

Race, Cross, and the Christian

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Date: 30 August 2015

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[0 : 0 0] the day since Martin Luther King Jr. stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC and delivered what is regarded as one of the top five speeches of the 20th century at least in the English speaking world it is the I have a dream speech many people have heard just at least a smidgen of it which is probably the bit that I'm going to quote now there's a speech that went on for about 17 minutes but in that speech he said I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed that we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi a state sweltering with a heat of injustice sweltering with a heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character I have a dream it's a dream that he unfortunately didn't see come to reality at one minute past six in the evening on April the 4th 1968 a shot rang out as King stood outside room 306 on the second floor balcony of the Lorraine motel in Memphis Tennessee the bullet struck him in the side of the face he died an hour and four minutes later at seven five minutes past seven p.m. according to one of his biographers a Taylor Branch King's autopsy revealed that though he was only 49 years old sorry 39 years old he had the heart of a 60 year old which Branch attributed to the stress of 13 years leading the civil rights movement in the United States the fight for freedom and justice and equality for African Americans cost Martin Luther King his health and his life he articulated and symbolized a great dream of racial harmony and social justice and it's a dream as we've been seeing in the last four weeks it's a dream that aligns with God's purposes for this world it's a dream that I believe uh must start with Christians and must start with the church the local church and it and it ought to start here at St Paul's the biblical vision that we've been engaging with um in this fifth week now is much bigger than how black and white people relate to one another in the United States and I'm pretty sure King knew that one of the ways um to understand the issue and understand God's purposes in the issue um is to look at the end and to see how God's been driving in that direction and that's what we're doing today we're arriving at the end in the book of Revelation to see where God is taking history and so if this is where God's taking history that means this is what history is about it means it's what St Paul's is about it's what Chatswood is about it's about what Australia is about it's about what the nations are all about and so you can learn your reason for being by looking at the goal of God in history where's he taking it all now we're going to go there in a moment we're going to go to the end of all things but let me just recap the trajectory we've been heading over the last four weeks and how each bit comes together to get to that ultimate end we saw in the first week Genesis chapter one that God created Adam and Eve in His image and what flowed from there was that every person born of Adam and Eve which is every person uh also carries the image of God which has massive implications of how you treat another individual um there is solidarity in our image even though we are all individually unique but as there is solidarity in image so we saw in the second week solidarity in sin as Adam sinned in rejecting God what we saw from that is that all of humanity is tainted by sin as a result our natural bias is towards sin it's part of our nature and one of the big consequences of that is Genesis chapter 11 where God judges all people where he scatters them and confuses their language so that they will not work together again in order to storm the heavens and depose God but God doesn't just act in judgment he also has the plan to reverse it all and Genesis chapter 12 is the turning point in the Bible it's the hinge where God starts His plan of redemption um it is His beginning and he begins with a promise to an insignificant bloke called Abraham and he says to Abraham that all peoples on earth will be blessed through him and we saw in the third week how

