

I'm not sure I explained last week the series this month I've decided to call it "Headline issues" because there have been certain things that have happened over the last few months and that are still with us today that are issues in the headlines. Last week I discussed the question "Is this the end?" because we've heard some things, particularly sometimes religious people (either Christians or people of other faiths) saying "Is this God bringing judgement upon us?", and I want to address that and look at it, and I reminded you all that actually things like this have happened, and far worse have happened, in years and decades and centuries gone by. And the Bible tells us not to listen to wars and rumours of wars but rather to trust him, and to know that God is the only one who knows the end from the beginning.

This week I want to look at another headline issue. The issue I want to look at this morning is the issue of racism. Many of you will know that this campaign "Black lives Matter" has been a one that has become part of our national and global conversation, around this issue. And we're going to look at that phrase, and we're going to unpack it a little bit later. But firstly what I'd like to do is to think about how we see issues of race and racism being expressed in the Bible; we're going to look at that for a moment.

We're looking at the issue of **Identity and Nationalism**. The reality is that all nations are prone to what we can call xenophobia. Now xenophobia is fear of anyone that is not like us. And you know it's one of the joys that I've had in my ministry: I've always been in multicultural churches, and for me any church worth its salt has to be multicultural, if for no other reason than we may as well get used to multicultural church now because it's what we're promised when we get to heaven. There's those lovely words in Revelation [7:9] that say, "And all the peoples, people of every nation and language and culture will come together worshipping God." And so for me, church is a little foretaste of what we have to look forward to when we reach that place where we're with God in heaven. Church is a foretaste of what is to come.

But the reality is that all nations are prone to xenophobia; all nations particularly as they try and define themselves and give identity and definition to themselves, the danger is, so often, that it is done by saying "not who we are", but rather saying "who we are not like." And nations so often fall into that mistake. I'm not saying "these are the values who make us who we are", but rather say "we define ourselves by not being like those other people;" and that's xenophobia, that's planting fear of anyone that's not like us. And you know the Jewish exiles, they did a similar thing: after they had returned from Babylon back to Israel, they needed to reassert a national identity; and they did just what I was talking about a moment or two ago - they used the fact of their difference from everyone else to defined who they were: "We're not like all those others - that's how we define who we are!" There are three verses from Nehemiah that I want to read to you.

[Reading: Nehemiah 13:1-3]

Now, you know what? If you look hard enough you can always find a passage of scripture that will justify a position that I would suggest is not always Godly. The Children of Israel in the Old Testament often did things that offended God, and to take those verses and say they justify us doing X, Y or Z now, that's a misuse of the Bible - we have to understand the Bible in context and not simply be plucking verses and dropping them into the 21st Century without reflecting on those verses.

Those verses from Nehemiah said they excluded all foreigners from the Israelite community. Now the word for “foreigners” in that passage in Hebrew is the word “עֲרָב” (`ereb) just 4 letters עֲרָב (`ereb). The interesting thing is the same word for foreigner, עֲרָב (`ereb) was also used to describe the large group of non-Israelites who left Egypt with them, in Exodus chapter 12 (we're not going to read the verses but in Exodus 12:38 it says that a large group of foreigners, עֲרָב (`ereb), also travelled with the Children of Israel out of Egypt, and those foreigners then became integrated into the Israelite nation. Isn't it interesting, the national story of Israel was the twelve tribes who were united and were pure in their ethnicity and in who they were. But the reality was much more complex. The ancestors of the Children of Israel, the Israelite nation, were from many other nations and people groups. Their national story said one thing, the reality was different.

So we have this age old problem, and when we come to the New Testament we find this problem happens in another way, a different way: when the Roman army occupied Palestine, which was the name for the area covering Israel, at the time of Jesus, the Romans brought very high taxes, they brought pagan worship with them, they brought daily oppression and brutality with them; and the Jewish people felt the weight of all these awful things that the Romans were bringing to them. And the Jewish leaders wanted to respond to this threat to the Jewish identity.

They wanted to respond to this threat that the Roman Empire was bringing and threatening the Jewish culture and identity, and the Jewish leaders did just what we discovered happened in the Old Testament – they went to this familiar message: all non-Jews (that is all Gentiles) are hated by God. That's what you found the Jewish leaders of that time saying – now please don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying Jewish leaders of today are that way, I'm saying that back then the Jewish leaders defined being Jewish by saying we're not like all those others because we are loved by God and they're not. That was 2,000 years ago when they said that.

