

One Race, Many Racisms – and the unfolding of racial justice

Church of God Worldwide Mission, Reading, Sunday 5 September 1999



'Let us strive to know our God,' said the prophet Hosea, 'whose justice dawns like the morning star, its dawning as sure as the sunrise.' God's justice, said other prophets in the ancient Hebrew scriptures, unfolds like the leaves on a tree, its unfolding is as sure as the springtime each year.

As we think about God's dawning, unfolding justice on Racial Justice Sunday 1999 we inevitably think about the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report, published a few months ago. Here this afternoon, we think also of the great South African hymn *Siyahamba*, which we shall shortly be singing: 'we're on our way, we're marching'. *Ekukhana kwe Nkhosi*, the hymn continues: we are marching in the light of God.

How does light from the Stephen Lawrence report blend with the dawning brightness of the light of God? This is a key question for Racial Justice Sunday 1999.

When a senior police officer interviewed the Lawrence family a few days after Stephen's murder he was handed a sheet of A4 paper on which were written the names of the prime suspects. Barely glancing at it, he folded the paper into two, then into two again, then again, then again. In surface area the paper was now one sixteenth of its original size. The officer held the folded paper in his clenched fist, and continued interviewing the bereaved family.

At the Inquiry this tiny episode was recalled. What, if anything, did it mean? Broadly, there were three views – or more accurately, there were three different stories into which the episode could be slotted and interpreted. Let us recall the three different stories here this afternoon, and then look at them in the light of the Judeo-Christian story in which we all stand, the story that God's justice dawns like the morning star. The story that the dawning of God's justice is as sure as the sunrise, that its unfolding is as sure as the springtime.

The first story is the officer's own. For him, the episode was basically of no significance at all. He had simply taken the paper and had folded it and had held it – 'I folded it, I did not screw it up, I folded it,' he declared indignantly, and

indeed emotionally and heatedly, when he was asked about the episode at the Inquiry. It was an entirely reasonable, methodical and professional thing to do, the sort of thing he had done several times a day every day throughout the years of his professional life. Not even worth remembering, let alone unpicking or discussing.

According to a second account the officer's gesture was insensitive, thoughtless, disrespectful. He was talking with people suffering from barely imaginable grief, trauma and distress. Instead of showing a basic human interest in something profoundly important to them – a list of people allegedly responsible for killing their son because, so the attackers thought, he belonged to a different race from themselves – he demonstrated an extraordinary casualness, callousness even. At the very least he should have communicated to the bereaved family that he was wholly determined to follow up the information about the alleged murderers which had been handed to him.

A third story is about racism and, therefore, about racial justice. In this story, the police officer would not have behaved with such casualness and lack of respect if the bereaved family had been white. Also he would not have implied, if the murdered person had been white, that he was uninterested in tracking down the perpetrators. His discourtesy was not just personal bad manners or lack of professionalism, but expressive of the occupational culture to which he belonged. In countless conversations and contacts with colleagues over the years he had developed, and on an almost daily basis had rehearsed and sustained, certain views of the world.

According to these views, Black British people do not merit the same basic respect and consideration as white British people, for they are alien, they are not fully British, not fully members of the community which the police service exists to serve and to protect. The stories, perceptions, worldviews, struggles, desires, identities of Black British people are outside the norm.

Such views of who is and who isn't really deep-down British, who essentially belongs here and who doesn't, had received reinforcement not only from the canteen culture of the police service but also, though mainly tacitly through their silences, from senior officers and opinion-leaders over the years.

Police officers, this third story continues, are representatives of the state. So if they routinely behave with insensitivity and lack of respect towards a particular community they are seen as expressing a widely-held, and entirely 'respectable', view of that community. As that particular officer folded up that piece of paper, he provided a glimpse into the occupational culture of which he was a part, and a glimpse also into a pervasive racism throughout British society. The failure to deliver justice to Stephen's family, it was said, is a denial of justice to every black person in Britain. The play which dramatised the Inquiry proceedings, *The Colour of Justice*, was not about 'a few bent coppers', said one reviewer, nor even primarily about the police service at all, but about 'how white Britain treats black Britain'. Not about a few rotten apples but about the whole barrel, the whole container.

Well, which of the three stories do we believe? Which one is true? That's not quite, actually, the question! These are stories belonging to worldviews, not about factual detail. It's the same with the grand narrative of Judaism and Christianity, the story that God's justice dawns like the morning star. If you say you believe in the certainty of God's justice, you are pointing to your worldview, the faith that is in you, the source of your hope. You're not saying something which could be proved or disproved in a scientist's laboratory, or which could stand up or be struck down in a court of law. The question should be: which of these three stories do we opt and dare to listen to, attend to? The answer on Racial Justice Sunday 1999 is that mainly we listen to, we attend to, we commit ourselves to acting and marching in the light of, the third story.

The third story was presented cogently by Sir William Macpherson himself and his colleagues in their report. It was, they said, a chilling story. To attend to it is to attend to both prose and passion. 'Only connect', said E.M. Forster 90 years ago, in an early injunction to what is nowadays called joined-up thinking: 'only connect the prose and the passion'. He added: 'And both will be exalted'. The term 'institutional racism' connects, in Forster's senses, prose and passion. The prose of policy-making, decision-making, inspecting, evaluating, monitoring, managing, changing. The passion of urgency, suffering, anger and love, expressed through story and metaphor, anecdote and image.

(In the Judeo-Christian story we know well that 'passion' originally meant suffering. The passion of Christ. It's not inappropriate to speak of the passion of the Lawrence family these last six years.)

Basic prosaic questions have to be asked in relation to any and every organisation – every government department, every local education authority or health authority or police authority, every school or hospital or police-district, every trades union, every social services department or housing department, every regional development authority, every charity or welfare organisation or funding body, every political party or campaign or lobby, and – of course! – every church and every church organisation. In a nutshell, the questions are these: 'Can criticisms reflecting the third story justifiably be made of our institution?' 'What is the evidence, in relation to each criticism, one way or the other?' 'If indeed the criticisms are justifiable, what should – what *will* – be done?'

Siyahamba: We are marching, we are living, we are moving, says the hymn: yes, but to do *what*?

As we march, live, move, we need to be mindful of a wide range of considerations. I will mention, briefly, four of them. First, the national theme for this year's Racial Justice Sunday: 'One Race, the Human Race'. It's important to keep this firmly in our minds. The human species does not consist of separate races. The belief that races exist was developed in the past and it's scientifically inaccurate and morally wrong. We have got to discard it, unlearn it. Racism, however, does exist.

Second, this word racism. We have to learn that it has a plural – racisms. Grammatically, this sounds weird, indeed 'wrong'. But so far as racial justice is concerned, it is fundamental. The fight for racial justice is against racisms, not racism. Anti-black racism in Europe and the Americas, dating from the beginnings of the slave trade in the sixteenth century and still virulent today tends particularly to be at the forefront of our minds in the churches. But there is also anti-Muslim racism, anti-Irish racism, anti-Gypsy racism, anti-Jewish racism. People in Christian circles often do not attend to these with nearly enough seriousness and rigour.

Third, a reason why Christians do not address such racisms with sufficient rigour is that they themselves have frequently been implicated in them. We do not know how to disagree with our sisters and brothers in Islam without colluding with anti-Muslim racism, known as Islamophobia. Or with our Jewish sisters and brothers without seeming to support anti-Jewish racism, antisemitism. Protestants disagree on certain fundamentals with Roman Catholics, but anti-Catholicism over the centuries has been intertwined with, and still is intertwined with, anti-Irish racism. By and large we Christians have not yet sorted these things out. To struggle to assert that there is One Race, the Human Race, involves also asserting that there are many racisms, and that our God, whose justice dawns like the morning star, calls on us to struggle against them all.

Fourth and finally, a word about stories. We are marching, living, moving, says the hymn, in the light of God. Our paths and our steps are lit up, as we journey on, by stories. Stories about tiny little episodes, lasting a few seconds. Stories which are big in their own time and place, like the Stephen Lawrence story in Britain in the 1990s. And the story which began before the world was made, which has been unfolding for billions of millennia, which is unfolding even now in the lives and work of everyone in this church this afternoon, sustaining and strengthening the hope and the faith which are in us, the story of God's unfolding justice.

Earlier this week there was an interview in a newspaper with Stephen Lawrence's best friend, Duwayne Brooks. Duwayne continues to fight for justice both for himself and for Stephen. The interviewer asked him whether he ever tires of fighting. 'No!' replied Duwayne, 'How can I be tired? We aren't even near the finishing line yet. I can't be tired. There's a long way to go.'

A long way to go. *Siyahamba*. Marching, living, moving. Let us strive to know our God, whose justice dawns like the morning star, its dawning as sure as the sunrise. Our God, whose justice unfolds like the leaves on a tree, its unfolding as sure as the springtime each year.

Amen.

The preacher was Robin Richardson, a member of the Oxford Diocesan Racial Justice Committee.