

4th Before Lent

I tried out a new hairdresser recently, and I was pleasantly surprised! I haven't settled with the same one since I came to Woodbridge, so perhaps I will now; she shares her work time in between Woodbridge and 'Fram' and spoke quite candidly about the state of the world; when we got to that awkward conversation when I was asked 'what do you do'?, she was not all phased I am pleased to report! But never mind that, she did admit to saying she no longer watched the news on TV at all if she could help it... I guess it still filters through via social media, but I wasn't at all surprised to hear her say that 'the News is all so depressing', isn't it?

It is, I agree. But there are always glimmers of hope and in particular, people, who want us to think deeply about the kinds of ways we discriminate against others, be it race, sexuality, disability, or justice. I commend to you the 'Churches Together in Britain and Ireland' website for today's 'Racial Justice Sunday' – which was first observed in 1995. The catalyst for this was the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager in south London, on 22nd April, 1993. So, of course, opportunities like today are there for every denomination to not only reflect on the importance of racial justice but also to give thanks for the gifts and beauty of human diversity and to commit to end racism and acts of discrimination and violence. In that sense it is everyone's business, everyone's 'news' to interpret and act upon.

Whilst we should indeed pray hard about all these things, not least for everyone taking part in General Synod next week, the Gospel calls out each of us to proclaim justice and mercy as we seek to walk with our God (Micah 6:8). Whenever and wherever we treat another as “lesser, or other, our theology fails to celebrate the dramatic nature of our transformation as people who find their primary identity in Christ. In Christ, our differences are not simply erased but rather embraced, valuing the unique ways we each reflect the image of God.

Only recently, a lovely person at our Friday ‘soup and sarnies’ in St Mary’s House, told me quite naturally and voluntarily about her son who had recently transgendered. She mentioned all the agonies, not least the call for her new ‘daughter’ to: “dress neutrally if you want to stay working here!” And that place of work - is right opposite my hairdresser! I learnt much in that short conversation, not least, the real understanding, grace and acceptance by that mother for whom life had changed quite dramatically but without any sense of complaint or criticism. She received her personal news with true love.

So the glimmers of hope can be found in and through people we meet and welcome in church, at work, or just down the road! I also think we do well to remind ourselves of the Church of England’s **own** ‘Pastoral Principles for Living Well Together’ – something our own PCC have been reflecting upon as part of the ‘Church’s ‘Living in Love and Faith project.’ As well as being designed for church communities to examine their life together, these principles “apply to all sorts

of difference and diversity among God's people." There are seven of them and forgive me if I list them:

1. Acknowledge prejudice
2. Speak into silence
3. Address ignorance
4. Name fear
5. Admit vulnerability
6. Pay attention to power
7. Commit to action.

I am not suggesting for a moment that any of us have cracked all these different demands or emotions; but these principles can help us to recognise the sources of our discrimination, confront them, lament, pray, and seek transformation of heart and of communities divided. As Archbishop Tutu reflected, "As much as the world has an instinct for evil and is a breeding ground for genocide, holocaust, slavery, racism, war, oppression, and injustice, the world has an even greater instinct for goodness, rebirth, mercy, beauty, truth, freedom and love." As we move in our worship from lament to action, from repentance to healing, may we be agents of God's goodness and love, in our broken and hurting world.

Thinking of one our own local heroes who acted so courageously in different times, John Clarkson, I am going to light a candle now, silently in his honour, and then I shall say a concluding prayer on behalf of all of us...

"Gracious God, we give you thanks for all who have built up this country in every generation, their dedication, their witness and their faith in you.

We give you thanks for those who have inspired us and challenged our way of life. Grant us the power to be the people you want us to be and to do what you want us to do, in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.”