

Race, Cross, and the Christian

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[0 : 00] Asylum seeker Kadim Dai fled to Indonesia to escape the Taliban in fear of his life. Kadim, who is part of the persecuted Hazara ethnic minority in Afghanistan, fled to Pakistan with his family when he was a child.

He left Pakistan in 2013 when a bomb went off near his school that killed 124 people, including a dear friend of his.

Kadim, who has been found to be a genuine refugee by the United Nations Refugee Agency, is living in Indonesia until he is resettled into another country.

He featured in the recent multimedia series Frontiers of Hope, and he agreed to participate in a question and answer session about the life of a refugee on the Age newspaper's Facebook page last Monday night.

What happened next highlights the state of the asylum seeker debate and racism in this country. Here is what some of our fellow citizens wrote on the Age newspaper's Facebook page.

[1 : 24] Another privileged elitist trying to illegally enter Australia. Only Australians have right to say who can live here. No other should have influence.

And out of those, only those who pay taxes should have a vote. Why is this Australia's problem? We are not a super country that can save six billion lives.

What's wrong with Indonesia? They are mainly Muslim and should be welcoming their fellow Muslims. He should not be a burden to our society.

Why should I have to work hard to pay for my mortgage and food and my foxtel? And this toad comes in through the back door and my taxes feed him.

That makes me hate asylum seekers even more. He should be shot dead. And yes, I would gladly donate money for the bullet.

[2 : 27] Now, I hope your blood boiled. I left out the expletive laden ones for the sake of propriety here this morning.

And ones that were even worse than that, which is hard to imagine. I found it hard to believe that someone would put that stuff out there on the public forum.

A disgraceful treatment of another human being, and yet it's out there in our society. And it's hard to believe that that's the sort of attitude that has historically found a home in the Christian church.

Even within our lifetime. And one of the clearest examples is the history of the black-white relationship in churches in the United States.

In parts of the United States, where Christian values were the strongest and church attendance in the highest, millions of whites belonged to the white supremacy group, the Ku Klux Klan.

[3 : 39] And even as far back as the 1950s, that's not that long ago, church groups would be involved in public lynchings of Negroes.

There's photos on the internet. Church families just walked out of church, all dressed up for church, and they're with people hanging from trees.

That's not that long ago. The Ku Klux Klan has been involved in the segregation and slavery and torture and murder of many black people. And yet, the Ku Klux Klan was, and in fact still is, a powerful advocate of Christianity.

The Christian cross features heavily in its activities, and it has consistently campaigned for the compulsory teaching of Christianity in public schools. It still does.

There are some very dark chapters in the history of the church, and yet, I have hope. I believe that the local church that treasures Jesus together can be a pace setter for the wider community on this issue.

[4 : 56] And so this series is not about St. Paul's being perfect on the issue.

It's about movement in the right direction. That's what it's about. The theology of the Apostle Paul, I believe, helps us move in the right direction of ending racial pride and ethnocentricity.

Hopefully, in the last three weeks, you've already been challenged about some attitudes of your own heart. If not, I would encourage you to keep tuning in. So let's go to Galatians 2.

It was just read out to us by Debbie. Galatians 2, verses 11 to 16 particularly I want to focus on. The key phrase that I want to focus on is verse 14. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel.

That's the verse. That verse implies that there is conduct, that is, there's behavior, actions, things that we do that is out of step with the truth of the gospel, which is what we focused on last week.

[6 : 09] Or to put it another way, the gospel governs not just what we believe, but what we do. So there is gospel belief, and there is gospel actions.

And some beliefs contradict the gospel, and some actions contradict the gospel. And Peter's action here in Galatians 2 was contradicting the gospel.

And so this is one of the most important questions that we can ask. Ask of our habits, of our actions, of our behaviors, of our attitudes.

Do they contradict the gospel? Or positively, are my actions, behaviors, attitudes in step with what I say that I believe about Jesus?

Do they say true things about the gospel? Does it reflect the gospel? Does it look like the kind of action that would flow out of the gospel? Now, Paul here leaves us in no doubt about what the heart of the gospel is.

[7 : 26] So we're going to look at it again so that we're clear on it. We don't have to go any further than verse 16, I think. So look at that with me. Galatians 2 verse 16. We who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners know that a man is not justified by observing the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.

So we too have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law because by observing the law no one will be justified.

And so the heart of the gospel for the apostle Paul was justification by faith alone apart from works of the law. Justification is what a judge does in a courtroom.

