

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 17 October 2021
11.00am Sam Walker

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Sunday 17 October 2021. A special service for Black History Month

Bible readings: Mark 10: 35-45, Hebrews 5. 1-10

Sermon title: Acts of Grace are glimpses of the righteousness of God's kingdom

I am delighted that I gave a date this month of my availability to preach and when Peter subsequently told me about the suggestion from stewards to celebrate BHM and asked whether I would be able to preach a sermon on this date, I answered with three YES' in the style of Simon Cowell in Britain Got Talent.

Black History Month doesn't ring-a-bell with many people, and the historical, sociological and contemporary significance does not resonate with many. In academia, Black history is arguably researched and studied through the lens of anthropology or sociology rather than history. Black British history thus becomes a subject of theory or social behaviour. However, we are living in gradually changing times where society is now more curious to learn about the representation of African, Caribbean, Asian and other ethnic minorities in Britain's development. Society is now asking for documents to be made available and disseminated and not kept under the title 'Hidden Histories of Britain'.

But before I say more about this, let me delve into the Gospel passage and see how we can correlate this story with the issues of Black History Month.

Today's Gospel presents the disciples of Jesus in a bad light. I think so; perhaps some of you do as well, others may disagree.

James and John are brothers. They asked Jesus a big favour. They want to sit on either side of him in the heavenly Kingdom. They want the most expensive seats. They want power and prestige. The other ten disciples are no better. They become angry at James and John because they also want positions of prominence.

We know that James and John, like the other disciples, travelled with Jesus for three years. We also know that they watched Jesus perform miracles, told stories and parables. We also know that the disciples had varying characteristics in temperament; they come from different backgrounds and had different professions. James and John wanted positions that would give them great power and authority over others. They asked "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you, Grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory" In their minds, they have been following Jesus all this time and doing whatever he asked; now it is payback time. All twelve disciples missed the point about the kingship of Jesus. Although he has told them repeatedly of his impending execution and resurrection, they just did not get it!!

You may have heard of this story. During the American Revolution, a civilian was riding his horse when he came upon a group of soldiers building a wall. The soldiers were led by a corporal who was barking instructions to the soldiers, but not helping.

The rider got off his horse and asked the commander "why are you shouting and not helping". The Commander responded "I am a corporal Sir", emphasising his position of authority. The rider got off his horse and started to help the soldiers. When the work was complete, the rider got on his horse and said to the corporal, the next time you have a job to be done, but don't have enough soldiers, tell your Commander to contact me, and I will come and help again. With that, the rider rode off. That rider unbeknown to the corporal and soldiers was George Washington, President of the United States.

Leadership is one of the conventional ways we can show "Acts of grace that shed light on the Kingdom of Heaven". Each of us is directly invited to leadership, sometimes in modest, informal ways we barely notice, and sometimes in ways that involve titles and prominence and the burden of being a public person.

Whatever form our leadership takes, we are required as Christians to follow the example Jesus offers us of servant leadership. A leadership that is unburdened by prestige, pride, power, fame or wealth. Leadership that is based on a willingness to stand up and articulate truth and justice in whatever the circumstances and in so doing, help those who are marginalised and are struggling because of the impediments imposed on them by society or class hierarchies.

Jesus claims the role of servant by word and deed. He says he has come "not to be served, but to serve" (10:46). And at his final meal before his death, he embarrassed his followers by kneeling before them to wash their feet as though he was their footman and not their Master.

How do we weave this Gospel passage to the issues of Black History Month?

In 1981, the former Greater London Council (GLC) provided funds for the research on the History of the Black Presence in London. Ken Livingstone was the leader of the Council and, with Ted Knight, who was the leader of Lambeth Council, led a radical group of progressives to change, among other things, the perception society has of Black people and to educate about Black peoples presence in London. In those days, Ted Knight was referred to as Red Ted, and with Ken Livingstone, at the GLC they were able to register Black History Month in October 1987 as a yearly event for celebration and introspection of the historical presence of Black people in London. In 1986, the exhibition, A History of the Black Presence in London was launched. Paul Boateng, now Lord Boateng was Chair of the Police Committee and Vice-Chair, Ethnic Minorities Committee. He wrote the forward of the exhibition booklet.

That exhibition, my friends exposed the fallacy, annoyingly repeated in the opening ceremony of the Olympics in 2012 that British Africans and British Caribbean people came to this country in the 1940's/50's. Now, suppose that is the story you believe or believed. If so, I guess you will have a massive jolt when you discover that it was in the same docks at Tilbury in 1482 where the Windrushers disembarked that Queen Elizabeth 1, organised her troops to face the Spanish Armada over three hundred years earlier and there were Africans among the crowd. There were Africans in the Courts of the Tudor Kings, Henry V and Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and James I King of Scotland, and in the households of famous Tudors including Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and many more. There were Black people in the stories of the vessels, Mary Rose and Golden Hinde.

