**Pastoral Letter**

**“All lives will matter only when Black lives matter “**

Dear sisters and brothers,

Recent events of the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd have left me grief stricken; for all the tens of thousands of people who died in this country and across the globe, and the death of a stranger at the hands of those who should be protecting all of us.

The pandemic has also highlighted the inequalities that exist across our society. People of colour are far more likely to die from COVID 19 than their white counterparts. I will not elaborate here as the information is no secret. We also know the inequalities that exist in the NHS – this is all information we can find out for ourselves.

The death of Mr. Floyd has reawakened us to the pain that is felt by people of colour not just in America, but in this country and the world over – and hence the protests that followed. We have also heard how Mr. Floyd was “scum, high on drugs, with a checkered past.”

But this is not about the behavior of Mr. Floyd, it is about a system that does not treat all people equally and allows that mistreatment to be normalized across society.

If he had been caught committing a crime, had been charged, faced trial and sent to prison, we would not even be talking about it, because that is how things should have been. But that is not what happened, is it? And this is a narrative that is true for so many people of colour in America.

The death of Mr. Floyd was caused by systemic racism – not the racist individuals themselves. This is a system that allows for institutions and people to get away with racism and discriminatory practices, and allows cops to get away with mistreatment and brutality against people of colour. Systemic racism begins as far down as education, where young boys are unfairly treated and eventually end up excluded. Then according to police, they are subjected to ‘surveillance which then informs ‘intelligence based stop and search”. But if you watch someone long enough, you will obviously notice when they slip up, or even drop litter, or whatever! Then when you stop them often enough, they will eventually crack and complain and resist – then they are charged! This is how the education system and the Justice system fails and criminalises young black men; their lives are over before they even start.

We have also witnessed the outrage at the ‘violence’ perpetrated on an inanimate object that feels no pain, injustice nor oppression. Yet that very inanimate object in its existence and presence symbolizes the COLONISATION, SUBJUGATION, DEHUMANISATION AND OPPRESSION OF PEOPLE OF COLOUR. In its existence, it did great violence to the core of the spirit of people of colour. So, what was that outrage all about? This looks to me like incredible cognitive dissonance!

I hear, ‘this is not the right way of protesting, we have constitutional processes to deal with things like this.” This is another cop out. People of colour in Bristol and their allies including our own Black Theologian Professor Anthony Reddie have campaigned and petitioned for a long time for this statue to be removed. Needless to say those calls were ignored because the statue still stood until last Sunday.

Black lives do not matter if we are outraged by ‘violence’ towards an inanimate object and not systemic racism and real violence against members of our communities and humanity at large.

This is happening in Britain. This is happening in Birmingham, our city, and the West Midlands Police is under investigation by the IOPC for police brutality on black men, as we speak.

Sorry, but I had to provide some context to the questions facing all of us as fundamentally members of the human race, and specifically followers of Christ.

Do you have people of colour in the communities that you live in or specifically in your Church family?

Any idea how this has affected them?

How do we pastorally respond collectively as church to those affected, bearing in mind our call and responsibility is always towards the victim and not the perpetrator?

I hear all can’t wait to go back to “normal”; is the presence of racism in our society one of the aspects of ‘normal’ we can’t wait to get back to?

I know all that I have mentioned is going to cause a lot of discomfort for most of us. I know in some instances it has already filled us with rage and righteous anger.

But rather than pretend or deny our own discomfort, we are better off embracing it. Just remember, friends, discomfort named is discomfort confronted. Discomfort positively confronted without guilt or victim blaming has potential to be greatly transformative and can instigate change. This named and confronted discomfort also holds great potential to propel us into witness and solidarity.

I have been encouraged by Richard Rohr’s recent reflections on race and human relations.

Below is his offering for today. I hope you find it as helpful as I did.

Contemplation and Racism – by Richard Rohr

**Contemplating Anger** Tuesday,  June 9, 2020

*“I have learned to use my anger for good. . . . Without it, we would not be motivated to rise to a challenge. It is an energy that compels us to define what is just and unjust. “—*Gandhi

*Today my colleague and CAC faculty member Barbara Holmes shares reflections on a “theology of anger.” Her words are challenging for white Americans like myself, but an important stage of contemplative solidarity is the ability to set aside our own opinions to listen with an open heart to the pain of the marginalized. I hope we can hear Dr. Holmes’s wisdom and desire for healing from the wounds of racism.*

We all need a way to channel and reconcile our anger with our faith. A theology of anger [for communities under siege] assumes that anger as a response to injustice is spiritually healthy. My intent is to highlight three ways that anger can contribute to spiritual restoration.

First, a theology of anger invites us to wake up from the hypnotic influences of unrelenting oppression so that individuals and communities can shake off the shackles of denial, resignation, and nihilism. . . . Second, a theology of anger can help us to construct healthy boundaries. Finally, the healthy expression of righteous anger can translate communal despair into compassionate action and justice-seeking. . . . The question is whether or not we will recognize our wounds and the source of our anger so that we can heal ourselves and others, and awaken to our potential to embody the beloved community. . . .

Collective and productive anger redirects our attention to the everyday survival and healing of our own community. . . Sometimes the anger of black folks is resistance but, more often, it is grief. During a demonstration in Minneapolis, Minnesota, after the police shot an unarmed black man [in 2016], Pastor Danny Givens of Above Every Name Ministry, publicly and peacefully challenged the Governor of Minnesota. He shouted into a microphone:

Your people keep killing my people. You keep telling me that you are going to do something. I just want you to put some action on it, put some respect on our people’s names. . . . This isn’t black anger. This is black grief! [1]

Pastor Givens wanted the governor to understand that grief, anger, and black joy are hard to separate. At funerals of young people slain by the police, expressions of black joy are common. This is not “joy” in the ordinary sense of the word. . . . This is the communal performance of resistance and resilience through dancing and rhythmic movement. Funeral-car doors fly open, music is thumping, and the community dances its defiance of death and the society that produces it.

We are angry, we are grieving, we are performing black joy as a sign of our determination to survive.

*What is the anger and grief arising in you today? What actions of resilience and justice can you take?*

Your sincerely,

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