

ERC, Amsterdam

1st Reading Isaiah 56 v1-8

16 August 2020

Sermon Part 1 *(slightly contracted and altered in delivery)*

THE FLAGS

The first time I came into this church was in January 1976. It had just been re-opened after massive restoration.

One of the things which surprise me were all the flags on the walls. I had never seen so many in a protestant church.

We might just look at them *CAMERA TO NORTH WALL WEST TO EAST AND AROUND CHANCEL.*

Several looked like they came from one nation, one looked very ancient, and there was a lot of red white and blue.

TO CAMERA

I didn't particularly like this. I knew there were people in the congregation from Ireland and Ghana and the Philippines. But I couldn't see their flags.

LEARNING ABOUT WW2

I never said anything to anyone and I'm glad I didn't. It was only after a while that I began to understand. I was born five years after the end of World War 2. I never knew anything about that war except that it involved Britain and Germany... oh and perhaps France. We never studied WW2 at school, so I had no idea about what happened to the Netherlands or Poland or Russia for that matter. And I had never lived in an occupied country

...AND THE NETHERLANDS

Over the past 40 years that I've been coming to this church, I've learned more about the Netherlands, and especially what it was like to live in a city and a country which were under occupation. I met people who spoke about the hunger they suffered, the risks which they took; the cruelty which they saw -especially regarding the Jewish community and the relief they felt when in 1945 Holland was liberated.

And these flags represent those who fought for the liberation of the Netherlands - the Dutch themselves, the British who became close allies, the Americans who came in towards the end of the war, and the Canadians too.

And I do not want for a moment to diminish the importance of that great act of liberation which these flags hang to remember.

IMPERIAL BANNERS

But my interest in history, which started here, has led me to find out a bit more about the three nations who, in different formation have flags which are red, white and blue.

Each of these nations have had, and still have, associations of being empires - in control of or influencing the lives of billions of people all over the world.

BRITAIN

My own country Britain, was able to paint over a quarter of the map pink. Our first colony was Ireland, but then we had colonies in North America, South America, all over Africa and Asia, countries with huge populations like India, and huge land masses like Australia.

NETHERLANDS

The Dutch too had colonies in South America, in Africa – Ghana and especially South Africa, and in Asia the archipelago of islands known as Indonesia.

USA

The USA is a younger country, but the Philippines was once its colony ; it controls Puerto Rico and some Caribbean islands. And Hawaii was an independent nation, until the USA took it over. The USA also became the home to millions of Africans transported across the Atlantic.

ALL IN THE PAST?

This colonial history has come back to haunt us this year, especially with the Black Lives Matter protests. And Christian people might want to say this is inconvenient, or it doesn't matter, or it's all to do with politics, it's not God's business.

GOD AS SCULPTOR, CHISELLING

...except that in the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures, God is working like a sculptor who is confronted with a block of stone or a block of wood, and gradually he chisels away bits of stone which are unnecessary until he reveals what he wants people to admire and learn from.

The people who do the chiselling for God are the prophets. They, despite sometimes great opposition begin to reveal that God is not the patron saint of the Jews, but the God of all people....and that includes those who are foreigners, and it also includes people who are considered odd.. like eunuchs. Those who keep God's laws are included in God's family irrespective of their nationality or pedigree.

MISUSE OF THE BIBLE

All the imperial nations had the same Bible, but in the imperial the Bible was used very selectively. Passages such as we heard were avoided in favour of those which

served the national interest.

USA *ref to Stars & Stripes*

The black theologian Howard Thurman wrote of how his grandmother who was a slave witnessed how when pastors preached to slaves, their text was often based on words from Ephesians 6 'Slaves obey your masters.' His grandmother said, 'If I ever get free and get my own bible that is one passage I will never read again.'

SOUTH AFRICA *ref to Dutch tricolour*

In South Africa, theologians in the Dutch church, claimed that black people were descended from Noah's disobedient son, Ham who (for reasons not in the Bible) they presumed to be black. And they reckoned that because God scattered those who were building the Tower of Babel, that meant that people of different colour shouldn't mix. Apartheid began in theology and ended in politics.

