

The Way of Love

There is so much room for misunderstanding and suspicion when discussing the legacy of slavery and how it affects subsequent generations. Some would argue that we can learn nothing from history, and in any case it is past and we cannot change what has happened.

Besides, the argument will run that too many people whose ancestors have been on the receiving end of what some would consider 'perceived' wrongs, want to 'cash in on the blame culture' and 'get what is owed them'. There is much talk of reparations for the descendants in terms of monetary recompense, as though that would solve all the problems regarding the relationships between the races. I recently heard a Nigerian speak eloquently of the pain Africans had suffered and he referred to reparation - not in terms of one section of the world handing over large sums of money as compensation for the exploitation of Africa by European nations in their voracious appetites for carving out empires for themselves (although we do need to face this issue), but by explaining that all of us, both descendants of slaveholders and descendants of slaves, have been damaged by the past and we need to repair our relationships one with another.

Too often we see churches are segregated along racial and cultural lines, not by law but simply because people feel more at ease in their comfort zones, implying that they are not keen to 'dig up embarrassing issues from the past'. This is a manifestation of religion in its crudest form. By religion, I mean the following of certain norms of behaviour and practice by a particular group - and those norms, including the forms of worship and hierarchical structure within the church. The norms serve as the safety net for those who are religious. They are the ones whom Jesus described as thinking they are well and therefore have no need of anything - let alone a Saviour. They are totally self-sufficient, and their focus is centred on themselves, even when they are 'doing charitable works' because that is also expected of them, in order to be accepted and receive due reward.

The hierarchical structure of the established church also served in the past to reflect that of society in the class system, and in antebellum Charleston this meant the slave/master relationship. Slaves were considered as property, not human beings. They could be bought and sold at the whim of their master who considered it was his Christian duty to maintain the structure he was born into, and not to question its existence.

The churches of the Deep South of the United States (especially from the evangelical wing) resented what they saw as Northern interference in their affairs. Despite the fact that Jesus came to bring freedom to all, they existed to maintain a social structure which enslaved most of the population because of the need to create the wealth for the privileged few, living in the height of luxury - in comparison to the lives of their workers and families. Saint Paul was blunt in his description of greed, which he equated with idolatry. Again, money can take the place of God. Jesus warns us that we cannot serve both God and mammon. Idolatry brings with it a curse which passes to the third and fourth generation, unless confessed to God in the light of the finished work of atonement at the cross of Calvary. When you choose wealth-creation at the expense of human dignity and justice, you reject God's unconditional love for the pinnacle of his own creation - human beings, whatever their colour, race or background.

By treating your fellow human beings as property or at the very least, not your equal, you are denying their unique nature as being made in the image of God, just as yourself. You are placing on them a curse, and you are taking upon yourself a curse at the same time. In the Ten Commandments, God expects us to give him the worship due his name. He is a jealous God who punishes the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him. If we hate what he has created - especially our fellow human beings, who like us, have been made in his image - then it is as if we hate him.

Jesus said, 'whatever you do to the least of these, my brethren, you do to me.' For Jesus, hatred is the same as murder, because the one who hates is a murderer in his heart (Matthew 5:21-22), and 'remains in death' (1 John 3:14). John categorically states that anyone who does not love his brother (whoever that may be), whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (1 John 4:19).

Despite President Abraham Lincoln's Declaration of Emancipation of 1863, the problem of racism and discrimination still remains. Some progress was made between the end of the Civil War and the infamous Compromise of 1877, when the President-elect relied on the votes of the Southern slave-states, with the Promise that legislation would be enacted to establish segregation and discrimination and so stall efforts to improve the situation of African Americans. It took almost one hundred years for this process to be reversed, after the civil rights marches succeeded in drawing to public attention what was obvious - namely, the injustice and immorality of the way society had been structured. It is

worth reflecting for a moment on the Declaration of Independence of 1776, where it states that all men are created equal. How ironic that it took 200 years for the ideal to be made legal!

However, legislation in itself cannot change people's perceptions. Prejudice breeds in a vacuum of blind ignorance which denies anyone the inalienable right to exist as an individual with God-ordained worth. Unless we face our preconceived ideas about other people, we cannot claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, who challenged prejudice wherever he found it. In one incident he sits at a well, thirsty in the heat of the noonday sun. A woman comes - and a Samaritan at that! He engages in conversation with her. A Jewish man daily thanked God that he had not been made either a Samaritan, a woman or a dog. Jesus was accused of supping with 'publicans and sinners', especially by the religious leaders. Down the centuries you can almost hear the voices of condemnation emanating from within church walls. I would contend that anti-semitism is from the same root as racism. Those who describe themselves as Evangelical Protestants and yet find they cannot accept Africans or Jewish people or foreigners as equal to themselves, fail to realise that Jesus was an Orthodox Jew, and therefore would not have been white-skinned. Nevertheless, God looks not at the outward appearance of a person but the heart. Martin Luther King Jr said that he looked forward to the time when a man was judged not by the colour of his skin but by the content of his character.

To his disciples Jesus was both Teacher and Lord, and yet he washed their feet, an act usually performed by a lowly servant. He declared he came not to be served but to serve, and to be a ransom for many. He was implying that he had come to pay for the release of prisoners or of those who are enslaved. Sin has enslaved us to a way of thinking, speaking and acting, which runs counter to his way. Jesus was paid the wages of sin, which is death (Romans 6:23). He became a curse for us, because cursed is he who hangs on a tree (Galatians 3:13). He redeemed us from the curse of the law - trying to obey the commandments and knowing that we were never going to be good enough! He has told us that if we love him, we will obey his commandments. Our relationship with him is based not on control and manipulation, but on unconditional love, which alone brings freedom.

Death is the consequence of a life characterised by hatred - not just physical death, but also spiritual death! Even before someone dies physically, they can already be dead inside - lost to an existence of deep-seated, bitter despair, which finds an outlet in mockery and violence.

Jesus chose to die. By rising from the dead, he conquered death, defeating the enemy. Satan has no hold over us, when we accept personally what Jesus did for us on the cross. As Jesus promised, no-one can snatch us out of his Father's hand. Once we realise there is nothing we can do, to add to what Jesus has done, then we are set free from the curse of slavery, because he has been our substitute at the place of punishment for what both our forefathers and we have done. Jesus cried out, 'It is finished!' and then he breathed his last. Even though he was God the Son, he died, in obedience to his Father. This is a mystery for all of us, but it was for our eternal benefit, no matter who we are - from whatever colour, race, or background! Let us seek to follow his way of love for him, and one another.

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