

St. Peter De Beauvoir – Dr Renie Choy – Racial Justice Sunday, 13 February 2022

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Is racial justice a historical matter?

2022 opened with the controversial acquittal of the 4 individuals who had toppled the statue of slave trader Edward Colston. Some said: ‘Why obsess over a statue from a hundred years ago, of someone who lived 300 years ago? Today slavery is prohibited, and we have protected characteristics, so historic injustices are just that – “historic”’. Insisting that there is such a thing as ‘historic legacies’ that can be linked to contemporary prejudices, some say, is to wage a misguided war on history.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus’ declaration cuts against this logic. He gives historical depth to social inequalities. He suggests that the *contemporary* mistreatment of individuals should be understood in light of *historic* mistreatment. In fact, he goes so far as to talk about the “ancestors” of the oppressors, as if there is something not only systemic, but even genealogical and hereditary about the perpetuation of oppression. Those perpetuating inequalities in his day – showing hatred toward some, favour on others – Jesus says, well their ancestors did the same.

Now, to our ears this may sound uncomfortable, even wrong, because it appears to entrench and aggravate divisions: an oppressed group always the oppressed, the oppressors always the oppressors, down through the ages. Applying this logic to race relations, some have said this sort of historical thinking is wrong fundamentally because it makes simply being ‘white’ a sin – an ‘ancestral sin’. That it suggests that any white British person alive today is automatically guilty by association, and is unfairly yoked with the burden of ensuring correctives, like reparations to the descendants of enslaved peoples; the repatriation of loot obtained by conquest; the representation of minorities in leadership roles. And many say, forcing this kind of ‘ancestral burden’ on people is ludicrous.

So today, it is very difficult to know what we’re supposed to do with the connection Jesus makes between current-day realities of social inequality and historic ones. Sitting here today, the very uncomfortable question to ask, the one we’re all asking silently but too scared to ask

out loud, is who's blessed and who's condemned, today, on the basis of ancestral wrongdoings.

For example, I happen to know that your church was built in 1841. I think about what was happening in my ancestral land in 1841. It happens to be exactly the year when, on the 26th of January, Commander Gordon Bremer planted a Union Jack in a fishing village called Hong Kong. He fired a salute, drank a toast to Queen Victoria, and named the spot 'Possession Point' to claim it for the British. The British did this to ensure the uninterrupted progress of trade -- most crucially, to force China to allow the import of opium, which led to mass addictions causing massive social, physical, economic, and moral harm.

Does this history lead me to assume that the 'blessings' must be directed at *me* because my ancestors were colonised? And that the 'woes' must apply to many of you because your ethnic ancestry puts you in the same category as the colonisers?

Let's make sure we hear Jesus's sermon correctly. Now we are told Jesus addresses the sermon to *disciples*, not curious onlookers but to those who earlier on in Luke's Gospel had already recognised his authority, shifted their loyalties, and taken the radical step of following him. And there is nothing to suggest that after blessing this group, he shifts his attention to a different group, to condemn a different group with the woes. So the objective here is not to figure out whether one is ancestrally blessed or condemned. The question, rather, is personal, direct, and immediate: the question is about whether your current behaviours and views put you in a lineage with true prophets.

Prophets like Jeremiah, whom we heard from today. Jeremiah, who calls us to trust in the Lord, which we do by cultivating an inner disposition that isn't devious, calculating, or scheming. To have thoughts, intentions, and purposes which withstand the testing of the Lord. Then, Jeremiah assures, rather than being barren and anxious, we will flourish. Let me try to explore some of the practical implications of this.

Today re-examinations of our historic legacies are often aimed at the Church of England's wealth of cultural heritage: its art, architecture, literature, music. Far from being immune from the culture wars, the church is a key battleground where culture wars are waged today. Some say we must 'decolonise' our sacred choral tradition, put in more diverse composers,

diversify our choirs; others say 'Leave our choral tradition alone!'. Then some say we must 'decolonise' our images of Jesus, who was not a white man; others say 'We're proud of English art – leave it alone!'. These battles over culture and history can be fought along divisive 'ancestral lines', leading us to either reject Western cultural heritage or to fiercely defend it depending on our ethnic and national identity.

