

Peace! Why Jesus is the answer to racial injustice

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 June 2023

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 0 0] Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

[1 : 3 5] In him you also are being built together, into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Now, in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in 2020, a video was posted online by a woman called Kimberly Jones, which went completely viral.

She gave voice to the anger felt by many black men and women in the U.S. in the face of a society pervaded by systematic racism.

You may well have seen the video. In the video, her face stares at the camera, her expression weary, as she says, how can you win? With the air of a question that she has asked a thousand times over.

The answer, she says, you can't win. The game is fixed. Like a game of Monopoly in which one of the players has everything taken from them round after round.

She spoke of a society that was rigged, rigged against black people, so that they cannot succeed, however hard they work, and whatever the content of their character.

[2 : 4 9] If you've seen the video, then perhaps you felt it was hard not to draw the conclusion that simply trying harder is not the answer.

New government initiatives are not the answer. In her words, the system is broken. The video raises the question, is there hope?

Is there an answer to racial injustice? Now, as a Christian, I want to persuade us this morning that the answer is yes.

Hence the title of this talk, Why Jesus is the Answer to Racial Injustice. I guess some of us may be surprised about the claim that there is an answer.

I guess others may be surprised by the claim that Jesus is the answer. After all, we all live in a culture where the claims of Jesus are so often marginalised, where secularism seems to have triumphed, and where Christianity and the claims of Jesus so often are regarded as one of the problems of our society, rather than the solution.

[4 : 09] So I think we'll only understand why Jesus is the answer once we have grasped the depth of the problem. And so I've simply got two points for us to consider and think about and ponder on this morning.

Firstly, the problem is far bigger than we imagine. Secondly, the answer is far bigger than we imagine. And we're just going to spend some time thinking about those two things.

So firstly, the problem is far bigger than we imagine. It brings us to our reading from Ephesians chapter 2. And just look there at sentence number 11, underneath the paragraph heading 1 in Christ.

Ephesians was written by the Apostle Paul to a church in Ephesus, in what is now Turkey. And just as you and I live in a world which is deeply divided, so the world of the first century was also deeply divided.

Have a look at sentence 11. Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.

[5 : 20] Now, in the first century, there was a great fault line that divided the whole of humanity. And it ran between those who historically were regarded as God's people, the Jews, and those who didn't belong to God's people, the Gentiles, everyone else.

One commentator writes, Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt for the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl would be carried out.

Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death. And yet the reality is that as the message of Jesus Christ went out across the Roman Empire, and as churches were planted in towns and cities, they were churches which were composed both of Jew and of Gentiles.

And here in verses 11 and 12, Paul is speaking to the Gentiles who made up the majority of the church in Ephesus. He reminds them of what they were before they put their trust in Jesus.

Verse 12, Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

[6 : 53] First, alienated from Christ, alienated from God's King, his promised Messiah. Second, alienated from the people of Israel, the very people through whom, back in the Old Testament, the blessings of God came.

Third, strangers, therefore, to God's promises. Fourthly, without hope. Fifthly, without God in the world.

Now that sentence takes us to the very heart of the Bible's diagnosis of what is wrong with our world. In the beginning, God made a good and perfect world.

He made men and women in his image, equally in his image, all men and women, to live in relationship with him and to rule over his creation.

And yet that is so clearly not the world that you and I live in today. Because the Bible's verdict is that each one of us has turned away from God.

[7 : 58] Each one of us has decided that actually we will be the ones who decide how we want to live in God's world. We will run our lives our own way without God.

It is what, if you're familiar with the Bible, it is what the Bible calls sin. As a result, what the Apostle Paul describes here, without hope and without God in the world, actually describes what each one of us, regardless of our culture and background, what each one of us is by nature like.

But, and this is the thing really to get our heads around, the result of our alienation from God is that in turn, we are alienated from each other.

Hostility between peoples and nations. And surely that is what we see throughout history and throughout our world. Because the fact is that if I am living my way, as if I am in charge of my life, and if you are living your way, as if you are in charge of your life, then the fact is you and I are going to come to blows.

Who is going to decide what is right and wrong when we meet? The fact is self-interest is bound to win. And therefore it is inevitable that we live in the world that we live in.

[9 : 31] Where the strong oppress the weak and the majority impose their will on the minority. Do you see how the problem is far bigger than we might imagine it is?

