

Questions and Answers on Matters of Racial Justice

St Paul's Church, Clapham SW4

The purpose of this document is to help the whole congregation consider the issues raised by 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM) and related topics. In particular, to address some questions that the 'average white person' might raise.

My answers are my personal views at the moment and do not represent official parish policy. I offer the following in the hope that it may help others work through these questions. Please note that it is not intended to cover every area and specifically does not discuss questions relating to history, such as slavery, museum exhibitions and statues of historical figures.

Please refer also to my sermon for the day (30 August) which outlines a more general approach to discussing the topic.

Rosemary Palmer

Licensed Lay Reader

30 August 2020

Question 1: Is supporting BLM just another way of having to be 'politically correct' as individuals, the church or society? Is the church just jumping on the latest bandwagon, fearful that it will seem irrelevant if it does not directly support it?

My response to this would be: I must admit it does look a bit like this. But Christian people who support it do so sincerely and not because it is fashionable to do so. For them, it is an important expression of 'love of neighbour'. Really, we are just trying to make up for lost time and to remedy past misdeeds. Remember that in the second half of the 20th century the Church of England in particular had a bad record in many areas of the country in its attitude to Black people. In the late 1940s when many people from the Caribbean started arriving in Britain at the invitation of the British Government to carry out vital work on public transport and in the NHS in particular,

they were often actively turned away and discouraged from attending many Anglican parish churches. They were told to go 'down the road' to another church 'more suitable for them.' This, to people whose countries had been evangelised by mission agencies from the 'mother country' and told that Britain was a great place.

Despite this, there were always Christian clergy, theologians and lay people from various backgrounds who did care deeply about racial injustice and did their best to get the issue onto the radar of the various denominations. This was often done on an ecumenical basis, eg the British Council of Churches as it then was. Nowadays the organisation Churches Together in Britain and Ireland continues that work. But if you will pardon the choice of words, racial justice has always been a 'minority interest' in the Church of England.

Question 2: Isn't this all rather political? Do we as a church (whether national or local) need to get involved in it? Won't it be divisive?

My answer would be: well, it is true it is political with a small p. I don't think it is party political. Of course the different political parties have different analyses of the issues and how best to deal with them. However, more or less every issue of everyday life that affects us all (unemployment, education, poverty, the environment, the health service) could be considered political in a general sense. Unless the church is going to talk only about 'spiritual' issues, the question of racial injustice needs to be addressed along with other areas. We all need to exercise a spirit of love, tact and empathy to hold this discussion in a productive way, so that we can come to a greater mutual understanding of the issues and how to deal with them. It is not fair to black people who are at a disadvantage to prefer a superficial calm just to avoid the majority white people feeling uncomfortable.

Question 3: Aren't there bigger issues the country as a whole has to deal with now, eg the economic recovery, unemployment, rebuilding the NHS, young people and their education?

My answer would be ... yes, but these issues affect black people as well as white people, people who have a lower income, who find it harder to get a job etc. And we

must remember that proportionately more BME people have died as a result of Covid-19; one reason being that there is a high proportion of BME people working in the NHS and other frontline roles. It would be terrible if once more black people were pushed to the back of the queue.

Question 4: Do I have to agree with everything BLM stands for in order to work for racial justice?

My answer would be no. Some people are aware that BLM officially includes (at any rate in the USA) the demand to 'defund the police' which I personally find puzzling and unnecessary. The police, like any public service, need proper funding. The challenge is to ensure that no police officer behaves in a racist manner and if they do, that they be dealt with appropriately.

It is interesting that black opinion, like white opinion, on this matter, covers a range of views. Patrick Hutchinson, a black man and BLM demonstrator who came to prominence for carrying Bryn Male an injured white man, and counter-demonstrator to safety in a recent march has founded a group called United to Change and Inspire. A website has been set up <https://utcai.co.uk/> where you can read more.

To acknowledge that aspects of BLM are not universally accepted by all black people, I was interested to read a newspaper article written by columnist Sherelle Jacobs who argued that BLM was an agent of Communism. She suggested that the best way to ensure better treatment for black people was to encourage black middle class people to earn more and thereby benefit everyone by spending more.

