

Celebrating Racial Diversity
Racial Justice Sunday 2024 Teaching Outline
By Lieutenant Nazia Yousaf - Intercultural Mission Officer
(Stockport Heaton Norris)



Key Scripture:

- 1 Corinthians 12 - one body with many parts
- Ruth 1:16

Introduction

- As the Body of Christ, it's important for us to not just accept each other but to celebrate each other too, no matter the background. Accepting is acknowledging that there are some differences in our cultural views, traditions, attitudes, ways of worship, skin colour, hair texture and cuisines. But celebration means that when we consider life and all its numerous small (and large) wonders, we see that there is plenty to be thankful for. In other words, if we keep focusing on the differences, we won't be able to see the similarities. We could miss out on the growth and development of deep joy that comes through embracing diversity in corps and in the Body of Christ, which helps our lives and God's mission both to flourish. Let's plan a bigger celebration feast.
- Britain is now the chosen home of people from all sorts of cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. For a moment, let's think about how people celebrated in the Bible. When the lost sheep was found, the lost coin recovered and the Prodigal Son returned home, the Bible tells us the people called a feast. No balloons or noisemakers - just good old food and joy became the centre of the celebration.
- How fortunate are we to enjoy the different cuisines available to us in modern Britain! Now imagine what it would be like if people years ago hadn't been accepting of other kinds of cuisines from outside of the UK. What if we insisted that the British live only on fish 'n chips, shepherd's pie, or cucumber sandwiches? What if other cuisines were discouraged? We would never have known what we were missing. The diversity of British cuisine accurately reflects the rich diversity of ethnic groups in our British society. The flavours of different cultures continue to nourish British society and make British life more interesting and colourful.
- The same is the case with today's Church: we come from different nations and cultural backgrounds. Our ways of worship, celebrations, interactions, biblical interpretations, traditions, uniforms and culture could evolve into something new and different while retaining the essentials of our mission.





Context

Belonging to the Body of Christ

- The phrase ‘body of Christ’ is first used and written about in those exact words by St Paul. He employed this metaphor to communicate important truths about the Church and to aid believers in appreciating the importance of diversity in the Church. Paul stated in a letter to the Corinthian church: ‘Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body - whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. And so the body is not made up of one part but of many’ (1 Corinthians 12:12-14). Because Christ is the Church’s head and we are all called to carry out Christ’s work, just as members of a body, the Church is referred to as the body of Christ. Although we all have unique talents, goals, and spiritual gifts, every Christian is just as vital to the Church’s ability to carry out its mission and function effectively. Each and every one of us is a necessary component of the body of Christ and is valuable to the Church. This diversity is something to be honoured and acknowledged as a vital component of God’s magnificent plan for the Church. (Drane, 2010, p314)
- Paul’s ‘language of belonging’ is particularly effective at illustrating the relationship between Christians. His use of familial language is crucial in this context. In his letters, he frequently uses words like ‘father’, ‘child’, ‘children’, and ‘brothers’ (and, I think, vice versa for other genders). This creates a compelling sense of belonging. We became family, the family of Christ, when we welcomed one another as the body of Christ. (Bosch, 2001, pp166-169)
- The Catholic theologian Hans Kung stresses his point in his magisterial study *The Church* (1967). ‘The unity of the Church is a spiritual entity. It is one and the same God who gathers the scattered from all places and all ages and makes them into one people of God. It is one and the same Christ who through his word and Spirit unites all together in the same bond of fellowship of the same body of Christ ... The Church is one, and therefore should be one.’ (McGrath, 2017, p372)
- Another beautiful interpretation of one body, one Church is given by Kung: ‘The unity of the Church presupposes a multiplicity of churches; the various churches do not need to deny their origins or their specific situations; their language, their history, their customs and traditions, their way of life and thoughts, their personal structure will differ fundamentally, and no one has the right to take this from them. The same thing is not suitable for everyone, at every time, and in every place.’ (McGrath, 2017:372)

Your people will be my people

- In the Bible, Ruth was from a different cultural background from her mother in law Naomi, which naturally also meant she had different local tastes and cuisine. She also followed a different religion. In Ruth 1:16, when Naomi



offered to allow Ruth to return to her own people, Ruth replied: 'Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.'

- Ruth followed her heart and went with Naomi to Bethlehem, where her influence on others increased. Instead of looking down on her as a foreigner, the Hebrews noticed her and admired her, and accepted her into their society where she felt she now belonged. She became part of the family, just as Paul calls his fellow Christians 'brethren'.
- Today as we are open to changes in our local taste and cuisine, are we open to accepting each other in our Church; noticing, admiring, and accepting each other's gifts, and encouraging others especially those who may look and act different from us? Although Jesus says the master of the house told the servants to 'compel them to come in' to the great feast (Luke 14:23), many of us are reluctant to compel different cultures and languages to come into our corps. We may be unsure how or are slow to let others feel welcome. We may even be unintentionally discouraging our brothers and sisters in Christ from making their contribution to our congregational and leadership life.
- Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:18-20, 'But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.' Just imagine eating the same kind of food every day? And what if everyone was to think and act in the same way? The world would be so boring. It's accepting the diversity and inclusion that brings colour and flavour to our world. And it helps us evolve into something more relevant and useful to our community today.
- We should trust that God has purposely placed each of us and our families here in the UK, in our community and corps, to enrich this land and share our gifts, talents, stories, and values with others. Ruth and Naomi's story was never one-sided; they both tried to understand and support each other without hostility or any reservations. They gave true honour and respect to one another. We too should have this celebration of acceptance and love for all our brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. Just as Ruth and Naomi affirmed: 'Your people will be my people.' You will want to commit to make others part of your people. This is our blessing and mission as an international organisation and multi-ethnic church.

Conclusion

- And even more important than just being willing, are we being intentional - yes, intentional in our efforts to 'spice up' the traditional British churches, our congregations, the groups in which we participate with rich and exciting new flavours? The secular British society shares a love for all kinds of food and cuisines. This helps make it an inclusive, diverse society and brings people together at the same table to enjoy and celebrate. Are we missing

out on the joy of tasty dishes in our church communities, a broader palate where each spice has its own importance and value? What is the ratio, the balance of what makes the whole? This is the point - some spices are required in more quantity than others, but the value remains in the mix. All those teaspoons and tablespoons, or those 'pinches' that we use in our kitchens, add up to make one main dish rich in depth and flavour.



Questions for reflection

- What groups of people in our corps/community might we find difficult to welcome, or even wish to exclude? Do these people want to feel welcome, admired, and accepted, and why do we find this difficult?
- Do we still believe that the message of the gospel is for 'whosoever'?

Bibliography and suggested commentaries

- Drane, John (2010) *Introducing the New Testament* Third Edition. England: Lion Hudson plc
- Bosch, David J (2001) *Transforming Mission*. New York: Orbis Books
- McGrath, Alister (2017) *Christian Theology, An Introduction*. UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd