



Changing the narrative on racism: a long, but hope filled, way to go

As we emerge from Easter, the Christian festival right at the heart of our faith, we continue to reflect on Jesus Christ's triumph over death. In the light of the resurrection, we are reminded of how the narrative of our lives has been changed for eternity by the events of Good Friday and Easter Day.

Over the past few weeks, the narrative around the report published by the Government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities has rightly given rise to concern and anger. The Report claims that institutional racism is not a significant issue affecting the life opportunities of many in our country, and that the United Kingdom is a beacon of good practice for the world. These claims are significantly at odds with the findings of four major inquiries on race in the UK since 2017.

The Report has created confusion and anger in many of our households, churches and communities. It has also added to a sense of despair that the lived experience of so many within our country is being ignored and dismissed.

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities makes 24 recommendations under four broad themes: to build trust, promote fairness, create agency, and achieve inclusivity. We do not demur from most of these proposals. What the Report signally fails to do is to address the underlying problems which have afflicted our society over decades.

On Trust: there is no understanding in the Report of why people of colour don't trust the repeated promises that have been made to root out racism and discrimination in our society; why there is so little trust in the Police; why people of colour continually find that employment practices discriminate against them.

On Fairness: the Commission seems to imply that better research, targeted funding and "levelling up" – procedural solutions – will make a difference, whereas procedural intervention arguably works properly only where there is a level playing field. Fairness does not achieve justice.

On Agency: the Commission fails to recognise that empowerment, while good in itself, does not work for those who are inhibited or structurally denied the possibility of taking up the opportunities offered.

On Inclusivity: the Report espouses a particular understanding of "Britishness" which seeks to rewrite the narrative of colonialism and paint a picture of a UK at ease with itself. In doing so, the Commission brushes evidence to the contrary under the carpet and denies the lived experience of

many people of colour in our society. It attempts to undermine the critique of our public life and our institutions which is rooted in the insistence that structural and institutional racism exists and is a force that prevents the flourishing and achievement of many people of colour.

As Christian leaders in an intercultural Diocese of the Church of England, we are concerned that the Report has failed to deliver a diagnosis and a remedy that will bring about the lasting change in the culture of the UK for which we long, work and pray. Our sisters and brothers deserve better.

One of the priorities of the Diocese of London for the next decade is to strive for racial justice within its own structures. This followed the admission by the Archbishop of Canterbury at General Synod in 2020 that the Church of England is “deeply institutionally racist.” We recognise that our own record leaves much to be desired and that we need to change.

Those who seek to change the narrative by simply stating that they want a different world, a different reality, and a different consciousness will be sadly disappointed. Our own recent history as a Church shows us that taking this approach will not work. Instead, we need to recognise both the individual failings and the structural injustices which mean that people of colour are discriminated against in their everyday lives. Through conversation, relationship building, and theological study together, we need to change our culture so that we are acting justly, in our governance, in our appointments, in the way we allocate resources, in the language we use and the way we treat each other, in all aspects of our shared life.

We bring to the table our own experience of lived diversity in the Church in London and our understanding of the radical nature of human sinfulness, which permeates our structures as well as the lives of individuals. We also bring our desire to live out our daily prayer – to imitate our God who exalts the humble and lowly and challenges elites and power as we serve the Common Good of society, so that both individuals and society at large experience and share in the fruits of their labours.

Our Easter faith is one that changes the narrative not by wishful thinking or selective memory, but by embracing at one and the same time the horror and pain of Good Friday and the joy and hope of Easter morning. As a Church and a nation, we need to own our failures and, in the power of the Spirit, work together for change so that throughout society, people of colour are treated with dignity and respect and play a full and valued part in our common life. We must be intentional and willing to be vulnerable as wounds are exposed, and yet still hold on to the radical hope that healing will come and transformation will remain.

In the Diocese of London we therefore affirm the words of the Bishop of Dover, the Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin, that as a Church and a country we still have a long way to go in this work, and we commit ourselves to work for change:

“When I walk into large establishments, or any establishments, for that matter, and I don’t see black people only sweeping the floors, doing the cleaning and the catering ... when I see black people sitting around every table up and down this land. When I see black people in leadership in all walks of life, then we will be able to say - and I will happily say - that Britain can become a model country. We’re not there yet.”

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