We experience alienation from each other. And of course that is the alienation that we can see because each one of us is by nature alienated from God.

And that alienation, of course, is something we cannot see with the human eye. In turn it means that superficial solutions, the problem of racial injustice, which fail to address the issue of our alienation from God, will always fall short.

It's why wherever you look in the world, there is racial tension. Not just the high-profile things like George Floyd. Think of the Balkans, tensions between Serbs and Bosnians.

Think of Rwanda, between Hutu and Tutsi. Think of countries like New Zealand and Australia and Canada, tensions between those who are descendants of white settlers and those who are from indigenous cultures.

[10 : 45] Think of South Africa, where racist attacks are on the increase as black Zimbabweans face attacks from black South Africans. Think of the caste system in India.

Humanity, if nothing else, is divided. Close to the home, of course, there's been the Macpherson report several years ago into the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence and the conclusion that the Metropolitan Police was institutionally racist.

More recently, the Windrush scandal exposed the racism within the British immigration system as people who had moved to this country in the 1950s and 1960s were being faced with deportation.

We went to the graduation of one of our children last July. It was a wonderfully impressive occasion, as I guess these occasions tend to be, in a beautiful medieval cathedral.

The students all dressed up, unrecognisably so, I have to say. Degrees were given out and then a speech given by the university chancellor.

[11 : 55] And I guess everyone was kind of thinking, you know, what pearls of wisdom will the university chancellor have for these students now they're graduating as they go out to life in the big wide world?

How would he encourage them to be transformative and make a difference? How might he distill the wisdom of this great seat of learning into a ten minutes of speech or whatever?

be kind. That was it. Be kind. To which my response, and I guess the response of everyone else in the building with any sense of reality, was simply, if only.

If only it was that simple. Be kind. Be kind. we shouldn't be surprised. Human attempts at dealing with racial injustice will always fail.

Because the problem of racial injustice is simply one of the many symptoms of the deeper, far more fundamental issue with humanity, which is that each one of us by nature lives our lives without reference to God.

[13 : 13] and just as when you go to the doctor and just as when you show the doctor your symptoms and yet you know that the answer is not for the doctor to treat your symptoms but the underlying condition, so it is the underlying condition of our alienation from God that needs to be addressed.

Only then can we deal with our alienation from each other. So that's our first point this morning. The problem is far bigger than we imagine. Secondly, the answer is far bigger than we imagine.

Have a look at sentence number 13 because it proclaims something which is very, very glorious. Sentence 13 but now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

But we say how can those who are by nature far from God be brought near to God? Have a look at verse 16. Speaking of Jesus it says Jesus might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross thereby killing the hostility.

God has reconciled the apostle Paul is saying God has reconciled the person from a Jewish background with all their religious heritage and privilege and the person from a Gentile background who has none of those privileges through the cross through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross who died to take the punishment for our sin so that those who trust in him can receive the forgiveness of sins can be reconciled to God can belong to him can enjoy a relationship with him both in this life but also in the life to come.

[15 : 17] It is very wonderful and yet of course it is also very humbling because it means that all receive God's forgiveness on the same basis.

Those from a religious Jewish background can't come before God and say look at my heritage look at my religious background look at my status please will you be impressed just as none of us can come before God and say I am a good person I am from particular backgrounds I go to church perhaps please be impressed because all of us by nature have turned our backs on God regardless of our race and status and that means that all of us regardless of race culture status whatever it is are reconciled to God in exactly the same way and that is by trusting in Jesus who died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins and the point is that then having been reconciled to God those who belong to Jesus can now be reconciled to each other

I wonder if you noticed when Patasha was reading this how the language of reconciliation is completely all over these verses so verse 14 have a look at it sentence 14 for he himself is our peace who has made us both one sentence 15 that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two so making peace sentence 17 and he that's Jesus came and preached peace to you to Gentiles who were far off and peace to those Jews who were near do you get the point being reconciled to God through the death of Jesus on the cross means that we can be reconciled to one another we had the privilege of going to Cape Town in South Africa several years ago perhaps it's somewhere you've visited or perhaps it's somewhere that you would like to go to I wonder what would be your highlight I guess for many the highlight is going up