Now Jesus challenged these prejudices and he recognised that these attitudes were creating hatred and were putting down people of other nations and other cultures, and Jesus challenged those views. Let's look for a moment or two at the issue of Jesus and race. In Luke 4:25-30 we read Jesus said this (now he said this in the village of Nazareth – Jesus grew up in Nazareth), and he said these words to the people gathered in the synagogue in his home town:

[Reading Luke 4:25-30]

Now I think you can be unpopular when you preach sometimes, I can say thankfully I've never had that kind of reaction to preaching, I've never been taken to the brow of a hill with somebody saying “We're going to chuck you over because we didn't like what you said,” but that's what happened to Jesus – they were so angry because what Jesus was saying there was “We Jews, (because he was a Jew) we Jews think that God only blesses us,” but Jesus was saying yet in that time it was a non-Jewish widow and a non-Jewish man who were blessed by God when Jewish people weren't blessed in that way, and he was saying that it was as though these Jewish people didn't have the same level of faith as Jewish people back then and the people of his town, Nazareth. His interpretation of scripture there was so scandalous that the folk from his town, people who would have known him as he'd grown up, were so angry with what he said they grabbed hold of him and they took him to the brow of the hill ready to throw him over.

They had an exclusive view of God's covenant, God' promise, as though God would only bless the Jewish people; and Jesus was saying “That is not true!” You can take the Bible and you can misuse it, and you can find verses that will justify something that isn't true. We have to take the Bible and use it carefully, and allow God's spirit to lead us as we interpret it. And to interpret in ways that

are not undermining the spirit of what God's word is about.

Let's look at a couple of other passages.

The Samaritan woman: John 4:7-9, but I've missed some of it out. 'So a Samaritan woman came at midday to draw some water and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink of water." She answered, "You are a Jew and I'm a Samaritan so how can you ask me for a drink?"' And there are some words that are in brackets '(For Jews will not use the same cups and bowls as Samaritans.)' There's a French phrase "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose", and what it means is "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Jews and Samaritans 2,000 years ago – what did they do? They wouldn't use the same cups and bowls as each other. And isn't that so similar to racism today when you hear people saying things like "I'm not going to touch the same stuff that you use because you're dirty, or because you don't wash properly, or because I don't like your culture, or you're not one of us."

Isn't it interesting: human nature hasn't changed through millennia; people still like to "other", say "people are different, they're not the same as us, they're not as good as us – we are the clean ones, we're the pure ones."

Another passage from John 4:21,23. This is the same story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. Jesus said, "Believe me, the time will come when people will not worship the father on this mountain..." (Jesus was talking to her on a mountain called Gerazim where the Samaritans believed that God had revealed himself to them) "...or in Jerusalem..." (where the Jews believe is the Holy Mountain) "...The time is already here," said Jesus, "when by God's Spirit people will worship the father as he really is, offering him the true worship that he wants." You see, Jesus here is looking beyond the prejudices of "I'm a Jew", "I'm a Samaritan", "I'm white", "I'm black", "I'm of another culture to you", "I'm better than you" – Jesus is looking beyond all of that, beyond the prejudices and hatred between these cultures and between the cultures of our day. Jesus is looking beyond that – he is looking to a future greater community united around humble, sincere worship of God rather than having the right ancestry, or being the right colour, or having the right background.

There's another passage that I want to look at for a moment or two from Luke chapter 9, and this is a little passage that we don't often refer to, just a few verses (four, five verses) and it's where Jesus has been out preaching in Galilee, and in order to get from Galilee down to Jerusalem he is going to travel through Samaria which is the place of the Samaritans. And so Jesus here in these verses sent messengers on ahead who went into a Samaritan village to get things read for him, but the people there did not welcome him because he was going to Jerusalem. The next verses say, "When James and John saw this..." (when they saw that the Samaritans didn't welcome Jesus) "...they asked Jesus, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' But Jesus turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village." Why is that important? Well it's important because there were many villages and towns that rejected the message of Jesus, but this one was a Samaritan village and these Jewish men who were Jesus' followers wanted to call down fire from heaven on these Samaritans because in their minds these Samaritans deserved it: "Lord we've always known these Samaritans would reject you, should we call down fire from heaven because we know it's what they deserve?" And that's why Jesus turned to them and he rebuked them – because they were letting their prejudices and their hatred define how they responded to these people, these Samaritan people.

Diversity in the church; just for the last few minutes – Diversity in the Church. The early church

definitely included black members and members from different communities but we only hear about them incidentally. The very first Gentile convert, the very first non-Jewish convert to the Christian faith was an Ethiopian Official (we often call him the Ethiopian Eunuch); and he was a high ranking official from the court of Ethiopia. We think he was travelling back home after the feast of Pentecost. He was what we call a "God-fearer", so although he wasn't Jewish by background he saw in the Jewish faith something about God and wanted to worship in the Jewish way. He was reading the message travelling back home from this Jewish festival. And he was reading the prophet Isaiah and God caused one of those divine coincidences to happen when he said to Philip "Go to that road because I've got someone I want you to speak to there!" And it was Philip who met the Ethiopian Eunuch and explained what the prophet Isaiah was saying in his book, and immediately the Ethiopian Eunuch said, "Why should I now be baptised now?" And that's exactly what they did: he was baptised immediately. And it's interesting the oldest church in the whole of Africa is in Ethiopia, because it's thought that the Ethiopian Eunuch took his faith back to his own country and so you have an immensely ancient church in Ethiopia that has been there almost since the very beginning after Jesus' death.

