

## ***Black Lives Matter: A reflection on prejudice and privilege***

***4<sup>th</sup> June 2020***

Today I want to be as clear and frank as I can be. It's not my intention to cause offense, but to bring an important issue into the forefront of our thoughts and prayers.

The protests in the USA at the moment – resulting from the brutal killing of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer – are gripping the attention of the news media and are in the thoughts and prayers of many.

And you may be wondering – what's that got to do with me? Why would I feel the need to make a special video just about this? I'm a minister of three churches in beautiful leafy communities of the heart of England, churches made up of nice people, not racists; it's just that unfortunately we don't have many people in our congregations or communities who are black, Asian or minority ethnic. So, we can watch and pray, but it surely doesn't *really* affect us.

Today want to challenge us to think that actually, if we care about humanity, if we claim to love our neighbour, if we care about God's world and pray 'thy kingdom come', then these issues should be very important to all of us.

*Black lives matter.* The protests and trouble at the moment, as a result of George Floyd's killing, is another flashpoint in the long and troubled history of race relations in the USA, going back through the civil rights movement, all the way back to the slave trade and even further back than that. It is the result of centuries of prejudice, discrimination and oppression against people of colour. That discrimination exists, even unconsciously, in the minds and actions of many.

*Black lives matter.* And from the perspective of my churches, where we try to be open-minded, inclusive, welcoming and understanding, it's easy to follow this up by saying: *Yes – all lives matter.*

Of course, it is true that all lives matter to God: of whatever race or creed. God loves all people equally, I believe that very strongly. And there are multiple groups who face prejudice and injustice on a massive scale. But I think the problem is that when we hear the phrase 'Black lives matter' and we quickly follow it up by thinking – 'Yes, all lives matter'. Then we can actually be belittling the problem, we could be really suggesting that this issue *isn't really worth special attention.*

*Black lives matter.* But then there are the news reports we will have seen about riots, looting, buildings burned, and the like. And from our perspective, guided by the media, it can be easy to view these riots as "just as bad, if not worse" than the killing itself. One man died – that's very bad – *but haven't they now gone a bit too far?* Now, I do not in any way approve of rioting or anything that causes people to live in fear. But I would urge us to just pause here and ask: why is it that we see the destruction of white people's property as

being 'just as bad' as the destruction of one black life? And the answer that comes to my mind is rather shocking: it is because, not so long ago in our history, black lives *were* white people's property. And that thought fills me with horror and shame.

*Black lives matter.* And, of course, what's not being focused on in the media, is just how many peaceful protests are going on, just how many prayer vigils are happening. The media we consume is content to suppress the truth that the majority of these protestors are good law-abiding (often) Christian people, while the minority of aggressors do nothing to honour the name of George Floyd, as his own brother has said this week.

Now, it's hard for me to speak on this subject with any authority, authenticity, experience or expertise. However, I still think I have something important to say on the matter, and that just speaks volumes about *privilege*! I am one of the most privileged people on the planet. Because of my ethnicity, gender, place of birth, sexuality, religion, age, physical ability, education, profession and wealth, I would be in the top 5% of any reckoning of the world's most privileged people. I have no personal experience of prejudice at all. *I have no idea what it means to be oppressed or discriminated against.* Therefore, my views on this matter are actually from an unfortunately blinded and disengaged point of view. I am, if you like, watching the play from the upper circle in one of the 'restricted view' seats. The fact that I even choose that analogy says a lot about me. Many will never have the opportunity to go to a theatre.

Equality is a wonderful idea. But it usually comes with the condition – 'as long as we can still have all the privilege we've earned'. And there lies a very privileged idea: that *we've earned it.* I've worked hard for this! Well, actually I was born to very supportive and loving parents, in a safe environment, in a white-British community, with good teachers and other positive role models, in a society where education up to degree level was free of charge. We weren't rich, but my parents were wise with money, and we had everything we needed. I *did* work hard, and so did my parents, but I am aware that people of colour with similar jobs to mine have most probably had to work *an awful lot harder* to get there, patiently battling against prejudice, suspicion and oppression. True equality would mean that we all start off on the same footing, with similar opportunities, security and influences. The world I was born into wanted me to succeed. Not everyone has that.

Black lives matter.

When Donald Trump orchestrated a photograph of himself standing in front of a church holding up a Bible, after getting his henchmen to violently clear the paths in a display of power and order, I wrote the following on Facebook:

When a president holds up a Bible outside a church for a publicity stunt, after clearing the streets of peaceful protesters using tear gas and ordering his armies to dominate the people, he needs to remember that he holds in his hands the story of a Man who in solidarity with the oppressed people of his day overturned the tables in the Temple, while those in power used excessive force and violence to put him and many others to death.

That president should consider that the Bible he's holding and the church he's standing in front of are in favour of the crucified one, not Pontius Pilate, and they bear testimony to the power of love, not the love of power.

I like to think it was a good, theologically valid response, and it gained a lot of approval – a lot of ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ from like-minded people – and lots of people have said similar things. But how typical, and how ironic, that as a white man in a position of privilege, I feel the need to speak, to be heard, to try to control, when what we should all really be doing is listening to the voices of the oppressed.

And the question has been nagging me: *why didn't I write anything on Facebook when George Floyd was killed?* Why did it take Donald Trump's Bible-waving incident to make me react? And the answer I've come to is that actually it was because, all of a sudden, it was about something dear to me. All of a sudden, it became about the faith I hold dear. And I wanted to distance myself as far as possible from Trump's actions. I spoke up only because it now affected me. It should have been my cause from the start.

In the words of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior, speaking about the troubles in his own time:

*“History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamour of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.”*

*Black lives matter.* All lives are equal before God. God loves us all. Yes, but while inequality and racism still exist, our efforts for those who from the start are on an *unequal* footing should be far greater. People of privilege (like me) do not need ‘protecting’ or ‘standing up for’ in quite the same way, because the system is not loaded against us from the start.

This is not about making anyone feel guilty for their position in life, but it is about inviting people to understand the privilege they might have, and how to turn that into a force for good.

Black lives matter, and they should matter to all of us.

And as privileged people, if we truly care, then when yet another black life is taken unjustly, or from whichever ethnic or religious community, then why don't we say to the people who are mourning, the people who have already suffered enough: *Will you let us join you and make this a struggle we share together? Will you let us stand alongside you? Will you let us use our combined resources to see justice done? And can we be the ones to make ourselves vulnerable, so that you don't have to anymore? Will you forgive us when we use clumsy words and think we have all the answers? Will you help us to know when to speak up and when to listen?*

**Andrew Murphy, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2020**