Many people before me have spoken about the exclusion of Black people in the tapestry of British history. Recently, we watched on TV the absolute masterpiece research by University of London, Professor David Olusoga and Professor Mary Beard of Newnham College, Cambridge, about this missing history.

About two years ago, I was asked to give a talk to the parents, teachers, Year 11 students and those in the sixth form about Black British History.

When I saw the programme, my first critique was the very glossy cover with images of American Historical figures. I was disappointed, and I said so. It was not surprising, however, that until recently you find a major topic in the curriculum: "Black people in the Americas"; what about Black people in Britain?. It implies that there are not many Black People in Britain that is worth inclusion for study. On the contrary, many Black people, those of African and Caribbean ancestry, White Africans, and others who identify as Black have played crucial roles in developing Britain's social, religious, political and economic development, but their presence and role in the life of the country has been ignored, distorted or marginalised.

One of the human failures in life is the acceptance of our equality one with another, an equality irrespective of our contradictions in character and behaviour, our different backgrounds, race and class. Our failure to accept equality may emanate from the way we were each nurtured, political ideology, status in society, ignorance, or deliberate omission or refusal to hear and accept facts. We believe that accepting facts will reduce our power and preferential treatment in society because of who we think we are or who society says we are. Others may stand on the shoulders of others to get along to the detriment of the person who is underneath and carrying the burden. The fact is that we have to live with the past, and we cannot just put it behind us. Societies and individuals in the twenty-first century cannot be held responsible for what happened all those years ago, the tremendous hardship and burdens Black people have had to suffer over hundreds of years. But I suggest that we have to acknowledge our difficult history, its virtues and vices as a society and aim to address persisting wrongs that derive from past moral errors.

Those in the corporate sector, Managing Directors, CEOs, and all those who lead organisations and institutions are given power and authority to do whatever it takes within the law to make tough decisions. Usually, they do so to advance the company or institution, or themselves or stakeholders.

They make decisions to lay off workers, outsource manufacturing, stifle collective bargaining etc. I will submit to you this morning that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is asking us to become CEO's not for exercising oppressive powers, but for his message of servant/leadership to help those who are struggling because of present social; economic and other policies, and those who are suffering from the effects of persistent wrongs that derive from those past moral errors.

The kind of leadership Jesus expects from His CEOs is revealed in Matthew 25: from verse 31. It is leadership that is based:

on helping others who are in pain and suffering,

A leadership that will speak up

for those who are deprived of the privileges of society because of the colour of their skin,

for those who are hungry and depend on food banks or are homeless,

for those who are sent to long terms in prison because of the colour of their skin and are deemed to cause more trouble than other groups, where the scales of justice are unbalanced

Taking a stand against these is what leadership means in the Biblical way. Showing 'Acts of Grace that shed glimpses of the righteousness of God's Kingdom'.

You and I also face opportunities to exercise that leadership. It may be a casual encounter as it was for George Washington riding his horse. Or it may be far more intentional when we prepare ourselves studiously and diligently over a long period of time for an opportunity to serve. But whatever form it takes, servant leadership happens when we place the welfare of others ahead of our desire for power or prestige or possessions or fame. The servant-leader puts others before self

and acts on that basis, thereby changing the world for good. Our world is desperately short of servant leaders.

In November last year, a resolution was tabled at the United Nations General Assembly for definitive/strong action to eliminate racism, racial discrimination, Xenophobia and related intolerance. A majority of members supported the vote. Twelve countries voted against including the United Kingdom, USA, Australia, Israel, Germany, etc. The news did not get much attention in the mainstream media. My friends, we have a huge fight in our hands, the spiritual says:

we shall overcome; We shall overcome someday

deep in my heart, I do believe

we shall overcome someday..... with God's help.

If our society wants any future that is worth having, we must cultivate more and more servant leaders for countless roles in society. Servant leaders in those vast and complex organisations that exercise immeasurable control over our lives; government organisations, hospitals, universities, business organisations and many others. Servant leadership at every level is essential if the impact of these organizations on all of us is to be a joy and blessing and not unhappiness and damnation.

We need servant leaders who will speak for an inclusive British history whenever the opportunity arises or for 365 days a year.

We need servant leaders, CEOs working for Christ who will stand up and condemn racism regularly in all its forms,

We need servant leaders CEOs who will look at CVs and make selections for jobs, for research opportunities in science and other professions based on qualifications, not skin colour, connections, or wealth.

We need servant leaders CEOs who are able and willing to help 'Black' people climb up from the foothills of poverty, bad education, incarceration, the stigma of difference rather than its celebration.

We need servant leaders who can show Acts of grace that shed glimpses of the righteousness of God's Kingdom.

It is only when our righteousness exceeds that of the power-brokers and appointed leaders will we, as Christians, offer a hopeless world a vision of God's beloved community.

God our Father through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ needs more CEOs to tell the world of the role Black people have played/playing in Britain's development and so help to bridge the gap in learning and appreciation between the dominant White majority and the Black minority.

God help us all to become CEOs for His Word with the courage to speak what we know is true and doing what we know is right.

May God add his blessings to these words, AMEN