
You Are Not Your Own

1 Corinthians 6.19

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 18, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

One weekend a year it's become common in America for people to come together in churches and other meeting places to reflect about the issue of race in this country. We do so in the name of the person who above all others pointed to a vision in which children would grow to be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

It seems to be taken for granted in some circles that the one invited to speak on these occasions should be an African American. Though this is understandable I have begun to wonder whether such an assumption still serves our common destiny. It seems to suggest that black people know what race is in a way white people don't – as if somehow black people *have* race, while white people don't, because white people represent some kind of primeval default setting from which other races differ in varying degrees. But this is nonsense – race is something everyone has and it's a significant part of anyone's identity because it's not subject to change.

There are those who want to downplay the historic injustice and present imbalance in the relation of black and white in this country by setting it in a wider context of the assimilation of a host of races and nationalities into this nation's culture, or even going wider and looking to the mutual hospitality, understanding and appreciation of many kinds of difference ranging across class to disability to sexual orientation, all under the general and apparently infinitely malleable label of diversity. In this spirit it has sometimes been said that Martin Luther King died and rose again as a white liberal, because his legacy has somehow been hitched to a rag-bag of causes about which he expressed no public view. But to my mind this too often misses the point.

The point is easily discovered by simply picking up a dictionary. Okay, I realize I'm showing my age and no one does that anymore, so a few days ago I looked up *Wikipedia*. Listen to this entry under "Black:" "Black commonly represents lack, evil, darkness, bad luck, crime, mystery, silence, concealment, elegance, execution, end, chaos, death, secrecy... Black magic is a destructive or evil form of magic, often connected with death... Evil witches are stereotypically dressed in black... In computer security, a blackhat is an attacker with evil intentions." And then click across and listen to this entry on "White:" "White commonly represents purity, lack, snow, ice, peace, life, death, nothing, frost, good, air... White is the color worn by brides at weddings... Angels are typically depicted as clothed in white robes." "Someone who is whiter than white is completely good and honest and never does anything bad" [says *The Free Dictionary*]. I don't think there's much more that needs to be said. The characterization of those with pink or peach coloured skin as white and therefore pure and those of dark brown skin as black and therefore frightening and chaotic runs so deep in our culture that it still permeates a 2009 dictionary.

So if we ask "What is the question of race really about?" here's a simple answer. A black person in the English-speaking world, even in the unlikely event that they've never been racially abused, discriminated against, excluded or humiliated, still picks up any dictionary and finds the weight of culture as a burden on their shoulders and the incline on the dial of social standing set to permanently uphill. But we're gathered in worship, gathered as Christians, and so when together we ask "What is the question of race really about?" we can't be content with sociological answers. We want *theological* answers. What's the problem? In what ways does Jesus address the problem? How does the church witness to the way Jesus has addressed the problem? These are the three questions I want to speak about this morning.

So what's the problem of racism? We're most of us familiar with a distressing catalogue of symptoms – but what exactly is the root cause? We could simply say "sin" – but precisely what *kind* of sin? Time and again the book of Genesis presents us with the stories of siblings competing, often for their parents' attention. There's Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and pretty well everybody. Sibling rivalry is so profound a feature of Genesis that it somehow sets its mark over the whole Bible, so that Paul sets the relationship of Israel and the Gentiles, the most significant one of all for the early church, in the context of these ancient sibling rivalries. And what is sibling rivalry fundamentally about? It's about fearing that there

won't be enough for everybody. There won't be enough resources and there won't be enough love. So I'm going to dominate my sibling, by fair means or foul, lest I end up on the losing side. And isn't the story of the white and the black races over the last 500 years like a kind of sibling rivalry *by groups*? By fair means or foul, one sibling has grasped the heel of the other, done whatever it took to steal the inheritance – because fundamentally it feared there wouldn't be enough for both. The dominant sibling then created an ideology of supremacy, superiority, and lurking crisis that inculturated its advantage and demonized anyone who might possibly alter the status quo. But the root of the sin is allowing ourselves to believe that there isn't enough for everyone. And so in the face of the person who's different from us not by language or class or creed but by race, a difference almost impossible to alter, we either ignore the other, subjugate them, demonize them or destroy them. Unless... unless we truly believe there's enough for everyone of the things that really matter.

And this is how Jesus addresses the problem. He says to those on opposing sides of the dividing wall of hostility, there *is* enough for everyone. He calls all kinds of people to be disciples, he makes five loaves feed five thousand people, his forgiveness endures even crucifixion, his life cannot be destroyed even by death, his Spirit speaks to everyone in their own language, his gospel goes to the ends of the earth. In all these ways Jesus displays that the true gifts of God – life, love, forgiveness, resurrection, the Holy Spirit – *these* are gifts that never run out. They're not in short supply. The more we share them out, the more of them there is.

Meanwhile Jesus blows away two of the fundamental myths that underpin racist ideology. First of all, there's no such thing as racial purity. Life is not a dog show, with our owners parading our pedigree before the judges. We're all mutts. (And geneticists suggest the more mongrel we are the healthier we become, because the key to adaptability to new environments is variation.) Jesus over and over again displaced a theory of salvation based on purity in favor of a salvation based on repentance, conversion, and forgiveness. There's no entitlement in the kingdom of God. Heaven is not restricted.