It is a declaration that a defendant is found innocent because they are actually innocent. The defendant is declared to be just that is right, justified, just if I had never sinned because they are just.

It's as just as if they had never sinned. So how can God, the judge, declare us righteous and innocent? And the answer is what we looked at last week is that Jesus Christ lived and died and to provide our righteousness and to bear our punishment.

[8 : 53] Justification by faith puts all of us, every single person, on level ground in utter dependence upon him. Utter dependence upon his grace.

And one thing that justification does is it smashes pride. That's the heart of the gospel. And my friends, from that gospel, how many new and sweet and tender and deep and strong and beautiful and noble and humble and kind and wise and patient and caring and serving attitudes and behaviors flow from that gospel.

And one of which is the breaking down of ethnic hostilities and suspicion and creates instead unity and harmony where there was once division.

justification by faith and justification by faith and justification by faith alone has overcome all, all, all, all the divisions that there are between people.

Galatians 3 verses 26 to 28 is very clear on that. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

[10 : 17] There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. Remember, Galatians, oh sorry, Genesis chapter 12, turning point that I said, Abraham.

That's where it all started, God's redemption plan. When Paul states here there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, he strikes at the three, at least the three of the major barrier forming divisions in human society.

Ethnic, economic capacity and sexuality. There was a Jewish prayer in the first century that went like this.

Blessed be he that he did not make me a Gentile. Blessed be he that he did not make me a slave or an ignorant peasant. And blessed be he that he did not make me a woman.

[11 : 32] That's a Jewish prayer. I assume prayed just at men's breakfasts, the bacon-free men's breakfasts that they had back in those days. And the Christian gospel smashes all of those barriers.

And it forms, doesn't just break down the barriers, it forms a radically new society. It doesn't obliterate the differences. Greeks are still Greeks, slaves are still slaves, and women are still women.

What obliterates here is the barriers that are formed up in those differences. And what's also obliterated is a person's status among the people of God based on those differences.

There is no race, no nation, no class, no gender, no denomination that has a favoured status with God.

This was radical theology in Paul's day because it flew in the face of all traditional norms. And it continues to be radical theology today because it conflicts with many of our cultural norms as well.

[12 : 51] The gospel brings unity, not uniformity. But at the end of Galatians 2 verse 12, we see that Peter was governed by fear and not by the gospel.

And Paul rebuked him for it in Galatians 2 verses 11 to 13. When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles.

But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy so that by their hypocrisy, even Barnabas was led astray.

And so Peter had been experiencing the freedom of the gospel as a Jew and he'd been crossing ethnic and religious barriers to eat with Gentiles ever since Acts chapter 10.

If you want to go back, that's a turning point for him. And then it says in verse 12 that certain men came from James. Now these were the Jerusalem conservatives who believed that the Gentiles because of their uncircumcision and because of their unkosher dietary habits and because of their failure to keep the holy days, they were off limits even if they were Christian, they were still off limits for Jews.

[14 : 27] And so these conservatives, theological conservatives came down from Jerusalem, the Sydney Anglicans, they came to Hillsong and started throwing stones.

religious and ethnic issues were inseparable for them.

Now I'm not sure exactly what Peter was afraid of, but it's clear, excuse me, it's clear that he was afraid of his own group.

and what is absolutely clear is that that fear ruined practical gospel faithfulness and relationships.

He was free, he was eating with brothers across ethnic lines and fear, at least for that moment, destroyed the diversity and the harmony.

[15 : 40] And so at very least I think I could say from this passage, don't let fear ruin your joyful freedom in living and working and worshipping and relaxing and eating with brothers and sisters who are different from you.

Or to put it positively, fall in love with Jesus again. That's what it means. Fall in love with Jesus again.

Rejoice all over again that you are justified by faith alone. It means we need to keep Jesus front and centre.

We need to keep justification by faith front and centre. Consistently, level playing field, no room for pride. It means treasuring Jesus together. Again, keep putting to that, treasuring Jesus together.

And yet fear is a very real issue. I went to the Hillsong conference this year. First time ever.

[16 : 53] I ran into a friend of mine, a colleague from all colleagues there. We were both surprised to see each other. fear. I said to him, let's take a photo and stick it on Facebook.

Preferably with Brian if we can. And he said, I'm glad to be here. I'm not quite ready for the vitriol. Fear.

I agreed with him. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. We need to keep putting Jesus front and center. We need Jesus to be our greatest treasure.