Where should Jesus' disciples fit into today's culture wars? What is an approach that would put us in the prophetic tradition, cultivating and displaying trust together in the face of difficult historic legacies?

First, as Jeremiah teaches, we must subject our hearts and minds to the testing of the Lord. This means examining historic legacies, their effects, and our own instinctive responses. Look up at the painting behind the high altar. Here is a Victorian painting, produced at the height of imperialism, Jesus and the apostles noticeably white and beautiful with their tender European features. Your church welcomed new migrants from the West Indies in the 1950s, offering them help and friendship; but we can also imagine them coming up to receive communion under the gaze of this white Jesus and his white apostles, with their gleaming golden halos. This in itself is an object which reminds us of the geo-political and cultural supremacy of the West. So first we must scrutinize historic legacies and their impact, and then we must scrutinize our own individual, private responses, the conclusions we instinctively draw about ourselves and one another. Do I feel outrage? Hatred? Bitterness, jealousy, inferiority? Do I feel pleasure, pride, defensiveness? Do I simply not care? All these responses require testing.

Secondly, Jeremiah instructs us to cultivate trust. Of all places, churches should be where we can trust the Lord to transform and heal the crushing effects of uneven power relationships. So let us trust what the Lord is doing in having brought *all* of us here today, and trust that by His Spirit our mutually entangled lives can collectively change historic legacies. As our opening hymn, we sang *All People That on Earth Do Dwell*. Every time my husband and I hear this hymn sung in English churches, we look at each other and suppress a giggle. Because, growing up in our Chinese church, we sang this song every Sunday as a single-stanza Doxology to different words, and the most memorable thing about it was the very strong Chinese accents. So it was the weirdest thing, a moment of dawning – and I'd say a moment of racial reckoning – to arrive in this country, turn on the television, and witness the

hymn being sung ‘properly’ for the first time, by the royal family and chorister boys at Westminster Abbey, and to suddenly realize that, one, what we sung weekly was *not* a cute little ditty but a ‘venerable, august’ piece of the ‘English musical tradition’, and two, that we had been absolutely *butchering* it the entire time. Whose version do we validate more? Can we allow our entwined lives to change how we hear this hymn? Our acts of collective worship bind us together not just in a spiritual transcendent way but in historical and material ways too. So we must allow our intertwined lives to transform the physical spaces, the music, the art that remind us of historic inequalities. This a restorative act we all need to engage in.

If you can stay after the service, I will talk more about how our stories can make historic spaces like this church a repository of shared memories, of our shared faith, of our shared acts of devotion, of our shared acts of ministry and service. The act of giving new meaning to historic legacies is a prophetic work.

At the offertory, we will sing G K Chesterton’s hymn. In the *New English Hymnal*, this hymn is found in a section called ‘National’, together with ‘God Save the Queen’ and ‘Jerusalem’ – so the sort of thing you sing at the Last Night of the Proms or a Royal Jubilee while waving a Union Jack. So, of course the hymn can symbolize a sort of patriotism tied to ethnicity and ancestry which has nothing to do with me – and I could dismiss it entirely on this account. But to do so would be to miss an opportunity to one, test our hearts and minds, and second, to trust the Lord. Let’s anticipate what we will be singing, what we will be singing *together*:

O God of earth and altar, / bow down and hear our cry, / our earthly rulers falter, / our people drift and die. / The walls of gold entomb us / the swords of scorn divide, / take not thy thunder from us, / but take away our pride. // Tie in a living tether / the prince and priest and thrall, / bind all our lives together, / smite us and save us all...

How can disciples follow the way of the prophets in contemporary battles over our history? First, by examining the walls of gold which entomb us – the reminders of inequality – and then by trusting the Lord to bind our lives together, tie us in a tether, entwining our fates with one another. The symbols and reminders of historic inequalities can be given new meanings, new memories, by our insistence on sharing our lives and stories together, by our insistence on forgiving each other, affirming the creed together, offering intercessions together, sharing the peace with each other, and partaking of the Eucharist together. Amen.