

FAITH IN A TIME OF THE PLAGUE
Meditation 11
THE STRUGGLE FOR BREATH IS A STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

Micah 6:8; Mark 12:28-34

“What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

“We can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice...”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The murder of George Floyd by the police in Minneapolis last week has graphically linked racial injustice and the Corona pandemic, something already evident in the fact that the number of black Covid-19 victims is proportionally much higher than white. But certainly, the tragic events we have watched unfold in the US demonstrate, as many have said, that racism has reached pandemic proportions. Like Covid-19, racism is a deadly virus. This is no homiletic exaggeration. The similarities are real and disturbing. Floyd’s agonizing gasp – “I can’t breathe” – like each Corona victim’s last gasp for breath and a planet choking to death, echo the same awful cry. This struggle for breath is a struggle for justice, and such justice is not achieved either through violence or by maintaining law and order through excessive force or military might.

The problem lies deep in the social history and realities that deeply divide the world along ethnic and economic lines. For just as Covid-19 is a new strand of an old virus, so present-day racism has a long pedigree going back to ancient times and, like the sin of Adam, it has infected one generation of Europeans to the next. Scientifically-speaking, race as distinct from ethnicity, is an unscientific figment of the European imagination, a fear of the unknown, the strange, the alien. Communicated by stereotyping “the other” as a threat, it has been used to justify colonial conquest and apartheid, and too often justified by a misuse of obscure biblical texts that reduce black people to hewers of wood, and accept slavery as God-intended and normal.

Isobel and I were students in Chicago when the Civil Rights Act was passed on 2nd July 1964 after months of protest similar to what we have witnessed this past week. It was a remarkable achievement after centuries of slavery and racial oppression. But sadly, the signing of that Act, important as it was, did not bring an end to racism in the United States. We in South Africa also know that the ending of apartheid has not meant that the virus of racism had been eradicated. The awful cry “I can’t breathe” is the daily cry of too many both here and across the world who live in squalor, are unemployed and unemployable, are poor and hungry, and who cannot breathe because of environmental pollution. It is not, however, a cry for handouts or cheap reconciliation; it is a cry for justice, for dignity, a cry for life.

We know that Covid-19 will keep spreading until a vaccine is found and it runs its present course. We also know, as epidemiologists tell us, that there will be subsequent pandemics and that these, as in the past, will often take the world by surprise. The same is true of racism except that even to this day, despite all legislation and policies, we have never found a vaccine that can root it out or prevent its insidious spread. For as long as I can remember the racial problem has been researched and written about; for as long as I remember there have been church resolutions condemning racism, and programmes designed to combat it; and for as long as I remember, racism has plagued society and, sadly, the church as well. It took

centuries before it dawned on most white Christians that the enslavement of black people was unjust and unchristian. And many white people are still surprised when protest erupts, and often turns violent because we have thought it had been overcome. After all, don't most white people insist: "I am not a racist". If so, how does it persist?

Racism in the church is one of the most serious indictments against the church because it is fundamentally at odds with what the church is meant to be. That is why we who claim to be Christian have a special responsibility to fight the pandemic and find a cure. And that begins with us as individuals; it requires repentance, a fundamental change of heart, mind, attitude and commitment. But because racism is so systemic, so embedded in culture, none of us can do everything that needs to be done, that is why the struggle against racism has to be a social protest movement. (Much needs to be said about what this means for us and the church which cannot be said here, so I urge you to read Melanie Verwoerd's article published this week on *News 24* "We can and must be better – lessons from America." To do so, you can follow the link: <https://www.news24.com/news24/Columnists/MelanieVerwoerd/melanie-verwoerd-we-can-and-must-be-better-lessons-from-america-20200602?isapp=true>)

But what do we Christians specifically bring to this struggle? Nothing more nor less than the good news that in Christ crucified and risen "God is reconciling the world to himself" and in the process creating a new humanity in which enmity between people is overcome. (II Cor. 5:11-20) The core business of the church is to embody this good news; that is our fundamental, though by no means our only, contribution to the struggle, and why Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his prison letters, "the church is only the church when it exists for others." He also wrote that words such as reconciliation lose their power when the church lives only for itself and insisted that we "can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice." In the same spirit, the prophet Hosea tells us that what God requires of us is "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." Which is just another way of saying that if we claim to love God, we must love our neighbour as we do ourselves. And do we not all cry out for breath, for justice, for mercy and kindness? This commandment to love our neighbours, that is, everyone we regard as "the other", is not, however, an option; it is an imperative.

When the Bible speaks of the love of God and love of neighbour it means self-giving love, love which expresses itself both in acts of kindness which affirm the dignity of the other, and in doing justice in solidarity with those who are oppressed. It is not about liking someone or embracing someone who is like us. "It is doing to others – even to enemies --what you would have them do to you." For that reason, Christian love means struggling against poverty, racism, and all other forms of oppression. Such love active in doing justice is the only vaccine we have to fight the racism pandemic. But it is a powerful vaccine when it is let loose on the world, for it is the transforming power of God at work through the Spirit.

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