this plan is worked out through all of history and finds its culmination in the death and resurrection of Jesus and this is how Galatians 3 puts it you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus for all of you who are baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek slave nor free male nor female for you're all one in Christ Jesus if you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's seed so if you put your trust in Jesus it means that you are an inheritor of the promise that God made to Abraham back in Genesis chapter 12 and as a result of that reconciling work where God pulls people to himself through Jesus Jesus calls his disciples to go and share this message of reconciliation to the world that they too may be partakers of it but he tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit to come who will pull them together and empower them as his people and the Holy Spirit comes on the day of Pentecost it was just read out to us just then and in the coming of the Holy Spirit what you see there is a symbolic reversal of the tower of Babel as God comes and dwells with his people by his Spirit and gathers his people to himself people are gathered and even on that day in the day of Pentecost language is not a barrier as all these people of diverse languages hear God's plan of redemption through Jesus Christ the one who shed his blood to unite all bloodlines Jesus is the one who brings unity and harmony from all the division and diversity and you see it there at the end of chapter two of Acts where this new community is formed and born and people together in unity and harmony of all their differences together in unity and harmony sharing with one another and caring for one another what is symbolic in Acts chapter two is reality in Revelation in chapter five verse nine of Revelation we get a picture of chapter five of the heavenly realms and in verse nine John tells us why Jesus is worthy to open the book of the end of history so that things unfold according to the plan of God Jesus is worthy because of how his death relates to all races and tribes and peoples and languages of the world it says you are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slain and with your blood you purchase men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth and so the reason that Jesus has the right to open the book of history is that by his death he has ransomed people for God that is for the glory of God and the worship of God and the worship of God from every tribe and language and people and nation that was God's design in the death of Jesus to ransom some from every kind of race and language and make them one kingdom one kingdom they would have one king that is they would all live with Jesus as their supreme treasure and Lord Jesus is the one who would unite them and they would be priests that is they would be full-time worshipers Jesus died to ransom subjects for the king and worshipers for the king from all languages and races and nations and peoples and so the consummation of God's plan for human history includes the reversal of all the judgmental aspects of Genesis 3 to 11 the curse is removed they return to enjoy fellowship with God the scattered ones once separated from God and separated from each other and now brought together under the reign of Jesus and finding God's blessing as he promised to Abraham and we see the vision fulfilled in verses 11 sorry 13 to 14 of Revelation 5 then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them singing to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever and the four living creatures said Amen and the elders fell down and worshipped see the picture of the end of all things it is all things worshipping the king that's the trajectory of human history that's the trajectory of all created things it's what we were created for it's what this world was created for it's what history is about it's what the nations are about it's what the races are all about it's what the languages are all about it's what St Paul's is all about it's what my life is meant to be all about it's what your life is meant to be all about that is the end of all things all things gathering around the throne praising their king. And so it is inconceivable that we should believe that this is the goal of God in history and the aim of the death of his son and not care about racial harmony in this city and in this church.

[12 : 20] It is critical that we today visualize the body of Christ and the people of God correctly.

Christians who gather around the throne of God are going to rub shoulders with people of all races. God's intention for his people is to be multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-generational but all united in their fellowship and their worship of God.

How easy it is for us to think that God is just like me. Just type in Google at some point and come up with images of Jesus and have a look at how often we make Jesus in our image.

There's a black Jesus. There's a white Jesus who... I mean, Jesus was white, wasn't he? I mean, when you see all the pictures of Jesus, he's got these beautiful blonde curly hair.

He's got blue eyes. He looks more handsome than me, for sure. And then there's Asian Jesus. And I looked at Asian Jesus. Well, Jesus wasn't Asian. I mean, he was white, wasn't he?

[13:46] And then there's cool Jesus. There's hip Jesus. There's all sorts of different Jesus. We think God is just like us. And yet the picture revelation is that the whole diversity of God's people is going to be more astounding than we realized.

And I'm pretty confident that Anglican worship won't be necessarily front and center. Pretty confident of that too. My contention here is that we need to work towards that ideal if that is our future together.

It's unfortunate, however, that our worldly associations and identities... It's unfortunate when we allow those things to determine the composition of our churches.

Here's a quote from American theologian Michael Horton. He said, South African theologians have pointed out that this principle in mission work laid the groundwork for apartheid.

Now that racial segregation is less explicitly deployed as a church growth strategy, we carve up Christ's body into socioeconomic and generational segments.

[15:17] Some churches use demographic marketing to appeal to different music styles with country western or rock or jazz services. I read recently of a growing movement of cowboy churches where preachers deliver brief talks from their horses to other riders in their saddles and they all depart with the song Happy Trails.

It's what's called the homogenous unit principle. People like to be with people who are like them.

It's a principle that's propagated by the church growth movement in the 1990s. It has led to churches planting or churches being planted to target specific demographics, particular segregations of people, and for churches putting up congregations for individual purposes.

We segregate people based on traditional service or a family service or an Australian-born Chinese service or a youth service. It is the standard practice of church life on the North Shore of Sydney.

It's the standard practice for church life in Sydney Diocese, the Anglican Church of Sydney Diocese. It's how we operate.

[16:43] It's how most of my ministry life has been. It was St. Paul's up until a few years ago. We'll get to that in a little while. But this is not the picture that you see in Revelation chapter 5.

Now, I understand that not all churches will be multicultural. It's hard to have a multicultural church if you're living in a monocultural context. But that's not the context of St. Paul's.

And so we have to labor hard to see God's ultimate intention lived out now as much as possible in this church.

God's intention for us is to be multi-ethnic, multicultural, multilingual, multi-generational, but united in our fellowship and our worship of God. And that intention will cost us corporately and it will cost us individually.

It will cost us because, as I read recently, evangelical Christians have a strong in-group identity that gives us a sense of distinctiveness from the rest of the world.

[17:59] That is, we like to see how we are different from everyone else. The negative of this is this in-group mentality has led ultimately, I think implicitly, to the degradation of other people not as part of that group.

We are the elite. Everyone else is not. And while the evangelical church historically has led the charge in pursuing racial justice on a society level, it appears that it does not trickle down into interpersonal behavior on a local church level.

We fight the battle out there in Canberra, but not here in the local church level. And again, I think it's an implicit racism rather than explicit.

An extensive research project in the United States discovered that mainline Protestant churches, that's what we are, were less welcoming to racial minorities due to the implicit belief that they wouldn't fit into their congregations.

And one reason for that is that mainline Protestant churches, like St. Paul's, use liturgies, music, and readings historically rooted in European culture, which is incredibly wordy.

[19:26] And so because of our way of doing church, which is culturally formed, it's less likely to appeal to people who are not part of that culture. In fact, studies have found that expressive contemporary worship styles are most effective for transcending racial boundaries.

And this possibly may be, at least potentially, one question we should be asking ourselves, of Sydney Anglican churches, why we struggle to build multicultural churches, even though we really

want to.

We really struggle with it. Now, one of the changes we made here at St. Paul's in our corporate worship is to move away from the homogenous unit principle, which divides us based on age and stage of life or ethnicity or tradition or whatever it is.

We've started doing that since 2011. We did not advertise our services based on personal preference. Our services are advertised based on language only. It's the only church I know of the North Shore doing that.

Language only. It's the only distinction that I can see in the Bible. The only thing that should cause difference between us. Now, that change has cost us dearly since 2011, as I expected it would, but I'm committed to it.

[20 : 54] And I'm really pleased as I look around, particularly at our English congregations today, and I see a much higher level of ethnic diversity than what we had four years ago.

Because God's intention for this church is for his people to be multi-ethnic, multicultural, multilingual, multi-generational. The reason I say that is because that's exactly what Chatswood is, and that is our mission field.

That's our place. That's our context. That's where we exist. And that's why we have a mission statement of our church that says that we exist to know Jesus, to treasure Jesus, to represent Jesus for God's glory and the joy of all people.

And we have core values like treasuring Jesus together. It states that we're committed to things like welcoming people from every background. We are committed to openness towards new people and the avoidance of clickiness.

We are open to purging our lives of sin that causes division and pursuing increasing visible, authentic, and practical ways of loving each other. My point is that we must treasure Jesus above every other association that we have in life.

[22 : 07] The gospel is what this world needs. The gospel achieves unity where unity is not possible. The gospel is the power of God that breaks down the dividing wall of hostility between Israelis and Palestinians and Russians and Poles and Jews and Nazis and white and blacks and male and female and the Asian and Cantonese and Mandarin.

The gospel is a power that breaks down all those walls. It breaks through every wall that this world puts up. And so that means that in the gospel, the church has a resource like no other resource for spanning cultural and generational divides.

No institution, including the United Nations, no organization, no entity or group on the planet has more power to turn cultural and generational tension into cultural and generational harmony.

Jesus himself is building his church and Jesus himself, therefore, is the great meeting place for his people.

And particularly people who would naturally be at odds with one another. The end of ethnic pride and the pursuit of racial harmony cost God the death of his son for us.

[23 : 37] It's a high price. It cost Martin Luther his health, Martin Luther King Jr., cost him his health and his life. And we've got to expect that for us to pursue this, it will cost us dearly as well.

When our Redeemer and our great Reconciler and his gospel are what we hold as first importance, then we are empowered to listen to those who have different perspectives, to evaluate fairly and change as we need, and to be proactive in reaching across lines that traditionally cause divisions amongst us.

The cross causes us to take Jesus-like initiative to foster relationships with people who are not in our group.

And when Jesus is our greatest treasure, and we say that he is here at St. Paul's, we see that our lifelong preferences are not our ultimate hope. It means that we can actually become eager to have them changed if it means that there are less barriers to others embracing Jesus and living out the gospel.

When Jesus is of first importance, we see that the power for real change and real church building is in fact Jesus. It's not in our tradition. It is in spirit-strengthened message of Christ crucified and risen for sinners.

[25 : 15] You see, when the cross is our salvation and our daily strength, we're eager to crucify our pride and our love for self and for our type and our comfort and our way and take the extra steps to reach across generations and cultures with kindness, with grace and always with a listening ear.

I think that little bit is so important for us to grasp. You see, unlike Martin Luther King, I have been part of the dominant group all of my life.

I'm, in fact, part of the group that's the oppressor, not the oppressed. I've never felt the sting of racial vilification, ever.

And what that's meant for me is most of my life as I never felt it and I've never seen the need or the urgency of this issue of racism. I've always assumed that while I might be a little bit racist, it's only a little bit racist.

I'm not a white supremacist after all. I don't have, you know, skinhead or anything. I'm not one of those guys. And so my racism is excusable.

[26 : 57] It's taken a while for me to listen and to try and understand what it would be to be oppressed.

And to help me, I read a letter that Martin Luther King wrote. He wrote this letter to some white clergy that, and I think it might help us to see, to have the shoe on the other foot, what it feels like, the sting of racial vilification.

In April 1963, King was arrested in Birmingham, Alabama for a non-violent protest against racism. And the local newspaper published a letter from, excuse me, a letter from eight white Christian and Jewish clergymen of Alabama criticizing King for his demonstration.

And the white clergyman had all said he should be more patient, he should wait, he shouldn't demonstrate. And in response, King wrote what has become known as the letter from Birmingham Jail.

And he wrote this. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, wait.

[28 : 26] But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim, and when you've seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters, and when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society, and when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering, as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to that public amusement park which has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she told that Funtown is closed to coloured children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness towards white people, people, and when you have to concoct an answer for your five-year-old son who is asking,

Daddy, why do white people always treat coloured people so mean? And when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you, and when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs which read white and coloured, and when your first name becomes nigger, your middle name becomes boy no matter how old you are, and your last name becomes John, and your wife and mother are never given the respected titles of missus, and when you are harried all day and haunted by night by the fact that you're a negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments, and when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of nobodiness, then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.

I hope, sirs, that you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. if you're white, let that sit.

Just let it sit. The first time I read that, I just burst into tears, and I realized that my racism mattered.

[31 : 26] it mattered deeply. Now, as far as I can tell, we don't have that level of blatant segregation here at St.

Paul's. What I've become more aware of is the implicit racial biases that we have.

these are the stereotypes and attitudes that affect how we unconsciously think about and act towards someone who is different from us.

These will lead us to treat someone differently without us even realizing that that's what we're doing. And so while very few of us would say that we are racist, discriminatory behavior persists almost everywhere.

more often than not, I can't see it in myself. I need others to help me see it. And when the cross is our daily salvation and our daily strength, we are eager to crucify our pride and our love for self and our own type and our own comfort and our own way and take those extra steps to reach across generations and cultures with kindness and grace and with a listening ear, I need to hear from you how it feels.

[33 : 05] Because I don't feel it. Martin Luther King's dream was a beautiful one, but it was a partial one.

God has the ultimate dream and the ultimate purpose for all nations and all languages and races, that is to unite together to display the majesty of Christ.

And that's our passion. And I would call you to dream your own personal dream, your corporate dream for this church and a city-wide dream and finally, ultimately, a kingdom dream, and to pray and to act by God's grace to make it a reality.

The cross of Christ creates a cross-cultural and cross-generational community.

And at St. Paul's, we call that treasuring Jesus together. Amen.