



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

14 June 2020: Matins Sermon

The First Sunday after Trinity

Deuteronomy 10:12–11:1, Acts 23:12–end

The Revd Canon Dr Emma Percy, Honorary Cathedral Chaplain

This week I went to the GP for a routine blood test. I was told in advance that I was a green patient and I moved through the practice on the green route, waiting on my own until called. I was classified green because, in terms of the COVID-19 virus, I am privileged - as a white woman under 60 with no underlying health conditions I am low risk, I may be a bit overweight but otherwise in this particular life lottery I am doing well. I am also aware that I have been living through this time in a house with plenty of space inside and out, with family who I love and who are all adults able to pull their weight in the cooking, shopping, cleaning – though sadly all deficient in any gardening skills. I am well aware that I am fortunate and I count my blessings.

My life has not always been so easy and I learnt young that life is not fair. However, compared to many, I have always been privileged by my white skin, my access to a good education and capacity to find support and understanding when I most needed it. Arriving at college in Cambridge from a girls' state school when women had only recently been admitted and the percentage of independent schools was considerably high was an experience of not quite knowing how to fit in. It was at times a very challenging experience. Yet, navigating that led to more privilege, having been to Cambridge has added a serious layer of privilege to my life. I am Oxbridge educated.

Over these last weeks we have been shocked and challenged again at the unfairness of a world that treats people differently due to the colour of their skin. We have been, quite rightly, reminded that racism is part of the history of the institutions many of us live and work in and it continues to infect realities of our present. This is true for the University of Oxford, for the Church of England and for Christ Church. We have seen and heard how racism at its worst is violent and deadly. We have heard the voices for change. We know that we have to do better. We have noted that here and in the USA COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on black and Asian people both in terms of death and disease and in job losses and space issues. We need

to learn how to address these inequalities in life opportunities and be clear about how they impact on health and wellbeing.

Many of us are privileged and understanding that and knowing how to graciously acknowledge our privilege when we listen and speak to others is a very important aspect of working for change. Our reading from Deuteronomy talks about privilege. The people of Israel are privileged in their covenant relationship with God. God holds them in affection. This is a privileging we sometimes find hard to understand from our perspective. They are a specially chosen people.

This passage is very clear that with privilege comes responsibility. The people of Israel are to walk in the ways of God, with circumcised hearts. For they serve a God who may have chosen them but who is also the God of heaven and earth, who eschews partiality and has a particular care for those who do not have people to defend them (for example widows and fatherless), or for those who are in some way outsiders in the community, the aliens. There is an expectation that food will be shared, clothing provided, people will not be in want. Loving God, in the Bible, always goes hand in hand with love of neighbour and as we know from the gospels your neighbour might not look like you or sound like you or share your religion.

The gospel of Jesus Christ takes and transforms the nature of the chosen people. In Christ the chosen are a varied and diverse people. Jew and Greek, slave and free, men and women, old and young. No doubt if Paul were writing today he would have added in a few more areas of inclusion. In Christ, all are invited to be kin, part of God's remarkable kin-dom of the church. The way of belonging may have changed but the responsibility remains the same. The people of God's family are to share, to look out for the marginalised, to welcome the stranger. To love God and love their neighbour.

Over these last months we have been and continue to experience events that we had never imagined. The future is unclear. We slowly begin to emerge from total lockdown but into what kind of world.

There is so much uncertainty, so much turmoil. In this complex changing world we need to find our feet and discern our way. We need to think about the values that will guide us. What will we learn in response to this pandemic? Can we truly value the people who work at all levels in our NHS, the people who provide care, who do the jobs we have often failed to notice? Can we hold on to the importance of keeping in touch with people. Can we keep the incredible value of neighbourliness to those we know and those we do not know but act to protect which should be

the hallmark of a good community? We know that we have to address the inequalities in health. We know that we might need to think differently about immigration as we have seen how reliant we are on the selfless work of many who were not born here who serve in our hospitals and care homes. We know we need to think seriously about how to resource care. The people of God are called to provide for the widows and fatherless, the people who have no one to depend on, and to treat well the strangers in our land.

Alongside the pandemic we are being rightly challenged to talk honestly about race, about our history and about our future. Although, this call for action has been sparked by the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis it has also arisen from the statistics we see about how COVID-19 has impacted on black and Asian people in our own country. This has highlighted inequalities and injustices shaped by explicit and implicit racism. We are being challenged to understand our own privileges. We need to think about who and what we honour, how we understand and commemorate our history, whose voices we listen to and how we can have educated honest conversations about racism and other forms of discrimination. This is about far more than statues. Our God is not a God who is partial.

And we need to think about our faith. What have we learnt about prayer, worship, faith and friendship through this period of lockdown. As we slowly begin to move back into the buildings we love, how do we hold on to some of what we have learnt during these strange times, especially the way we have engaged with those who cannot join us in person? My elderly aunt has no computer or iPad and has been delighted by being able to dial in on her landline to hear the services from Christ Church each Sunday.

If we are privileged people as most of us are in so many ways, above all we need to pray for humility, for the willingness to admit that we do not know it all and we have much to learn. It is uncomfortable to listen to the anger and outrage of others, it is all too easy to jump in and explain ourselves, our history and our attempts to be good. Instead we need to listen.

As we listen we need to discern the truths that we need to hear. Real change requires change from us. As the Magnificat reminds us, for the lowly to be lifted up the proud need to be brought down and we may find that in some areas we are the proud.

So, in these turbulent times we need to read, to look and to listen to the words of those who can offer us different perspectives. We need to know our history, warts and all, and then to think with a variety of viewpoints about how we tell it.

A few years ago Martyn and I were in Chennai, India in the early weeks of January on a conference. We were taken to visit St Thomas Church built on what is held by tradition to be the site of the disciple Thomas's execution. In this part of India, the church is ancient, it was there long before the white European missionaries arrived. Outside the church were the Christmas crib scenes. I was saddened to see that Mary and Joseph and the Christ child were fair skinned, European featured, models. In this place where Christianity was carried by 1st century Palestinians to local Indians the ethnicity of those people had been forgotten and the image of the white Christ was now standard.

We have a long way to go to understand how to redress the injustices perpetrated by those who saw and those who continue to see, white skin as somehow superior. Who felt it more appropriate for our images of Christ and all most holy. We begin to change by acknowledging our privileges and finding the humility to listen and learn from those who have lived and still live with discrimination.

For our God is not a God of partiality. Our God cares for the undefended, for the marginalised and for those we see as other and calls us to do likewise. The kingdom of God is made up of a glorious variety of people and the wonder is that we too are welcome to be part of it.