Table Mountain and seeing the fantastic view the wonderful location that Cape Town has or perhaps it's going to Cape Point seeing the second most southerly point of the African continent or perhaps it's the renowned Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens there are loads of highlights it's a wonderful city to visit I think for me I think in point of fact the most wonderful part of our visit to Cape Town was Sunday morning church we went to a church far away from the tourist areas in the Cape Flats and it was remarkable because there was an equal split between black coloured and white as the apartheid system categorised people and in a country still divided by race and income inequality where the kind of fear between communities never seemed to be far from people's lips it was completely remarkable and we left thinking to ourselves saying to ourselves only the message of

Jesus can do that but how is that kind of possible for that to be sort of worked out in practice well let me finish with three things that Jesus gives those who put their trust in him which completely transform the way in which we think about race firstly a new identity now it's wonderful hearing Annie speaking about this earlier but Jesus offers forgiveness without distinction to all those who put their trust in him regardless of race or background and then when we turn to him and trust him and follow him he gives us a new identity such that we belong to him we are in Christ as the New Testament repeats time and time again an identity that completely cuts across and relativises all other identity markers markers such as race gender culture class education wealth marital status and background now the implications of this are huge

[19 : 57] Benji mentioned this book earlier Healing the Divide there are three copies available on the bookstool I think it's seven pounds each or so but Jason Roach who's one of the authors he's a black minister of a church in London and he says this he says ultimately as a Christian I have more in common with a white woman who knows very little about my culture but who is a black man who eats the same food wears the same clothes drinks the same drinks but is not a Christian isn't that striking in Christ we have a new identity and that new identity secondly becomes the basis of a new community a new community therefore where everyone is of equal value and dignity if you've read the gospel accounts or one of the gospel accounts of Jesus life then you will know that

Jesus scandalised fellow Jews by tearing through racial and cultural boundaries in the first century you may know churches united those of high and low social standing those who are rich and poor those who are slaves those who are masters not to mention people from all the different racial and cultural backgrounds that made up the Roman Empire and you see the same beauty the same beautiful dynamic in churches across the world today one of the myths in certainly media circles in the UK still is that Christianity is a white western religion nothing could be further from the truth the fastest growing churches today are in China China expected to be majority Christian by 2050 under 30 years time sub-Saharan

Africa and South America the church if you think of the worldwide church the church is the most multicultural body in the world now yes of course it means that individual churches like Grace Church we need to work hard and keep on working hard to express this glorious reality that we are one in Christ Jesus and yet when we do that we all flourish and benefit and I hope some of us will have experienced that those of us for example from white British backgrounds we can be challenged about some of our cultural idols around privacy perhaps keeping ourselves to ourselves or money something which we never talk about those from other cultures could be challenged about some of the idols of family and marriage and children you see when people from different races and cultures are part of the same church we all flourish we all benefit a new identity a new community finally a new hope

I started by quoting from Kimberly Jones I think one of the reasons why her video is so hard to watch really is because of her insistence that racism is structural and that it is permanent it is a profoundly pessimistic view with little hope for change by contrast of course the kind of the secular liberalism that is so often espoused by our political and community leaders is so often short on action and transformation and I guess many of us will be only too aware of that it lacks the vision for the sort of social reconciliation and flourishing that problems like racism require the Bible by contrast presents us with a radical hope those who belong to Jesus yes our lives are transformed we have a new identity in him in churches we are part of a new community but above all we know where this world is heading we have a glorious future hope the Bible ends with a description of heaven the new creation it's there on the screen let me read it for us after this

I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number from every nation from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb that's the risen Jesus clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands and crying out with a loud voice salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb the risen Jesus that is where our world is heading which simply leaves me to ask the question do you know what it is to experience this peace for yourself peace with God but also peace with others do you know what it is to experience this new identity do you know what it is to be part of this new community to have this future hope now of course it may well be that you've heard the message of Jesus before and done nothing about it well it may be that you recognise the need for peace in our world and the need to deal with the problem of racial injustice in the world but actually you've never really made the connection the fact that the alienation we see all around us is part of a far bigger problem of our alienation from God and therefore to be reconciled to each other for there to be racial justice we do indeed need to be reconciled to God for ourselves and then

[26 : 08] God and if tell us let's let's let's