

The Bishop of Rochester



THE POWER OF IMAGES **Reflections following the Death of George Floyd**

The image of 3-year old Alan Kurdi's body on a Turkish beach in September 2015 is one which is seared on the memories of many of us. In recent days, we have seen other deeply disturbing images. First, the horrific sight of a police officer kneeling on the neck of George Floyd for 8 minutes and 46 seconds as Mr Floyd's life was squeezed out of him. And then, in deeply painful yet powerful counterpoint, the image of the President of the United States posing with a Bible outside St John's Episcopal Church – to the outrage of so many including the local bishop, and yet with many others tweeting their support.

I am always very wary and uncomfortable about commenting on matters of race because I know that I, as a privileged white male, am complicit in multiple expressions of racism and, if I am honest, will myself have behaved in racist ways. None of us will wish to condone violence, but it is really important to hear and acknowledge the anger, outrage and sense of multi-generational injustice which we see being expressed on the streets of the United States and this country – and very clearly not just by people of colour.

It is of course only too easy to point up the evils which exist in other places. But, while the setting and the history may differ in some respects, there are loud echoes on our side of the Atlantic. These events in the United States come just as we are confronted with the wholly disproportionate Covid-19 infection and death rates among people of BAME heritage – including so many without whom our health and social care systems would collapse. This is more than a tragedy – it is a disgrace. I am sadly confident that further evidence and research will demonstrate unequivocally that this is related to other manifestations of discrimination and inequality in housing, employment and education as well as health.

And it is of course also only too easy for a church leader to point up the evils in wider society and so be rightly open to charges of hypocrisy. The church (at least the Church of

England which I know and serve) is itself stained by racism both in its history and in its current life. For the last seven years I have chaired a national initiative aimed at increasing the presence of BAME clergy in senior posts within the church. As I prepare to stand down from that role, I dare to think that we might have made some difference. Some attitudes may have been changed for the good, some progress made in reducing bias, whether conscious or unconscious, within some of our processes. Certainly, I have been privileged to meet and work with some wonderful and gifted people among our clergy and lay people of BAME heritage. And some of those have been appointed to senior posts and others have been enabled to develop their skills and callings. Within my own diocese, I have rejoiced in those BAME people offering themselves for ordained and authorised lay ministries and those appointed to lead parishes and engage in important chaplaincy work. But, and the recent events underline this, I am more convinced than ever that racism, within church and society, continues to be deeply rooted in individuals and institutions, in our attitudes and our practices.

Did that much commented upon image of little Alan Kurdi bring about any lasting change in attitudes and policies in relation to migration? I rather fear not. And what of those more recent images? Pray God they will. They should call us to lament, to righteous anger, to repentance and to heartfelt prayer and action that the day will come when 'justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'.

*The Rt Revd James Langstaff
Bishop of Rochester
5th June 2020*