



Neither Jew nor Greek

A Pastoral Letter to the Teulu Asaph from Bishop Gregory
Thursday, 18th June, 2020

I was supposed to be writing to you about the Trinity today, but another subject has become so pressing in our national life that it cannot be avoided. It may seem peculiar that the death in custody of a detainee in the United States should spark huge demonstrations and even violent disorder on the streets of Great Britain, but this is what we have witnessed in the last two weeks. A death in custody should always be treated with the utmost seriousness. In 2015, the latest statistic I found, there were 14 deaths in police custody in the United Kingdom, while, more recently, in the year to March 2019, there were 286 deaths in prisons in the UK, many of which were suicide. These are disturbing statistics, because every death is someone's child, husband, parent, daughter or relative. We hardly hear about them. Yet, in the case of George Floyd, protests in the UK have been widespread, and we have seen violence on our streets.

Someone might be tempted to ask "Why all this fuss about an American situation, appalling though it is?" "Why do we have to say Black Lives Matter, when surely all lives matter?" It would take more than a pastoral letter to address this subject properly, but I suppose this one death, swiftly followed by a second actually, the death of Rayshard Brooks, causes worldwide reaction. It is partly because their ends were caught on video, and live footage seems to indicate that these deaths arose out of trivial offences, and were completely avoidable, were it not for police brutality – and colour.

One of the truths about life is that oppression can be almost invisible to the more privileged party. Men can be completely oblivious to sexism, and straight people to homophobia. Sadly, it is also true that the white middle-classes can wonder why racism is an issue. I can tell you now that if it wasn't an issue, it would not have brought thousands out on the streets. Law abiding citizens from the better backgrounds might see our police as the upholders of law and order, but those who are black or coloured are much more likely to be subject to stop and search. I write as an extremely privileged white university-educated male, favoured to be admitted to the bastions of ancient and privileged halls of learning. For me, the police are pillars of society, and I will always voice my support for them, and deplore any violence against them. I am not so sure that those who are disaffected in our society can see things in the same way. This is not to accuse the police of anything, I am their supporter, but it is to acknowledge that such trust is not readily forthcoming across all sections of society.

The ancient world was one which was highly stratified. Roman patricians were at the top of the pile, the plebs were the poor, but even poor Roman citizens counted for more than foreigners – the barbarians, who couldn't speak Latin or Greek properly, and mocked for saying "Ba, ba, bar ..." Even they counted for more than the slaves. Jesus and Christianity literally overturned all that with the radical claim that everyone was God's child, and that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3.28). Now in context, this is a claim about our new identity in Christ, once we are baptised and reborn, but Christianity shook classical civilization to its roots because it said that anyone could be the equal of Caesar.

In just this last week, I have been accused of meddling and of grandstanding, because I've voiced again my personal dislike of statues to one particular local lad made good. Let me not start discussing that here! However, as a bishop, as a Christian, I believe that the followers of Jesus are bound to do what Jesus and the prophets themselves did, and that is to speak up always on the side of the least privileged. All lives matter, yes, and for each one Christ died, but we have to say Black Lives Matter because black and coloured communities have come to believe that their lives don't matter as much.

Today our faith compels Christians to stand with the outsider. "If you do it for the least of these my sisters and brothers" said Jesus, "you do it as for me." (Matthew 25.40) Rowan Williams once said that Christians should be very careful about drawing boundaries, because they will generally find Jesus waving at them from the other side of the boundary.

+gregory/bmehwy