GREAT BRITAIN.

In Scotland, Christians owned a third of the slave plantations in Jamaica. The Church of England had chaplains who worked in the slave ports in Ghana not to liberate slaves, but to pray for their safe passage across the Atlantic.

ref to Union Jack

And as a boy of 5 in the Sunday School sang songs that would never be sung now.

Do you see this penny? It is brought by me
for the little children far across the sea.

Hurry penny, quickly, though you are so small,
help to tell the heathen THE HEATHEN Jesus loves them all.

And the heathen had a colour...because as we sang this song, we would go out to a table in the middle of which was the metal head of a black man. He had red lips and white teeth, and hand under his face. He was called Sambo. And we would put our missionary penny on black Sambo's hand and the twist his ear, and he would swallow the penny. What did that teach us about people who were not white/...and this was happening right into the 1960's???

TODAY? BLM & BEZOS

Now, someone might want to say... but this is all in the past. Yes, but the victims of empire still are many, as exhibited in the Black Lives Matter protests, but also in the new multi-national empires. Just two weeks ago it was reported that Jeff Bezos, the multi-billionaire owner of Amazon want to set up business in India. India is a nation with many small businesses; its economy is driven by them and thousands of businesses and hundreds of thousands of employees will be affected if Amazon comes to town.

Q SOBRINO

God, as the Salvadorean theologian Jon Sobrino has written, 'is not a god of the empire.' He is a God of the commonwealth, who gave the earth and all its potential

to humanity not to powerful rulers or rich men.

In past weeks I have been looking at a story which most children know. But today I want to look at a story which I wish all children in the present day might learn about.

We will hear it soon.

MUSIC IN WORSHIP

2nd Reading Act 8:26-40

Sermon Part 2

TAMPA

Last year I was in a Bible Study group in Tampa Florida, and we were considering this passage. At one point someone asked,

'Is this the first time a black person is mentioned
in the New Testament.

A lady replied,

'Just because he comes from Ethiopia
doesn't mean to say that he was black.'

Immediately an African American man sitting next to me said,

'Lady, you are talking about my colour.'

For a moment I thought there might be blood on the floor, but actually the woman and the man knew each other. I still couldn't understand that anyone could imagine in themselves first century a court official in Ethiopia being anything other than black.

Eunuch – Scottish?

But in Glasgow I'm sure that some people might think that the Ethiopian eunuch is Scottish because no one else can pronounce the word eunuch properly apart from the Scots...oh and the Dutch

EUNUCHS AND ISAIAH

But this story particularly fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah....that those who were not descended from Abraham, those who were not pedigreed Jews, but who kept God's law should be part of God's community.

And Isaiah – as we heard - becomes more radical because he says,

'To the eunuchs who choose the things that please me...
I will give a name that shall not be cut off.'

These are very precise words, for while some eunuchs were men whose bodies and sexual organs never grew normally, other eunuchs were young males who were victims of genital mutilation, castrated sometimes to keep their high pitched voice.

And the law of Moses made it very clear that any man who did not have functioning sexual apparatus had no place in the house of God. He could not have a family therefore he could not fulfil God's command to multiply.

ISAIAH CHISELLING

That's the law..... but Isaiah has chiselled through the cold legal text to reveal God's true intention...that foreigners, outsiders, and those who were marginalised because of their irregular gender status were part of the family if they strove to do what was pleasing to God.

PHILIP

But the Eunuch is not the only person involved in the story. It involves Philip. We don't know much about him. I always envisage him as a kind of dreamy student who can't believe that he Jesus is interested in him. **One of the things that Jesus promises is that if he sticks around he'll see great things.**

So now, years later, he finds himself in the Gaza desert. Something has compelled him to go there. And he sees a black man in a carriage, a person of sophistication, the Chancellor of Ethiopia
...someone who can read..
....someone who is reading out loud words from the Bible.
Something compels Philip to go and join this person, maybe a little unsure as to whether it is a man or a woman, going by his voice.