We need to remember that the divide could not have been larger between sinful human beings and the infinitely holy son of God.

And Jesus did not despise us. He came to us. He loved us. He died in our place to give us life. And he did that when we were more alien to him than anyone has ever been to us.

[18 : 06] Jesus needs to be front and center consistently. You see when we think or feel or act with disdain or disrespect or avoidance or exclusion or malice towards a person simply because he or she is of another race or another ethnic group we are in effect saying that Jesus acted foolishly towards us.

And I don't believe we ever want to say that. Now as far as I'm aware here at St. Paul's we don't face the issues of Galatians.

That is exclusion because of lack of circumcision. far as I'm aware that's not the case. But we do face numerous divisions.

We have divisions of race and age and gender and social status and financial status and theological awareness and historical connection. We don't have signs up in the building segregating people of different races morning tea here lying for whites and we don't have that sort of thing happening.

Hopefully that's long gone. We don't have a KKK option to sign up for Activate. But we do have our prejudices and implicit beliefs that linger in our hearts.

[19 : 34] And that's the key issue I think that we need to be looking at. The key issue is our hearts. On the whole, our issues I believe are more implicit.

Sort of like a motor mechanic who implicitly assumes that girls can't fix cars. And so with that implicit assumption he gives less attentions and fewer opportunities to his female apprentices.

Because it's an implicit belief that he has. Boys are better at fixing cars than girls. And so my hope in this series is that we would put to death those implicit beliefs, the remaining corruption in our hearts that think or feel or acts with ill will towards others because of difference, especially race and ethnicity.

So what I want to try and do for the rest of our time together now is to help us to see and remove one of the subtle sinful prejudices that's in our hearts.

I want us to focus on a particular part of the text that was read out from John chapter 1. It's not the main point of the text. It's an implication I think relevant for our situation.

[20 : 57] It's in verse 43, 43, Jesus calls Philip to be his disciple. In verse 45, Philip finds Nathanael and says to him, we have found the one Moses wrote about in the law and about whom the prophets also wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

In other words, Philip has believed in Jesus as the Messiah and he's eager for Nathanael to know him too. He identifies this one written about Moses and the prophets by calling him Jesus of Nazareth.

So he identifies Jesus with a town, with a group of people who live in that town, just a small town, about 2,000 people, something like that. And for whatever reason, Nathanael responds to Philip's announcement in verse 46 with Nazareth, Nazareth.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? And so his question amounts to a foregone conclusion. Nothing good can come out of Nazareth.

What's the nature of his mistake? One way to describe it would be say that it was sinful prejudice against the people of Nazareth. He had what you call a stereotype of people from Nazareth.

[22 : 25] He made his judgment about Jesus based on that negative stereotype. But another way to look at it is that Nathanael did what we do every day.

He made a generalization based on multiple experiences, possibly biblical evidence, and then formed a probability conclusion based on that generalization.

So let me try and unpack that in this context. My experience is that the people of Nazareth are pretty ordinary people. And I don't see in the Old Testament that the Messiah actually comes from Nazareth.

death. Therefore, from those general observations, I think it's highly improbable, if not impossible, that Jesus is the Messiah.

Now, before we go any further, I would say generalizing from our experiences and drawing probability conclusions is both inevitable and good.

[23 : 44] The human brain works that way. In fact, our life depends on it working that way. For instance, you observe that mushrooms of certain colors, particularly bright colors, generally are poisonous.

poisonous. And so, when someone offers you with a mushroom, which is orange and yellow and purple and says, here you go, taste that, you turn it down.

You've never tasted one before, ever. You've never tested that particular mushroom whether it's poisonous, but you see that it belongs to a general class of mushrooms that are known to be poisonous.

And so, you form a probability conclusion and you refuse to eat it. Your life depends on not treating that individual mushroom in isolation from your experience.

You with me? Let me just say that again. You're with me? Fantastic. Of course, sometimes our judgments are totally wrong.

[25 : 00] They seem legitimate, but are dead wrong. My experiences in Alice Springs in 2005 that I mentioned a couple of weeks ago. And there was another time I was at a restaurant with a former Chinese member of our church one day.

We were sitting down, we were just about to order, and the waitress came over and this member spoke to this waitress in Mandarin. And the waitress looked at him and just didn't say anything.

And I looked at the waitress and I said, you've got no idea what he just said, do you? And she says, no, I don't. And I just laughed.

