

Racial Justice Sunday Sermon

By The Reverend Folli Olokse

Sunday 9 February 2025

Friends, it is a pleasure and an honour coming here today. It is like a home coming.

With joy, I remember my ordination in this same cathedral 11 years ago.

With gladness I remember the services I attended and the friendship and support I received here and in the diocese during my stay here.

I want to use this opportunity also to thank Bishop Paul and Bishop Andrew and the Cathedral Chapter, especially the Dean, and members of the Racial Diversity Advisory Group for the opportunity to speak on this occasion.

Today, I stand on the shoulders of saints who for years have prayed and strived for Racial Justice, not only here in Guildford but also in our National Church.

As I speak, I am aware it is an issue dear to many of us.

My prayer is that we may all have that peace that was promised by Christ, a peace that is immeasurable peace that passes all understanding.

On a day like this, I am reminded of the words of the famous American poet Maya Angelou in her poem "I know Why the Caged Bird Sings."

In this poem she compares the life of two birds. One is free and able to fly to wherever it wishes while the other is caged and unable to do what birds are meant to do, fly!

The bird that is free can fend for itself and its flourishing and survival is almost assured.

Whilst the one that is caged, is not only limited in what it could do, it depends on the good will and generosity of others for its survival.

This poem reflects our society. This is not only in terms of racial justice, but it is especially felt by people of Global Majority Heritage.

Many feel like the caged bird, struggling to breathe and survive.

This year marks the 30th Anniversary of the celebration of Racial Justice Sunday. It is disheartening that after 30 years, there is still a need to have a special day to remind ourselves of the importance of Racial Justice in our society and churches.

Much has been done and achieved by the National Church and Guildford Diocese in this area.

In the last couple of years, we have seen the appointment of Global Majority Heritage people into position of Senior Leadership positions in our church.

Here at the Cathedral, there has been the appointment of Canons. At the diocesan level, the work of the Racial Justice Advisory Group is laudable.

But more could still be done. A look at the Senior leaders in our diocese and National Church show that it is not as diverse as it could be. I hope and pray that we will continue to build on the work already done until that day when our church life reflect the whole people of God.

The theme for this year's Racial Justice Sunday is Coats of Many Colours. This is of course taken from the famous coat that was sown for Joseph in the book of Genesis. Today it represents the diversity of the colours and skills of the people of God.

The Bible in various places reminds of the diverse nature of the people of God. Jesus himself commanded his disciples to go to out and make disciples of all nations.

It is important to note that Jesus neither said go to those who look like you or belief in what you belief, or speak like you or even dress like you, nor did he said go to different races.

In fact, the Bible hardly mentioned races. As Saint Paul reminds us, in Christ, there is no Jew nor Gentile, all are welcome, and all belong to this multitude of people that are created and loved by him.

Our reading from Acts reminds us of this.

As we sit in this Cathedral named after the Holy Spirit, we are reminded that when the Holy Spirit came, although it fell on the disciples, everyone present was able to hear their language and the good news was proclaimed to them in the language of their heart.

I often wonder why St Luke was particular in letting us know that various languages were spoken. It is safe to belief that every foreigner who was in Jerusalem on that day would either speak Greek or Hebrew, but we are told that they were spoken to in their own language. I believe Saint Luke want to point to the importance of language and the work of the Holy Spirit.

There is something powerful, welcoming, and enriching when we hear our native tongues been spoken.

This is even more when we are in a foreign land.

I do not know about you, but when I travel away from home and I hear people speaking in my native tongue, I feel reassured. I feel safe. I feel welcomed, known and loved.

These emotions, of been loved, welcomed, known and reassured are often not experienced by many GMH people in many of our churches.

Often, they are met either with a deafening silence that is unwelcoming and frightening, which demands conformity before they belong, or with a welcome that places a glass ceiling over their participation, a welcome that says, you can come in thus far and no more. A welcome that says yes but!

This is not the welcome we are meant to offer. This is not the welcome we have received from God. The welcome God offers us was freely given without reservation, without any caveat, without any glass ceiling. This welcome is what we read of in Revelations.

It speaks of a great multitude of every nation, tribe, and language!

Imagine what that will be like. A symphony of joy!

How great will it be if our churches on earth could start a rehearsal of what the heavenly assembly will look like?

How fantastic will it be if we allow everyone in our churches and chaplaincies to be so filled with joy that they could pray and praise in whatever way and language they wish?

This great multitude can be replicated in our churches when we do as Jesus commanded us in our reading from the gospel.

Just before he was arrested, Jesus called the twelve to himself and prayed for them. His prayer is for unity.

It is not a unity to be based on race, colour, or church tradition. It is a unity that mirrors that of Christ and His Father. It is the unity that echoes that of the Trinity. A unity of love.

Often, we tend to view unity as the eradication of difference or a situation where everyone agrees on everything. But the unity Christ prays for, is one that acknowledges that we are all different in many ways but are united in Christ.

It is a unity that acknowledges differences but allows each person to flourish. It is a unity that looks for those who are missing from the Table and brings them in and makes a place for them to comfortably sit and eat with others.

It is a unity that ensures that race is not a limitation to full participation in the life of the church.

It is a unity that does not place glass ceilings.

It is a unity that extends a hand of love, acceptance and welcome to everyone.

We all know this unity is not present in most of our churches and their structure of our church today.

It is worth striving for. And it is possible to attain, if we all play our part.

Each of us, individually and collectively could do at least five things to encourage this form of unity.

1. Love and genuinely care for each other as the Body of Christ.
2. Welcome others and make space for them to also flourish.
3. Encourage others to participate, pray and be who they are in Christ, bringing with them their culture, languages and experiences to enrich our worship, fellowship and liturgy.
4. Stand Up against Racial Injustices and dismantle unjust structures and practices.
5. Look out for those who are caged or under glass ceilings and help free them in any way we can.

When we do this, the world will know that we are Christ's disciples.

As we celebrate and pray for Racial Justice, may God, who has called us a part of the many colours of His Kingdom bless and keep us as we continue to strive for a better world where racial injustice and all forms of injustices are eradicated. Amen