

Reflections and Prayers – Divisions and Injustice in Society

This is the 10th in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

Prophecy

‘The Lord has showed you what is good; what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?’

Micah 6: 8 RSV

Why ignore Trinity Sunday?

Methodist local preachers, so it is alleged, often decide that Trinity Sunday, always in May or June, is an ideal opportunity for a late Spring weekend away, thereby neatly escaping being planned to preach on the most challenging of Christian doctrines. Trinity Sunday represents the climax of the lectionary, from Advent to Pentecost, summing up our faith in one integrated, coherent and glorious whole.

Business experience taught me to distinguish between what is important and what is urgent: some issues are neither, some are both; but some are, subtly, either one or the other and it’s easy to confuse them. Right now, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity may be important, but it can wait (until a further promised Reflection drops in my inbox): other matters are urgent, as well as important.

The death of one black man, George Floyd, at the hands of white police officers in Minneapolis, USA, has precipitated widespread condemnation, outrage and protest in many US cities and across the world: most reactions have been angry and many violent, but some demonstrations have been conducted in dignified silence. While President Donald Trump urges state governors to ‘dominate’, his rival Joe Biden, the 2020 Democratic Presidential candidate, has called for the American nation ‘to deal with systemic racism’: and to think that this is 57 years after Martin Luther King’s inspirational ‘I have a dream’ speech, just five years before he was assassinated.



Public Health England has just reported on the uneven incidence of coronavirus-related deaths on specific groups of people in the UK, related to age, gender, health conditions such as obesity and diabetes, occupation, and, significantly, ethnic background (especially ‘BAME’, black, Asian and minority ethnic). The scientists underline that this is a complex topic in which the variables are themselves connected (e.g. older people suffer more from diabetes), that the facts and presence of these conditions pre-date the coronavirus, but the virus has exposed the greater vulnerability of BAME communities in our society. It will require careful analysis and sensitive discussion as they seek assurance and convincing evidence that they are not marginalised.

While the coronavirus may not discriminate who it attacks, its impact not only differs widely in terms of health but also on patterns of daily life. We may be in this together (so the phrase goes) but we are not in it equally. Loss of household income has mainly fallen on those employed in the private sector, not least the self-employed (despite the UK government’s short-term financial support); some are already declared redundant and others

will surely follow as businesses struggle to survive; at the same time, the incomes of public sector employees and retirement pensions have been sustained. Some people feel a sense of injustice.

In their contrasting ways, these topical events (and many others we can bring to mind – think of Hong Kong) highlight divisions and issues of injustice in societies across the globe, whether perceived or real, and some deeply rooted. The next reflection and photo come from Queensland, Australia.

John Bell, June 2020

Justice and Righteousness

If I'm honest, I'd have to say I've lost track of how many weeks we've been living with restrictions. I could probably go back and count it, but it hasn't seemed like a big deal to me. We're in exceptional circumstances and it requires exceptional measures. So, it hasn't been hard to stay home. However, if I continue to be honest, I have to admit that for me these restrictions are incredibly easy and I haven't felt threatened by Covid-19 at all. There are many others who are not so fortunate. There have been people who have been locked in hotel rooms alone for weeks and people isolated in detention. Nurses have been spat on and Asian-Australians have been targets of racism. People are out of work and families have gone hungry. There have been fights over rent and mortgages, and of course, even toilet paper.

All this has manifested into a singular value with conflicting ideas. What is right or just in a world in a pandemic? If you're a landlord and a bank is forcing you to pay a mortgage, it's right that your tenant pays you. But if you're a tenant who has lost work, you'd feel entitled to a break. It's easy to support forcing people into isolated hotel rooms for the "greater good". But when it's you who is forced into extreme conditions you begin to understand the weight and pain of isolation.



The issue being that we tend to define what is right and what is just as, what is right and just **for us**. We have a tendency to want to think about ourselves first. It's so easy to shift our understanding of what is "right" that we may not even realise that we are shifting our values. Or applying different values and standards on different people at different times. Especially on ourselves.

The bible has a different vision of justice and righteousness. Instead of putting ourselves at the centre of how we live, it shockingly calls us to put others first. It challenges us to recognise how Jesus extends to us a mercy we ourselves do not deserve, and to share that same love and mercy outwards towards the stranger.

So, what is right or just in a world in a pandemic? The bible would challenge us to remember to see that each person is created by God, loved by God, and valued by God. So, we are called to see each person as God's precious child the same as we are. Justice and righteousness mean not shifting our values to benefit ourselves, but to think of others first.

Rev'd Matt O'Donoghue, minister at Caloundra Uniting Church, near Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, May 2020

Photo Judy Morrison, Caloundra promenade and the Pacific Ocean beyond, social distancing being observed, May 2020

Prayers for justice

Lead our leaders, God of wisdom,
guide them past the lure of power or self-importance,
keep their eyes focussed on the wellbeing of all people,
give them courage to tell the truth,
empathy to listen and enduring compassion for the voiceless.
When the paths of our opinions diverge,
the way seems treacherous or our criticisms destructive
then, for heaven's sake, call us to account, to apology and to compassion
so that together we can be people of hope, truth, kindness and justice.

God of bounty and brilliance,
when public life is tarnished,
when we fail to discern the common good
and when some shine at the expense of others,
whatever our political allegiance and persuasion
conform us to your will and your way.

Revd Dr Barbara Glasson, April 2020, both prayers

Photo of the UK House of Commons chamber



For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord;
For a just an equal sharing of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action help us rise and pledge our word.

All that kills abundant living, let it from the earth be banned;
Pride of status, race or schooling, dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice may we hallow life's brief span.

Fred Kaan, StF 696, R&S 620, verses 1 and 3. Dutch-born Fred Kaan (1929-2009) became a URC minister in Britain, serving for a time as Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Geneva in the 1970s. This hymn was written for a service at the Pilgrim Church, Plymouth, Devon, to mark Human Rights Day in December 1965.

And finally....

Focussed yet again by the death of George Floyd is the most insidious issue: racial discrimination. Let Martin Luther King have the last word from his Washington speech of August 1963:

'I have a dream that, one day, my four little children will live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character; that, one day, this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed that all are created equal'.

Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at johnabell@supanet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Hymns are referenced from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymn book (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P, or even the 1933 Methodist Hymnbook – MHB) and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC's present hymnal.