It turns out she could only speak English and she was in fact Korean. The probability conclusion based on observation and experience was in fact wrong in that moment.

But that's what our brains do all the time with our information. Sometimes it's sinful.

[26 : 07] I'm driving along the road, stopped the said traffic lights, man standing at the traffic lights, based on what he was wearing, the beard that he had, the haircut he had, and his general appearance.

I immediately concluded, he was a Muslim man of Middle Eastern descent. The next thing that happened in my mind was sinful.

I wonder if he's linked to terrorism in any way. That was the next bit in my mind which was sinful. So what does Nathaniel do?

Was his non-sinful, fully warranted probability judgment that proved to be wrong? Or is Nathaniel guilty of sinful prejudice? I think he's guilty. Because he doesn't say, can the Messiah come from Nazareth?

He says, Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth? Nazareth? If his heart were right, gracious, loving, patient, hopeful towards the people of Nazareth, he might have been legitimately skeptical about whether the Messiah came from Nazareth.

[27 : 18] Although he would probably would have not said, Nazareth, can anything good come from Nazareth? You see, he's moved from legitimate probability conclusion to sinful prejudice.

His view of these people is so negative that he sweeps all of them into the stereotype including Jesus, which is what I did on that night in November in 2005 with those Aboriginal people.

notice too that his reaction to what Philip says is immediate. He doesn't consider the possibility that Philip might have been right about what he knew what he's talking about.

He's temporarily blind to his prejudice. Now here's the point that I want to make. There's a fine line between legitimate probability judgment and sinful prejudice.

but there is a line. There is a line. And God sees it even when we don't.

[28 : 30] And we do not, we need to be careful to not allow our genuine and right assessments of people and circumstances to function in our hearts in such a way that it becomes a subtle self justification for sinful prejudice.

I've noticed that since doing this series that I have less patience with some people of some races than I do with others.

Our hearts are deceitful and corruption remains. We must put it to death. death. And so may the Lord give us absolute honesty with ourselves and with him.

May he expose every remnant of sinful prejudice. May we never use the legitimacy of generalization to cloak what is sin.

And so let me close with three indications of a good heart as we struggle with this line between inevitable generalization and sinful prejudice. It's a heart I believe that has received Christ, knows forgiveness and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

[29 : 57] Number one, this good heart desires to know people and to treat people for who they are as individuals, not simply as representatives of a group.

if this were not so, Jesus could not be recognized for who he is. Do you desire, I mean really desire to know people and to treat people as individuals, not just samples of a group?

Number two, the good heart is willing to take risks to act against negative expectations and belittling stereotypes when dealing with a person.

Paul says, love believes all things, hopes all things, and I think he meant that love strives to believe and hope for the best and not for the worst.

Number three, the good heart is ready, like Nathaniel, to repent quickly and fully when we have made a mistake and judged someone wrongly.

[31 : 10] This is what I want my heart to be towards you, it's what I want your heart to be towards me, it's what I want our collective heart to be towards the city of Chatswood.

And I believe it is vital for God's glory and our society, our society needs to see this kind of racial harmony and peace in action.

And so I would invite you to start right now. when I say now, I mean when we finish here and move out to morning tea, we finish our formal time together. I don't want to trivialise the gravity of the issue that we're dealing with in these series by making the application trite and simple, but let's do it anyway, let's start there.

Why not move out of here and talk with someone who's different than you? As a starting point, not just gather with the people that you normally gather with, across boundaries.

Maybe next week when you come to church, sit with someone different than you. Ask God to help you by the power of his spirit to build bridges of peace and harmony.

[32 : 41] I think it's absolutely essential and it has been for us and the Christian church for decades to deal with this issue. John Stott wrote this in his Ephesians commentary back in 1970-something, 76 I think, 79.

He said, it is simply impossible with any shred of Christian integrity to go on proclaiming that Jesus by his cross has abolished the old divisions and created a single new humanity of love while at the same time we are contradicting our message by tolerating racial or social or other barriers within our church fellowship.

We need to get the failures of the church on our conscience to feel the offense to Christ, to weep over the credibility gap between the church's talk and the church's walk, to repent of our readiness to excuse and even condone our failures and to determine to do something about it.

I wonder if anything is more urgent today for the honor of Christ and for the spread of the gospel than the church should be and should be seen to be what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is.

A single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their father and love each other, the evident dwelling place of God by his spirit, only then will the world believe in Christ as peacemaker.

[34 : 31] Only then will God receive the glory that is due his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen.