

Matthew 8 v5 -13

Isaiah 56 v 3-8

Psalm 96 v1-10

Why Racism is a Sin

written by Sarah Ashton

May my feet walk in your way Lord, may my hands do your work Lord, may my mind think of you Lord, may my heart be filled with your love Lord and may my mouth speak your words Lord. Amen

This morning's sermon is the fifth in the series: 'Tough Questions for Today's Church' and is titled 'Why Racism is a Sin'. Firstly, I think I need to give a definition of racism. It is a topic that is regularly in the news in a variety of ways. Whether we are talking about Black Lives Matter, White Privilege, offensive name calling or Institutional Racism we are talking about a situation where one person/group is biased against another because of the colour of their skin. Only this week Sadiq Khan, The Mayor of London, has revealed that he has 24 hour protection 7 days a week from a team of 15 officers because of the threats he receives due to his race and faith. Originally, the word 'race' functioned in English like the word 'ethnicity'. Race is first recorded in English in the late 15th Century as coming from the French, race, which came from the Italian razza, meaning 'kind, breed or lineage'. The meaning started to change in the 1700s as European colonialism and imperialism spread and white Europeans started to group humans by place of origin as well as skin colour. In the late 18th and 19th centuries some anthropologists, physiologists and others, wrongly claimed that the characteristics of a person's race innately determined and justified their social superiority or inferiority to others.

A study by the European Social Survey* in 2019 asked a representative sample of British people in an online survey to consider two statements on 'biological racism' (that is the belief that there are innate differences between racial or ethnic groups and that some groups are inherently superior to others).

The first statement was 'some races or ethnic groups are born less intelligent than others'. 19% of the British public agreed with this. That means 1 in 5 people believes that some races are superior to others.

The next was 'some races or ethnic groups are born harder working than others'. 38% of the public agreed with this statement. That is over a third of the British public holding some form of racist belief.

Using Bible references I am going to attempt to explain the Christian principles which make racism a sin.

My starting point is a verse in Acts 17v 26. Paul is speaking to a group of Greeks in Athens who have an altar to an unknown god and he is explaining to them who God is and he says 'from one man He made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth.' Paul is saying that God is the Creator and He alone made all the different nations. This can be our starting point for saying that racism is a sin as everyone is made by God, and God's creation is good.

Exodus 22 v21 is one of the many laws Moses had to impart to the people of Israel after they had been rescued from Egypt and were struggling to stay faithful to God: 'Do not ill-treat an alien or oppress him as you were aliens in Egypt.' This is one of a long list of defenceless people that God is particularly concerned about and Moses' proclamation here is reflected throughout the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms which then become the core of Jesus teaching.

Our Gospel story this morning is one that is well known. Jesus has entered Capernaum, a town on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee and he is approached by a Centurion asking for help for his paralysed servant who is suffering at his home. The Centurion was a Roman military officer, in command of 100 men. He was not a Jew, but he was clearly a man of compassion who was keenly aware that under Rabbinical Law, Jesus would defile himself if he entered his house. As a man who is used to commanding people, he shows humility and Jesus comments on the strength of the Centurion's faith. In v11 Jesus says 'I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith' and the verse goes on to say 'many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven'. Jesus is

saying that faith in God is not just for the Jews but for all people. V12 says that those who believe they have an entitlement to be with God, but do not show faith in their lives will be thrown outside the kingdom. For me there are two very clear teaching points in this account. Firstly, that God's Kingdom is for all people, whatever their race and secondly that to inherit the Kingdom we must live lives that reflect God's teaching.

In 1 John 4 there is an explanation of God's love and v7 says 'Let us love one another for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.' It doesn't say love those you know, or who are like you, or of the same race. It says love one another. The passage goes on to say that God showed His love for us by sending Jesus, that we might live through Him. John ch 3 v16 says 'God so loved the world that He sent His only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life'. Jesus was an atoning sacrifice for our sins, and since God has shown His love for us in such a selfless way, we should love one another. God loves everyone and so should we.

