**Black History Month – Sermon – 17th October 2021**

Today we are celebrating Black History Month which is now an annual event in the life of this country when particular focus is given to the role and contribution made to this country and the wider world by those from the black community and the challenges that they faced in seeking to live, learn and work.

Whilst this is highlighted during the month of October we should all be aware that these issues are not restricted to one moment in time and are ever present in peoples’ consciousness and lived experience in the here and now.

Part of our celebration this morning is to highlight the contribution made by several members of the black community to our own country’s development and the well-being of their communities, the legacy of which lives on to this day.

But another equally important part is to think about the discrimination that people still face in their daily lives, both overt and covert, in the spoken word and action and in the structures that exist in our society that discriminate against all peoples of colour.

One of the changes that has recently been introduced is to change the overarching description that is given from BAME to UKME as it is inclusive of all peoples, not just those falling within the Black or Asian communities and it also recognises that those coming from global majority ethnic heritages and living in the UK are only minority ethnic in that context.

The term “People of the global majority” acknowledges that Black, indigenous, and people of colour represent more than 80% of the world’s population and points to the demographic inaccuracy of the “minority” terminology.

This is yet another reminder to us all that the use of language is very important when we are talking about issues of race and culture.

I am grateful to Adjoa for highlighting the story of a number of people who played an important role in this country and in particular prior to the Windrush generation.

On the display board there are short biographies of them and we will leave the display up for a few weeks so please do take the opportunity to read their stories and be inspired.

There can be an unconscious thought that prior to that time there were no UKME people in this country although we know that a glance at contemporary history records will highlight their presence and the role that they played.

Earlier this year I took a funeral of a local woman who was of Barbadian heritage but was in this country prior to the start of WW2 and was evacuated and at her funeral we recounted her adventures during the war and in particular on VE2 dancing in Trafalgar Square and bumping into the two Royal princesses.

Before the NHS: Black Nurses in Britain 1881-1948, Thu. 10th May 2018 | London South Bank University, UK

Stephen Bourne, author and LSBU Honorary Graduate, presented an engaging and informative illustrated talk about the lives of some of the pioneering African Caribbean nurses who worked in Britain before the birth of the National Health Service in 1948.

* Annie Brewster, who worked at a famous London hospital from 1881-1902;
* Princess Tsehai, who was employed at the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children during the London Blitz of 1940/41;
* Nigeria’s Nurse Ademola, who trained as a midwife at Guy’s Hospital during the Second World War.

We are also aware that many from the African and Caribbean served with distinction in WW2 and the story of Ulric Cross who served in the RAF and went on to have a distinguished life of public service in the judiciary and in Trinidad and Tobago is also displayed.

Britain’s first Black Headteacher was Yvonne Conolly who sadly died earlier this year and was part of the Windrush generation and who broke down the barriers that were placed in front of her to become a renowned educator.

Sadly we know that when we are thinking about the actions and prevailing thoughts of previous ages, the Church was not exempt from prejudice.

The Rev Carmel Jones, MBE recounts the story of how he attended St Paul’s Clapham in 1955 he was told after attending for 3 Sundays to go away and not to come back – by a member of the clergy.

He went on to exercise his ministry within the Pentecostal Church to which he turned and to establish the Pentecostal Credit Union which helped churches to obtain credit as the normal avenues were closed off to them.

In October 2020 the current Vicar at St Paul’s, Revd Canon Jonathan Boardman issued a formal apology to Revd Carmel for the manner in which he had been treated during their Dedication Festival.

As I mentioned a few moments ago, part of the focus this year in our service is also to think about and reflect on anti-racism and the Charter that the Diocese has committed itself to so that over time we seek to address and eliminate as far as possible racism, recognising that we are all sinners and will get thinks wrong, consciously and unconsciously.

Following the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement there has been a reflection of the past actions of the church and its links to slavery and racial practices.

Examination of the heritage of some of our church buildings and who is remembered on its walls and the action of the church in perpetuating racism – as the Charter states:-

*“Acknowledgement of the anti-slavery campaigns of Wilberforce, Clarkson and Equiano does not obviate the fact that, for hundreds of years, racialised theology and biblical interpretation were used to justify the Church collusion with the enslavement and racial denigration of people of African heritage.”*

I am all too aware that I speak to you as a white male priest, the product of white privilege and I have never experienced the racism that for too many of you has been a part of your lived experience, both in the past and sadly the present day.

I will get things wrong and may not be as culturally sensitive as I should be but one of the joys of being a parish priest in Downham is the diversity of the community that I serve and what I can learn from you about God and spirituality.

I am conscious that different cultures have different traditions and customs associated with those lintel moments in life – birth, marriage and death – and it has been a privilege to be invited to join with you and minister to you on those occasions – to join in the tears and the laughter.

We all have much to learn from each other and it is important that we are open to learning and not assume that our culture, our history is the only way and others should conform to our way of thinking.

You will notice that in many of the images in the Diocesan Anti-Racism Charter and diversity publicity re-present familiar pictures or icons in a culturally diverse manner.

Too often we view Jesus and icons through the prism of the white European representation whereas we know that Jesus was of middle-eastern ethnicity and actually we do not know what he looked like and our assumptions can be biased on our own wishes that make us feel comfortable.

Maybe they call us to move out of our comfort zone and to re-imagine our relationship with God.

The picture on the board of the young black women standing by graffiti saying “Keep Britain white” is still a reality for some although it may not be as overt and blatant as that picture illustrates.

As the Charter highlights, our structures and institutions can create an environment and a system that perpetuates the disempowerment of people of colour and maintains the status quo whether intentionally or unintentionally, although I would hope the latter, although this can be harder to address.

Each of us is human and each of us has our own biases, unconscious or otherwise and the first step is to acknowledge this fact.

None of us is perfect and we will get things wrong and say the wrong thing or jump to the wrong conclusion and we need to be open about our sinfulness and repent and seek to learn.

As a Church there are steps that we can take to start to address the racism and stereotyping that spoils and inhibits the growth of both individuals and God’s kingdom.

* First principle
* Second principle
* Third principle

These are quite wordy principles but if you look beneath the surface they all speak of seeking to value everyone equally – as the words on the poster say:-

*“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” Galatians 3 v 28*

Our Gospel reading today reminds us of the Centurion who cared for his slave who was ill, when at that time we know that slaves were disposable commodities – if they got ill, they were cast aside.

As well as valuing everyone equally it is ensuring that our structures and processes allow everyone to exercise their gifts within the Church without putting in place barriers that are based upon judgements linked to someone’s ethnicity or cultural background.

One of the aims of the Charter is to increase the UKME representation, both lay and ordained in the ministry of the Church so that people can move into positions of leadership.

It is very hard to image oneself in a leadership position if there is no one in a leadership position that you can identify with.

We are blessed in this Area to have Bishop Karowei as our Area Bishop – one of two black Bishops within the Church of England and I know he is committed to encouraging vocations amongst all people.

This desire is part of the wider call to action that the Diocese has committed to as it seeks to fight racism.

Read the calls to actions.

As a Church here in Downham we need to ensure that we, too, are called to action to fight racism in all its forms and ensure that in our life together we are a welcoming and inclusive church.

Yes we will get things wrong but it is important that we are open to learning from the past and committed to celebrating the diversity that is present amongst us so that all peoples can thrive and become the person that God wants them to be.

**Amen.**

The Diocese of Southwark Anti-Racism Charter can be accessed via the Diocesan website: [www.southwark.anglican.org](http://www.southwark.anglican.org)