Question 5: Is it really true that black people suffer as much injustice as they say? And can't we say that 'All Lives Matter'?

The answer to the first question is: yes, black people do suffer as much injustice as they say – and more (much is not reported). Following the news in the UK alone gives you many examples of how black people face discrimination far more often than white people. Numerous cases of 'every day racism', whether by passing strangers in the street, security guards, the police, landlords and others, occur.

Sadly the existence of the Equality Act 2010 and the recommendations of six official reports and enquiries on key institutions produced in the last 20 years have not been as effective as we would wish. This is one reason why black parents have to give 'The Talk' to their children at what they decide is a suitable age, in order to explain how to deal with the sort of comments and actions they are likely to encounter, due to no fault of their own, but based solely on the colour of their skin.

You may have heard of the phrase 'white privilege', a term which originated in the USA. I prefer to use the phrase 'white advantage'. It refers to the difference in everyday experience of white and black people. When I, a white woman, go into a shop, I can walk round and look at things and go out not having bought anything without fearing that a security guard is going to ask to search my bag to see if I have stolen anything. If I go out for a drive in my car, or travel abroad, I don't expect to be stopped for no reason on the road, or for my passport to be given more than a cursory inspection at the border.

Yet black people in these same situations know that they may be stopped needlessly to have their bag searched, are quite likely to be stopped in their car, especially if they are young and male, or will have their passport scrutinised much more carefully than a white person's passport. You can see many examples of this reported in the press. So in other words, black people have much more to contend with in their daily lives. We white people don't have to think about being white. It is 'normal', it is, so to speak, the 'default' standard in society and therefore anyone who is white automatically has an easier life. But black people don't seem to 'fit in' automatically. They 'look different' and this is seen as sufficient reason to behave differently towards them, leading often to discriminatory treatment.

While it is true that fundamentally of course, all lives do matter, unfortunately this is a phrase that has been adopted by those who are positively opposed to race equality. So it is not open for us to use it as a slogan, without the risk of misunderstanding. As has been said by a supporter of BLM: All lives do matter, but black lives seem to matter less than white lives.

Question 6: Is there really such a thing as institutional or structural racism? If so, does it make everyone who is part of that organisation automatically racist?

My response would be: there is such a thing as structural or institutional racism and one must be prepared to find it in any organisation whenever an unthinking approach is taken towards issues of racial justice. One example is in the staffing of organisations. Bearing in mind that it is usually white people who hold the positions of power in most organisations, or the majority of positions of power, investigations have shown that a natural (or 'unconscious' bias) in areas such as recruitment, promotion, education and training lead to those in power appointing those who 'look like them', unless they deliberately take a step back and carefully analyse their work for bias. Often this is not deliberate. However, as it harms the prospects of Black people, steps need to be taken to redress this bias. This can be difficult to do, as once a certain way of doing things is entrenched in an organisation, people tend to think it is 'normal' and are reluctant to change. 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' .But from the point of view of black people, the system *is* broken and *does* need fixing.

These kind of invisible barriers, which do not affect white people and which they may be unaware of, are what we mean by structural, institutional or systemic racism. It has the effect that black people are unable to participate or contribute as they otherwise would.

Personally I do not think that all people who are associated with an organisation that can be seen to be institutionally racist are automatically racist themselves. However, there is a risk that unless they take whatever actions are available to them to combat the racism they see (ie take an active anti-racist stance), they may be complicit in the ongoing disadvantage experienced by black people. Whether or not they are complicit could depend on their level in the organisation, ie if they are a junior member of staff with no power to influence policy or procedures, or a more senior person, a decision maker, who could use their influence to start to deal with the problems that have come to light.

It has been said that it is not the individual who is racist (except in very clear cases, eg membership of outlawed racist organisations) but the behaviour - implicit, explicit, conscious or unconscious – which is racist. This view may be helpful in preventing white people who are starting to think about these issues being overwhelmed with guilt unnecessarily. And of course we must remember that certain types of words, actions and behaviour have been ruled unacceptable under the terms of the Equality Act 2020, which covers all types of discrimination and related issues for many people, not just black people.