The Golden Rule of Christianity is summed up by Jesus in Matt 22 v37. The Pharisees were trying to trip Jesus up verbally and, as experts in the law, they question him as to which is the greatest commandment. His response is that you should love the Lord Your God with all your soul and all your mind and secondly you should love your neighbour as yourself. He then states that the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commands. The Law and the Prophets is the Old Testament. The first part about loving God is the Shema, recorded in Deuteronomy 6 v4 and is the central prayer of Judaism and covers the first 4 Commandments; the second part sums up the last 6 Commandments. As a Christian your neighbour is not just the person you sit next to or live next to, it is a much wider brief that encompasses the whole of God's creation. All people are part of God's creation and therefore as Christians we should not be racist. The Jewish leaders in Jesus time believed that God was for the Jewish people only and Jesus was challenging their view.

There are many Old Testament passages that support the theme that racism is wrong. In his sermon on Solomon and the Temple, in August, John Castle drew attention to 1 Kings 8 v41 where King Solomon in his dedication of the Temple prays for the foreigner, who does not belong to God's people Israel, but has come from a distant land, because of knowing God's name;

He asks that God will grant their prayers so that all peoples of the earth may know and fear God, just as the Israelites do. Solomon has the wisdom to see that God's love is bigger than just for the Israelites.

Isaiah 56, which was read earlier, is another such passage. Here Isaiah is encouraging those who believe that they are not right for God's Kingdom. I am sure that God has not given them that impression, it has come from the people around them. The passage addresses a range of reasons that people might feel rejected from God's presence but Isaiah says that God will not reject them. The foreigner, one who is not born Jewish in this instance, but was living amongst the Israelites, was excluded from worship by the Jews, even though they had come to believe in God. Isaiah says clearly that the foreigner who has faith, follows God's teaching and respects the Sabbath, will be brought, by God, to his holy mountain and the offerings that they make will be as acceptable as those made by Jews. Just because someone is born into a different group it doesn't mean that God is not prepared to accept them and likewise we need to have the same premise.

The other case in this passage is that of the eunuch who feels excluded as he cannot have children, which were a sign of God's blessing, neither could he be a Levitical priest or part of the congregation. He questions how he can 'belong' and Isaiah explains that their name will live on within God's temple if they are devout followers. God does not discriminate against those who are different. Our passage ends in v8 with the words 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'. God welcomes all who come to him and we as His followers should reach out to all people, regardless of their race and show them God's love in action.

Our Psalm this morning is one of praise telling us to proclaim God's glory amongst the nations and his marvellous deeds amongst all peoples. The message of God is not for an exclusive group; it is for all nations. All nations are called on to worship God in the splendour of his holiness, to bow down before Him and proclaim His glory. V10 tells that God will judge the peoples with equity and if that is God's way it should be our way. This is echoed when Paul talks of the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 v13. 'For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free, and we

were all given the one Spirit to drink.' If we are all part of one body then before God we are equal, if we do not treat our neighbours as ourselves then we are going against God, making racism a sin.

I have looked at a selection of Biblical texts, from both the Old and New Testaments, to show that racism is a sin for Christians and I would like to conclude with the passage that I first thought of when I saw the sermon title. It is Paul's letter to the Galatians ch3 v26- 28

'You are all the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

Amen

- Reference:

The European Social Survey (ESS) is an academically driven cross-national survey that has been conducted across Europe since its establishment in 2001. Every two years, face-to-face interviews are conducted with newly selected, cross-sectional samples. The survey measures the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of diverse populations in more than thirty nations. See www.europeansocialsurvey.org

Statistics from the ESS used in this sermon as quoted by Anthony Heath (Director of the Centre for Social Investigation, Nuffield College, University of Oxford) and Lindsay Richards (Lecturer in Sociology, University of Oxford) in "How racist is Britain today? What the evidence tells us" published in "The Conversation" July 1, 2020. See <https://theconversation.com/how-racist-is-britain-today-what-the-evidence-tells-us-141657>