He ends up sitting beside the eunuch in his carriage, helping to understand Isaiah chapter 53, the section which points to God's suffering servant, whom Philip tells the eunuch was Jesus. He's just a pages away from Chapter 56 which says that even the eunuch who does what God commands will be part of God's family.

BAPTISM..WITHOUT THE BOOKS?

So the eunuch asks for baptism.

And this must have been a dilemma for Philip. No one is around, no Peter no John no Silas to give him a second opinion. There are no books of church law.

Here is a person who looks like a man but who sounds like a woman,
Here is a person who is darker in skin colour than Philip
Here is a person who admitted that he couldn't understand the Bible.

Should he baptise?

Well, he does....

He does that which no one else – as far as we know – has done.

He has baptised someone not of his colour,

He has baptised someone who was not a full Jew

and who would probably have been suspected of not being a full person

He has baptised someone who from this time on knows himself to be a child of God, wanted and valued and welcomed. This black life matters

Heaven has opened at this moment and the greatness, the inclusiveness, the wonder of God's love has been shown.

A NEED FOR HOSPITALITY TOWARDS PEOPLE OF COLOUR

This is a season in the life of the world where the hospitality of God especially to those who are the outsiders needs to be evident in the followers of Jesus.

Stephen Lawrence and police racism

Last week, in Britain a murder enquiry involving five white youths who killed a black boy was effectively closed. Two of the killers are imprisoned, the others walk free because no white witnesses have ever stepped forward to identify them, and also because the London metropolitan police force still exhibits racist behaviour.

Kamala Harris

Last week in the USA, Kamala Harris was named as Jo Bidden's nominee for Vice President. The first person of colour to be so nominated.

One wonders whether the insipid racism which stalked Barak Obama will also stalk her... the more so because she is also a woman.

Covid 19

Last week as the week before and the weeks to come it is clearly charted that in North American, European and Asian cities, the highest increases in the rate of Covid 19 are among black and other immigrant populations, and in every case it is because they are poorest and live in the most crowded and inhospitable environments.

Vaccine?

In weeks to come, whether Russia or any other nation should develop a successful vaccine against the corona virus, billions of doses will already have been bought up by the wealthy nations. What does that do for the poorest people in Africa..a continent in which themselves virus did not begin. What hope is there for people like a friend of mine in Zimbabwe where corruption among the ruling black elite has made life already unbearable even without covid?

RESPONSE

How do we who live relatively comfortably respond?

Wisdom from the bottom up

I am interested in how wisdom tends to percolate up from people at the bottom rather than drop down from those at the top. It is interesting how if you were to look at the greatest humanitarians of the 20th century, you would almost certainly have among the top five – Martin Luther King, Mohandes Ghandi, Desmond Tutu Nelson Mandella ...all the victims of colonialism in its different forms.

So I want to end with two words which have changed my life from people in the 'developing world.'

Helder Camera

The first was a book I read when I was 18, called *The Church and Colonialism* by the Archbishop of Recife in Brazil, Helder Camera who said,

When I say, 'blessed are the poor' they call me a saint
When I ask 'Why are the poor, poor?' They call me a communist.

What would you, what would I rather say? I sense that asking why the poor are poor is the more godly thing, if indeed God is a God of justice. Blessing the poor could be both a kind of escapism and rather patronising.

Mpho

And then a word from a woman called Mpho, who was in charge of a day hospital for people suffering from HIV Aids north of Praetoria in South Africa. I had visited the hospital at a time when they had morning prayers. Everyone was singing and dancing.

I said to her, 'When everyone was singing and dancing, I couldn't see who were nurses, who doctors, who patients.'

'No' she replied, 'you wouldn't.'

Because in this place we have discovered that for the healthy to be whole
for the healthy to be whole
they have to be touched by those who are sick.'

I wonder in the light of what she said,
whether also for the wealthy to be whole, they have to be touched by the poor
for the powerful to be whole, they have to be touched by the weak
and for the sunburned male Christians like Philip to be whole, they have to be touched
by those who are very different.'