

HOMILY - Black History Month

Thank you for the invitation to be with you for this service at the end of Black History month. It is an honour and humbling to be invited – especially as I am a white, privileged woman in a position of leadership whose only experiences of non-inclusion have been based on gender and even that in the midst of strong social movements towards gender inclusion.

However I do come as a person of faith – a faith we share together – that is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ – and it is from the heart of that faith that I speak to the challenges we – as church and society – face in changing the travesty of racial discrimination. For the Gospel is about love - love for all people – children, women and men – old, young, black, white, or brown – every human being – of every size, shape, colour, ability, is a beloved child of God!.

Jesus stopped to speak to beggars, the blind, those perceived to be sinners, to women, children, tax collectors, outsiders, or those marginalized by those in power – whether the power of Rome or that of religious leaders! When the disciples tried to stop him – Jesus continued to respond and listen – and lift up those who were being ignored or sidelined by others. He listened when challenged by the Samaritan woman - even about his own limited vision – when she – said ‘even the dogs can claim the crumbs under the table’..... Jesus saw all people as those created by and loved by God – and challenged them when their own vision would limit and deny their own dignity or that of others.

Let me tell you a few stories that have brought me to see these challenges more clearly. My curacy was in a multi-cultural parish - the most multicultural, diverse parish in Toronto – where everyone participated fully. My first parish as incumbent was about 50 kms north of Toronto – and I was struck immediately by the lack of diversity in the community and congregation. it was also my first experience with Indigenous people from the nearby reserve and community and exposure to the historic injustices they had experienced. Then I moved back to a community on the outskirts of Toronto – and was struck by the fact that all the people of colour sat around the edges of the church – never in the centre of the nave. Few were on the Advisory Board – they were faithful, regular attenders of

worship; contributors to the parish but not often in leadership. I wanted to change that and began to discover the systemic nature of barriers – that no one articulated out loud – but were noticed and felt deeply.

A faithful family with Caribbean roots, came to me one day and asked if I would bless their brand new van. They were so excited about this new vehicle in their family – and said that their previous beat-up car had seemed so out of place in our parking lot that they parked a couple of blocks away and walked to the church. I was mortified that somehow our community had exuded that kind of exclusion – not intentionally – but by all the unspoken signals that we were an upper middle-class church where some had privilege and others did not.

Since then – I am learning to see the power of those unspoken attitudes that permeate our lives. And with them the unseen privileges that those of us who were in the majority or at least in power of institutions and government have enjoyed. We hold embedded biases that infect our attitudes to those who are different or from ‘away’ – those whose experiences are different – whose way of speaking is different – whose way of interacting is different – and difference makes us uncomfortable – It is easier to push away the difference than embrace its possibilities. And easier – if you are in the majority or power position to expect others to conform and act like ‘us’. One of the most damning statements about our relationship with Indigenous peoples was given by Archbishop Michael Peers – ‘We tried to remake you in our image’.

I have heard the stories of faithful Anglicans from the Caribbean or Africa who arrive at the door of a parish in Canada and are told – either explicitly or by inference – that ‘Your church is down the road’pointing to the Pentecostal Church or another denomination. Faithful Anglicans sit in the back or side pews so they don’t seem pushy!

As Christians we want to claim that we are not racist. I know that most people are horrified to think they might be! But racism is far more than individual attitudes. It is the system of interlocking attitudes, actions, policies and behaviours built into our society that sideline others – that become so rooted and

pervasive we no longer notice their power because this is the world we receive and live within.

A telling analogy is the long, long history of symphony orchestras that did not hire women instrumentalists. There was often no bar to them auditioning – but curiously they were never chosen. -until an orchestra decided to test themselves – and made all of the auditions blind. The players were behind a screen and their names were just an initial and surname. Gender could not be identified – only their skill in playing. Not surprisingly – women began to be selected for the available positions.

A white university classmate of mine at university married a South Asian scientist and artist. When they moved to a prairie city as a mixed race couple they looked for a place to live. When they phoned to make appointments to see an apartment everything was available – but when they arrived at the door suddenly it had been taken already. Coincidence? I think not.

None of this is new to those of you who have experienced such discrimination. Yet, we are a country that embraces refugees and diversity of language as a bilingual country (at least nominally); and we are a church that embraces the gospel that calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves.

