

Homily of Archbishop John Wilson

Racial Justice Sunday Mass

St George's Cathedral, 10am, Sunday 28 January 2024

Dear Brothers and sisters in Christ what a joy it is to see our Cathedral so full and so representative of the different communities within our Archdiocese. Thank you, sincerely thank you, for your presence here today which is a snapshot of our church across South London and Kent on this Racial justice Sunday.

As I was thinking about our celebration of Holy Mass today something struck me in a new way, as if for the first time. It dawned on me that no one has ever belittled me because of the colour of my skin. No one has ever made fun of me because of the way I speak or the food I eat or the style of my hair, not that I have got much hair left. But I know people who are belittled and who are made fun of through racist comments and attitudes about these kinds of things and more besides. Sometimes racism is dressed up as humour and other times it is just downright disrespectful. In either and any sense, racism is unacceptable. Some people who face racist comments and attitudes are just children. Sometimes they are the elderly or they are migrants or they are refugees. But here is the truth: it does not matter what age people are or what their status is. Racism is wrong; no ifs, no buts. I read that recent research from the mental health charity Mind indicates that one in three people from ethnic minority communities experience stigma or discrimination whilst receiving support. Sadly, there is even racism in our Catholic Churches, in our parishes, in our schools. The very places where we come together as one body, as one family in Christ.

And I want to make it absolutely clear that in our church and in our society, in our nation and in our world, there is no place for racism. Never. Ever. No matter what. Almost 60 years ago, the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the equality of all people disclosed from our dignity as persons with fundamental rights. Vatican II said this:

“Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal human rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design.”*

Incompatible with God's design! There is no place for racism. Please say it with me. There is no place for racism and there never should be.

Dear friends, we heard two powerful messages in the scriptures today, ancient messages which speak to us here and now. In the book of Deuteronomy, God proclaims through his servant Moses, I will raise up a prophet and I will put my words into his mouth. Of course, there were many prophets who followed Moses - all pointing towards Christ. The prophet calls people to right relationship with God and with each other. The prophet witnesses to God's justice, the prophet does not so much predict the future as tell God's truth in the present.

All the prophets, up to St John the Baptist, prepared the way for the true and final prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God. It is Jesus who speaks and teaches the truth in a new way, in a manner that has authority behind it, Divine authority, unlike any other. So, I want to say to you, to each of you, my sisters and brothers, baptised in Christ, that you too are called to be prophets. You are called to speak God's truth with authority. In the words of St Oscar Romero, each of us, each of you has to be a microphone of God. Each of us, each of you has to be a messenger and a prophet. He says wherever there are baptised persons, wherever we are, there is also the church, there are also prophets, in those places something must be said in the name of truth which discloses the lies of the earth. And so, says St Oscar Romero, let us not be cowards, let us not hide the talents God gave us on the day of our baptism. Let us individually and together truly take up the beautiful responsibility of being a prophetic people.

Dear friends, I believe that we must speak prophetically the truth that every person is a beloved son or daughter of our heavenly Father - every person. We must speak prophetically the truth that there is no place for racism. We must speak prophetically the truth that every person, irrespective of their place of origin or their language or the colour of their skin, every person no matter what, has an innate dignity that must be respected. This divine truth is self-evident through human reason. It is enshrined at the heart of our faith. Love one another said the Lord Jesus, as I have loved you. Love one another - there are no exceptions to this, there are no get-out clauses, there are no exclusions. Love one another. We are each of us called prophetically to love one another, called to love our neighbour and our neighbour is the next person we meet, over and over again.

I have to say to you that it is an immeasurable blessing that our Archdiocese is so richly international and so ethnically abundant and diverse. People from across the planet have made their home here - we are a genuinely Catholic Church - a magnificent all-embracing kaleidoscope of God's creation. Each and every person is a gift from God. Each and every person has gifts to offer God and others. No one is superfluous. No one is incidental. Everyone is necessary. Everyone is important. Everyone is blessed. I am proud that our Archdiocese is working to combat racism. Our Commission for Promoting Racial and Cultural Inclusion is actively encouraging the recognition of the gifts of everyone in our community. We are promoting saints from diverse cultures, including the marvellous St Josephine Bakhita from Sudan, whose statue is soon to be erected here in our Cathedral. We are collaborating to produce Bible and sacramental celebratory resources that reflect the diversity of our community. We are enabling training and formation in parishes and schools and working with agencies and organisations outside our Archdiocese to address racism. I am grateful, so grateful, to Canon Victor Darlington and to the members of the Commission for their passion and their commitment to make our Archdiocese a welcoming place for everyone.

Dear friends, we will never meet anyone that God does not already love. Think about this truth. We will never meet anyone, no matter who they are, we will never meet anyone that God does not already love. When we gather for the Eucharist we see in each other the face of Christ who draws us, who draws us to himself and into unity

with each other. I don't know if you know the person sat next to you today at Mass, this may be the most uncomfortable thing you do all week. But let's have a go. Would you turn to the person next you and say to them "I see in you the face of Christ".

Dear friends we are, and we must be, prophets of the truth. The truth that there is a place for everyone in our world and in our Church. We are, and we must be, prophets of justice, who refuse to remain static or silenced in the face of discrimination. We are, and must be, prophets of hope who dream of, and work to achieve, the celebration of our beautiful shared identity of one family of humankind united in love. I will raise up a prophet and I will put my words into his mouth. That prophet my brothers and sisters is you and me. Amen Lord. Amen.

*Gaudium et Spes ("The Church in the Modern World"), Vatican II, 1965, #29.