And second, the way we're made is not the most fundamental thing in God's eyes. Race and gender, the two most apparently indelible characteristics, are important and precious, but they're not *fundamental* to the way God sees our identity. God's not actually all that concerned about what you are and where you're coming from. He's concerned about who you're becoming and where you're going. Remember St Paul wasn't a white guy. His life changed on the Damascus Road. That day he discovered it's not about race, it's about grace. That became his message: It's not about race, it's about grace. Our identity as Christians rests solely in this: our baptism. It's our baptism that turns us from the exiles, mongrels, sinners and strangers that we are into a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. If we were really reading the New Testament right, when we fill in the questionnaire that says "Nationality" we'd write "Christian" and the one that says "Race" we'd again have nothing more or less to say than, simply, "Christian." We each have many characteristics, but one stands out above all others. And that's baptism. For Christians, it's not about race, it's about grace.

At a conference in Chicago in 1963 to mark the hundredth anniversary of the emancipation proclamation, one speaker began his address with the words, "The issue, the only *issue*, at this conference is baptism." The delegates rose to their feet in outrage at the offence to Jews and secular activists who were present in the hall and were treasured members of the movement. As one observer noted, "Nothing can be more hostile and boisterous than 657 liberals bent on solving someone else's problem when the harmony and unanimity of the occasion is threatened." Dr King was a genius at building a movement that could bind together people of a host of different persuasions and commitments to address a common enemy. But he was a Baptist pastor, and he, better than anyone, knew that for Christians, no science, no account of tolerance, no desire for progress, no program of education, no call for common humanity can finally achieve what Christ brings about in baptism. Baptism doesn't abolish difference – but it transforms difference from a cause for fear into a manifestation of abundance.

So this is how Jesus addresses the problem of racism: he dismantles and discredits the myths of purity and nature that make racism plausible, and he displaces the ideology of scarcity that makes racism credible. Racism is exposed as a logic of fear that rests on the assumption that the God of Jesus Christ does not exist. Racism is about finding a security and an identity other than the security and identity found in God. It is, in the end, a form of atheism.

And so our response to racism, in ourselves and in others, personally and corporately, prophetically and institutionally, is vital to our witness to the God of Jesus Christ. As Paul says to the Corinthians in today's New Testament passage, "you are not your own... Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." God gives us to one another as places of encounter, as temples through whom we can encounter the Holy Spirit. That's what we are each *for*. To dismiss or oppress people of another race out of hand is to deny oneself access to God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit that God communicates to us through them. *They* lose from our cruelty, but *we* lose even more because we're deprived of the place where God promises to encounter us. Our assumption of scarcity rebounds back on ourselves. Racism simply gives us less access to God.

But racism is nonetheless still with us and in us. So finally I want to say a few words about how the church *witnesses* to the way Jesus has addressed the problem. Christians of different races need one another to hear everything God has to tell us in Scripture. How can we hear the story of the matriarch Sarah and the slave Hagar if we have never known anyone like Hagar, or anyone like Sarah? How can we hear the story of Moses if no one among us has any idea what it means to say "let my people go"? How can we hear the story of Daniel or Esther if no one among us has ever known what it means to be in charge of a nation or organization and still be regarded in that nation or organization as a second-class citizen? How are we to we hear the words "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" if no one among us has come from humble and despised origins? We approach Christians of histories and locations different from our own, and one of the first things we say is, "Help me to hear what God is saying in the Bible." God has given us in Jesus and the Holy Spirit everything we need to live beyond racism – but we need to receive everything he's given us, and that means receiving one another's unique and different experience and wisdom.

One slogan that was much circulated a couple of months ago went like this. "Rosa sat so that Martin could walk. Martin walked so that Barack could run." I think this slogan has a great deal to teach the church. It says that each act or gesture of courage or faith or defiance takes its place in a litany of such acts, most of which remain obscure and forgotten, but which together make up a chorus of witness. These are the acts that make up the church.

The politics of the church is not headquartered in Washington D.C. How many of us who feel we have all the right opinions, voted for the right person, and like to broadcast both on our bumper stickers, nonetheless struggle to turn those convictions into realities in our relationships? Here are some suggestions. Let's not complain about the American church being still segregated unless we ourselves are prepared to go and sit in a church of another tradition every few weeks to listen and learn and share and enjoy. Let's not lament the reality of segregated neighborhoods unless we ourselves are prepared to welcome at our table and maybe offer our spare room to someone of a different history to our own. Racial reconciliation isn't something that any of us can delegate to anyone else. It's something we each have to embark on for ourselves. For a long while we've spoken the language of rights and access and entitlement. That's important, but it can't achieve the change that really matters. It's only when the language of rights and access and entitlement is transformed into the realities of understanding and friendship and trust that the dividing wall of racism really begins to come tumbling down.

What matters most today is that the phrase "so that Barack could run" is not the end of the sentence – or anything like the end of the sentence. The sentence didn't begin with Rosa, but stretches back over decades and centuries of people who believed and knew that the God who had made their oppressors in his image had made them in his image too. And the sentence won't end with Barack, because sitting on his library shelf in the Oval Office will be that same dictionary as you and I both have, the one that says "black" commonly represents lack, evil, darkness, bad luck, crime, execution, end, chaos, and death, whereas "white" commonly represents purity, peace, life, and good. Rosa, Martin and Barack will always have honored places in that sentence. But the sentence is really about every forgotten person who lived with hatred and discrimination and responded with courage and hope. The sentence is really about those who didn't think the curse of racism in this country was someone else's problem to sort out. The sentence is really about those whose lives were not lived to themselves only but who became temples of the Holy Spirit that opened the eyes of others to the glory of God.

There's even a place in that sentence for you and me, if only we have the courage and hope to take it up.