One of the aspects of the Hebrew scriptures that is not frequently noticed is that the Hebrew people were not chosen for privilege as the favourite people – they were chosen in order that they might share the light of God with ALL nations....Isaiah 49; God's love & covenant was intended for all and even if people chose not to share it – they were to be treated with dignity, respect and infinite hospitality – the kind of hospitality that kills the fatted calf; welcomes into community and offers shelter. AS those grafted into the inheritance of Abraham – we are called to be light for the world – to share God's love and covenantal commitment to humankind.

The warped philosophy of white supremacy that denies human dignity is antithetical to a Christian understanding of being human in God's family. Our church succumbed to the assumption that white, European standards for faith and education were essential for Indigenous children – and so joined the

government in operating residential schools that separated families; destroyed cultural ties; denied languages; and allowed sexual and physical violence to flourish in some places. Those assumptions blinded us from seeing the presence of God already evident in their communities; their relationships; their care for creation and recognition of interdependence with creation. We imposed our ways of knowing Jesus – and only in recent years are Indigenous Anglicans reclaiming space for an integration of their spirituality with the Gospel – an integration that the whole church must learn from!

I know that Black Anglicans are doing the same. Raising their voices against the systemic exclusion that is evident when we look at our church councils. The Council of General Synod is overwhelmingly white. The only people of colour are Indigenous members who have designated spots on the Council. The Council is chosen from the membership of General Synod – 1 bishop, lay, clergy and youth from each ecclesiastical province. The ecclesiastical provinces choose from among the members of General Synod who are chosen by each diocese. We have Indigenous bishops but no other bishops of colour at this time. Our General Synod membership of clergy, lay and youth has been overwhelmingly white. I hope and pray that General Synod in June this year will have greater diversity.

In many ways the denial of the gift of diversity is an extension of the hubris of Adam & Eve believing they know better than God about good and evil and eat of the fruit of the tree in the centre of the Garden of Eden. It is the hubris of assuming we (those with power and/or privilege) are best and right and strongest – and pushing away the reality that we all are only part of the whole and we need each other – strong & weak; tall and thin; rich and poor; of all colours and genders – we need the whole ‘Rainbow People of God’ as Desmond Tutu would call us – to live fully in God’s way.

I cannot speak to or know the full experience of BIPOC people in Canada. I am committed to listening to your stories of pain and of faith. I can be alert to the ways my own heart and mind have been shaped by biases and attitudes that must be challenged and changed. I can be alert to the ways that our Church has not welcomed diversity; promoted the gifts and leadership of those who have made

Canada their home. I have asked the House of Bishops to assist me in nominating leaders in our Church from communities not currently represented - I have asked Synods choose their delegates to General Synod to represent the fullness of their community. I ask the BIPOC community to continue to critique and challenge us to do the work that is needed and to be willing to step into the opportunities for leadership – and be bold in demanding them.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent – the season of repentance and renewal for Christians. It invites us to intentionally reflect on whether and how our lives reflect the light of Christ in our communities. Jesus resisted the temptations of the devil – and kept his focus on the nature and call of God. He refused the temptation to claim power for himself or to worship anyone or anything other than God. We are called to the same.

I have just returned from three and a half weeks in Africa – attending a conference on human trafficking and modern slavery; visiting PWRDF projects in Kenya and participating in the Anglican Consultative Council in Accra, Ghana. The ACC includes participants from all across the globe – it witnessed to our diversity and unity – welcoming the diverse languages (instantaneous translation!). The new Standing Committee of our Communion has members from DRC, New Zealand, Malaysia, Jerusalem; England; Kenya; Australia; Canada; Brazil, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Ireland!!.....

In the middle of one of the sessions on the climate change and its effects on so many around the Communion – a New Zealand Maori priest – stood up and performed a Haka – a traditional Maori song sometimes seen preceding soccer matches – it is powerful and dramatic – and in this case was a cry for creation. Although the words were not understood – the power of his song moved us to tears.

Black Anglicans from Africa and the Caribbean walked with those of us from N.America and Europe through the slave castle at Cape Coast – as we considered our backgrounds in the slave trade – some through direct descent – others as descendants of traders and owners who have benefitted from the slave trade,

including our churches. Together we are learning to hear God in new ways – through the gifts, history and voices of experience.

I look forward to the vision for the kingdom of God that fulfills St. Paul's vision of inclusivity and diversity in Galatians 3: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Vs 28. We are created for community – for each other – as partners in the Gospel – as siblings in Christ for the Good News. We have not yet lived into its fullness but I pray we are on the road towards it.

May this Lent deepen repentance where we have failed to respect the dignity of every human beingencourage action to transform injustices we now see. May we bring life out of the pain of the past as we walk as partners in the Gospel for the healing of the world.