

Sermon on Wednesday 24 June 2020

by Rev. Wendy Sellers

Readings: Isaiah 40. 3-6a & Luke 1.5 7-66, 80

Black Lives Matter

Years ago, Dale and I used to host formal dinner parties.

That meant a tablecloth, bone china, crystal glasses and a day spent in the kitchen cooking three elaborate courses.

However, any dinner party was not really about food but conversation, as guests would sit around the table for hours and simply talk to one another.

For this reason, a popular question asked when interviewing celebrities is, 'Who would be your ideal dinner party guests?'

Who would yours be?

You might go for a themed dinner party – all composers or radical politicians for example. How about women from the Bible – Sarah, Ester, Bathsheba, Mary Magdalen, Lydia. Wouldn't that be

fascinating?

However, I suspect most people would go for an eclectic mix – Cleopatra, Picasso, Mozart, Martin Luther King and Oscar Wilde. That kind of thing. But I'm guessing that John the Baptist, whose birth we mark today, would not be on many people's list of ideal dinner party guests. Why?

Well, firstly you can be sure he would be dressed inappropriately in his wild animal skins. And would a man who lives on locusts and wild honey turn his nose up at fancy food?

But the worst thing would be his inability to gossip or make small talk. John the Baptist had one known purpose in life – to prepare the way for the Messiah. So, as far as we can gather, he spent his adult life preaching repentance and baptising those who wished to be washed clean of their sins. We know his message was uncompromising, because it was that which eventually led to his death. If John thought something was wrong, he said so, even at huge risk to himself. And he paid the ultimate price for that.

I don't know about you, but I have been hugely challenged in the past weeks by the Black Lives Matter protests. We are in the grip of a pandemic, which means we should not gather. We all know the suffering

that COVID has caused – physically, mentally, economically, socially. So, there has been a perfectly natural reaction, that protests should not take place because they are ideal places for the virus to spread.

However, we also know that to be black in Britain means you are more likely to live in poverty and to have serious underlying health conditions. It means you are less likely to have qualifications and much more likely to end up in prison. It means that people who interact with you always see your skin colour first and make assumptions based on that.



We also know that the Bible tells us that for God the oppressed are a priority. And when God took human form, he almost certainly did not have white skin.

So, what would John the Baptist do? What would Jesus do?

I suspect they might do what two young friends of mine did.

One has been working in ICU during the crisis. She has nursed COVID patients and she has seen them die. She

is passionate that we continue to follow guidance to stop the virus spreading, because she knows first-hand the cost of this terrible illness. Not just for the patients worst affected, but also for health service workers.

Yet last weekend she went on a peaceful, socially-distanced protest. Because she also passionately believes that Black Lives Matter. And after all, one thing we now know is that people of colour are more likely to be hospitalised or to die from the virus.

My second young friend works for a major humanitarian charity, which is currently almost entirely preoccupied with helping communities in both the UK and in poorer nations deal with the pandemic. Her partner is an American and he is mixed race – he would identify as black, just as those around him would almost always identify him as black. So, he has spent his life in the Southern States of America with his skin colour impacting on every area of his life. His skin colour means that any encounter with authority has the potential to become dangerous. So, my young friend also went on a peaceful socially-distanced protest. When I asked beforehand if protesting was wise given the virus, she pointed out that potentially her partner's life was on the line anyway, because of his colour. She was protesting against the devaluing of his life and all those like him. And, that shut me up!

It might be that you, too, attended a protest. It may be that you decided against it. But there are other ways to make our voices heard. A middle-aged white American woman, for example, campaigned for people to apply for tickets for a Trump rally scheduled to take place on the day the USA mark the official end of slavery. Most of those people did not attend, of course. She used the internet as a protest platform. And if you read the news it is full of people taking a stand against racism in a whole lot of different ways. You and I personally can pick up each comment or even each thought that judges another in terms of race.

We need to pray for and give thanks for those brave enough to protest in any way about the wrongs of this world. The environmental campaigners, the journalists, the peaceful protesters. We need to be brave enough to preach and to live a Gospel which reminds people that being a Christian means we believe in a God who takes a very dim view of the inequalities of our world. When we ask Thy Kingdom come, we are asking for a kingdom where all are equally treated, loved and valued.

So, if John the Baptist were alive now, would I ask him to my dinner party? He'd be challenging, I'm sure. But he'd be honest. He'd shake up my ideas and my priorities. And he'd probably have to leave early, to get up the next morning, to attend a protest.