So Diversity in the Church – just a couple of others. We've got two people who were called "Cyrene". We've got "Lucius from Cyrene" and "Simeon, the Niger", or "Simeon the Black", and it's though that "Simeon the Black" was called that to define him – there were lots of other Simeons or Simons at the time. And that's why we think he was called "Simeon the Black"; and now Lucius was from Cyrene (Cyrene was a north African port), so it's very likely that he was also of African descent. These two people were leaders in the church in Antioch, and we had various people who were leaders in the church in Antioch; some of the other leaders were part of the royal household. And we have various people including Paul who were all leaders in the church in Antioch. But we have these two men who we think were of African heritage. And also Simon of Cyrene – he was the man who when Jesus fell carrying the cross was frog marched out by the Roman soldiers and forced to carry Jesus' cross to the place of Golgotha where he was crucified. So both of these men were from Cyrene, but the interesting thing is we're never told whether they were of African heritage or not because, actually, no-one bothered to mention their colour: it didn't matter. In the early church what people's ethnicity was doesn't seem to have mattered – it just doesn't seem to have mattered to the early church. Interestingly that changed over the following centuries – race and ethnicity became more and more of an issue in the church as it grew, and, to be honest, as it became more like the world and society in which it found itself.

Just to finish off I want to look at Areas of Struggle for Justice. That first circle there has the word "Personal" written in it. How can we respond to the issue of race and ethnicity in our country today? Well, we can read books that challenge us. Various members of my house have been reading various books: "Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race" (written by Reni Eddo-Lodge), another called "Brit(ish)" (which I think is written by Afua Hirsch [it is]). There're various books out there I've found very challenging and are making me think about how do I reflect on these issue of racism and on issues around black lives mattering. How can we reflect on that? And we need to think and be challenged in what we think, in our ideas. We can watch challenging TV programmes; we've loved some of the programmes by a guy called David Olusoga – he's done a series called "Black and British: A Forgotten History", and he's done some parts of a series called "Civilisations" looking at different different civilisations and how they developed in our world recognising that human culture first developed in Africa – we were all Africans once if you go back far enough.

The next circle; we've looked at Personal, we're going to look at "Church" for a second or two. We

need to get to know each other's stories and lives. Now is probably not the time to say this because we're all socially distanced, so we're not allowed to go to each other's homes, we're not allowed to have dinner together (well we probably can if we sit so far apart from each other that we can hardly hear each other) – so now's probably not the time to do it, but when we finally come through this and we're able to spend time with each other, it's so important that we get to know each other, we hear each other's stories and we get beyond saying “Hi” to each other on a Sunday morning; that's important to say “Hi” to each other on a Sunday morning, but being church has to mean more than what we say to each other once a week. We need to get to know each other and understand our histories, understand our lives. It's been a great privilege for Sandra and I: we'd just started getting people to come to our home (one or two of you have been to have lunch with us on a Sunday) – sadly we've had to stop that because of Covid but it's something I'm really looking forward to getting back to doing in the months and years that lie ahead. Also we need to ask questions about our church. How diverse are we as a membership and as a congregation, and then is that reflected in our leadership, is it reflected in those who do up front things in our church; is that reflected in the decision making bodies in our church. All those things are important for us to reflect on because we want to make sure that we ourselves are not simply reproducing inequality within the way that we function as a church.

And then there are two more circles: there's the “National”, and there's the “Global”. I'm going to very quickly shoot through these. So we need to be aware of issues in our world and in our country, we need to be aware that there's institutional bias in our world and our country, we need to be aware there are structural inequalities in our country and in our world – and we need to reflect on that. We're not being disloyal to Britain in saying that Britain is not innocent around issues of racism and structural inequality, we're actually saying that we care about this country and we want to see it more reflect the values that we say we hold. That's important, that's about what it means to really value the country we live in. And then finally we need to lobby for change. We get the chance to do that in election campaigns, but there are also other times when we get the chance to say “I want to see change in this way, and I'm prepared to stand up and go out there, and demonstrate, and ask and demand change”, and that is important.

I want to finish with this picture here because we've so many times seen these pictures about black lives matter, and this woman is holding up a really interesting banner, and she says (it's really her reflection on the fact that some people have been holding up banners or even wearing T-shirts saying “All Lives Matter”; and she's just saying “Yes, all lives do matter but 'Black Lives Matter ' is focused on the black ones because it's very apparent” she says “our judicial system does not know that black lives matter” and she's saying that's why the Black Lives Matter campaign is so important because actually there are parts of our society, and the way our society works, that don't recognise that black lives are as important and as valuable as anybody else's lives. So I leave that with you. This is a massively important issue for us to reflect on.