glass windows, banners and other pictures. Then do the same for church websites.

Now add up the people of colour we can see.

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Because of my time working with so many black people I have a large number of pictures of black saints, black heroes, and images of Jesus, Mary and others as black people. here are two of my favourites. The first is based on a famous icon of the story of Genesis where Abraham meets three angels or lords. It is often called the Trinity and seen as an image of the way Christians
understand God to be. Here the artist Meg Wroe has painted a version with the faces of three people from the diocese of Southwark on it. The original is in Southwark Cathedral and is, I think rather beautiful. The other two are by Yvonne Bell an artist who worships in our diocese at Winslow in Buckinghamshire. Christ of the Flowers, and Mother of God of Clemency.

When I moved here to Christ Church a few weeks ago among the removal team were two young black men. As they packed my collection of pictures and icons they were beside themselves at all the black images. It sparked long conversations with them as we worked about race, Black Lives Matter, faith and their own experiences of racism and church. It was a very beautiful conversation. For Christians, working for justice is not about fairness. It is about God revealing himself.

Right at the start of revelation in Genesis we are told that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Every human being is a revelation to us of God. Our reaction to every human being needs to be awe, wonder and reverence. We can depict Jesus as black, not because he was of African origin but because God reveals himself to us in every person.

Imagine if every church in our diocese had images of black and minority ethnic people in it. If every website included images of non-white people. This is especially important in areas (like rural Staffordshire where I’ve been living for the last few years) where no black people live.

I have been talking often in my first week about that little carving of the listener above the Sub Dean’s stall. Paying attention to Black Lives Matter, to the young in their yearning for justice is to show our love for them, show that we receive the image of God in them.

To make this building a home for all people is to make it a place where everyone can walk in and find themselves here, see themselves in the images, experience the divine in the holy women and holy men of the past, women and men of all races and nations.

Once we live God-centred lives we realise our true equality. As St Paul says at the very end of the first reading “We will all stand before the judgement seat of God.” Thank fully God’s judgement is merciful and for that mercy “every tongue shall give praise to God.” Because “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.”

*Canvas prints, commissions and cards of icons by Yvonne Bell cans be purchased via her website [here](#).*