One could argue, using the well-known phrase ‘Hate the sin, but love the sinner’, that while we hate racist actions, we should not denounce the person who commits them without giving them a chance to speak and explain themselves. For Christians, racism, like other evils, is a sin, and needs repentance and forgiveness. Of course one can also talk about ‘sins of omission’ and ‘sins of commission’, and in this area, it is easy to be negligent in not taking action where one can.

Question 7: I (a white person) honestly do not think I am racist. I never deliberately harm or discriminate against a black person. Isn't that sufficient? If everyone (all white people) behaved well, we would not need these campaigns.

My answer would be: Well, it is true that if everyone behaved better, the world would certainly be a better place for everyone, black and white alike. But years of well-intentioned white people ‘standing by’ has held back changes which are badly needed to remedy injustice. If personal circumstances permit, I would suggest that white people need to think what actions they can take (not just going on a march) which could help ‘level the playing field’. It is sadly not enough to be neutral on these issues, or ‘non-racist’. As many white people as possible need to be ‘anti-racist’ ie actively promote racial justice.

Question 8: Does the emphasis on increasing the visibility of black people and enabling their contribution mean that white people should take a back seat and stop contributing?

My answer would be: some white people might feel called to make this kind of gesture – you might call it a ‘boycott’ of unjust structures, for example. But I take the view that everyone’s contribution is of value and that a white person standing down will not of itself encourage more black people to come forward. We need to affirm and support black people and address their concerns, while not devaluing white people or the contribution they make. Every person has their own gifts which can be used to support others and give glory to God.

White people can in addition become ‘allies’ of black people and their organisations, in supporting the work to challenge and do away with injustice. In that way they help but do not take over.

Question 9: Shouldn’t roles be filled on the basis of the person’s capability rather than race? Are we in danger of a kind of tokenism, appointing a black person just for the sake of it?

My answer would be: providing the person is capable and/or has the potential, it is good to appoint someone to redress any imbalance. (It can also be the case that a white person has been appointed to a job because of ‘who they know’, and their skills and suitability have not been objectively assessed).

Question 10: Isn’t this all talk? What about action? How are we going to get things to change, including at St Paul’s Church in Clapham?

This is the key question. I suggest these possibilities:

- Continue to talk to each other, whether to other white people, other black people or in a mixed pair or group. Share stories and experiences and relate how your own views have developed and perhaps changed over the years
- Read the book ‘We need to talk about Race’ by Ben Lindsay. It is highly recommended, about the experience of black people in white majority churches, with points to ponder from various viewpoints. It is an easy way for white people to find out about the experience of black people.

- Educate ourselves about the issues, be aware of news items and take the time to look at in detail rather than brush aside.
- Organise parish discussions once face to face gatherings are possible.
- Consider this aspect in all church plans, including Mission Action Plan.
- Support local and national campaigns as possible (church or secular).
- Encourage a supportive atmosphere so that black people are more willing to come forward, whether to volunteer for roles, contribute to discussions or draw attention to injustice and discrimination.

Question 11: Can you recommend any follow-up material?

The following cover a wide range of topics:

- Talk by David Olusoga and the Revd Liz Adekunle on Reforming Attitudes to Race, given at St Martins in the Fields in 2017 preceded by an introduction

<https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/reforming-attitudes-race-olusoga-adekunle/>

- Book by David Olusoga: Black and British – a forgotten history (Pan Books 2016)

- Radio 4 programme 'I can't be racist' 16 September 2019 which includes a very useful discussion of the pros and cons of 'unconscious bias training'

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002rkq>

- Why I'm no longer talking to White People about Race, by Reni Eddo-Lodge (Man Booker Prize Winner 2015)
- Brit(ish) by Afua Hirsch (2018)
- Natives: Race & Class in the Ruins of Empire, by Akala (2019)
- Notting Hill Carnival website <https://aaa.nhcarnival.org/>