

(Exodus 19:2-8a; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35 – 10:8)

So where will you be at 1 o'clock today? We all hope and pray that the planned rally in the Market Place will not be disrupted by extremists, and whether or not we will take part we all affirm that 'Black Lives Matter'. As people who live by the conviction that 'the kingdom of God has come near' we say there is no place for prejudice of any kind.

Now anyone minded to quote out of context a particular verse from today's gospel reading could easily misrepresent all that Jesus said and stood for. In sending out his twelve disciples as *apostles* Jesus did say, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles...'. But we know that he came with good news for *all* people; he commissioned his apostles to *begin* their work amongst the house of Israel.

And we also know that the good news of St Paul – the 'apostle to the Gentiles' – was that we are 'justified by faith'. The essence of his message is that we enter God's kingdom not simply by works (which could be the product of blind obedience to the Old Testament Law) but by faith in the victory won for us by Christ. But true faith leads to good works, and to the renewal of our lives. And this renewal will very likely lead to a change of heart and mind.

Elsewhere, Saint Paul says, 'We are all one in Christ Jesus; [we belong to him by faith]'. In the same passage he says, 'There is no longer Jew or [Gentile], there is no longer *slave or free*, there is no longer male and female...'. His vision of the Church, the 'ekklesia', is of an inclusive assembly or community of people in which all are regarded as equal. And all are outward-looking. The Church is to be the 'new Israel': a 'priestly kingdom and a holy nation' to borrow the phrase used of the Israelites in our first reading today.

In St Paul's day, when slavery and gross gender inequality were normal aspects of society, his vision of equality for all was a radical one. So naturally there would be no place for institutional racism or sexism. And I wonder what Paul would have made of an 'ekklesia' gathered on Zoom rather than in a market place or a building. Such a thing would probably have been beyond his imagination!

Likewise, he probably could not have imagined a society in which slavery had been abolished. As a nation we have revisited our shared history this week, and we have seen examples of lives turned around – transformed, *renewed* – by a true and active faith. Look at John Newton, the writer of the hymn 'Amazing grace', or Robert Baden-Powell, with his connections to many places, including Richmond. Look at St Paul himself, a self-confessed former persecutor of the Church.

And look at our own lives. How many of us have only just become aware that we too are beneficiaries of the slave trade that may have generated enormous wealth for a few but also paid for the physical and societal infrastructure that we have hitherto taken for granted? How many of us were unaware that it was only five years ago that as a nation we completed the payments agreed in 1833 to compensate slave owners at the abolition

of slavery? What resonance there is in the thought that the sum of £20 million then represented 40% of the national budget!

As we recognise the reality of the ‘amazing grace’ in which we stand we also recognise there can be ‘no more condemnation’. That’s the second line of the hymn ‘I am a new creation’ with its chorus: ‘Here in the grace of God I stand’. ‘No more condemnation’ is an expression which comes straight from St Paul’s greatest piece of writing, Romans chapter 8. The chapter begins ‘There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’. I invite you to study it – along with the preceding passage in chapter 7 which leads Paul to use the word ‘therefore’.

And if there is no condemnation within the assembly of people who are living out the values of God’s kingdom then there can be no condemnation of those who are invited to join. Condemnation of others has no place in God’s gracious kingdom; seeking to address inequality and injustice in all its forms most certainly does.

Perhaps current events are challenging us to recognise injustices to which we have long turned a blind eye. What about examples of modern slavery? Or inequalities in our education system? Or the reality of deprivation in our towns and cities – and in rural areas – where people live without hope? Or climate justice, an area in which we all see we are interconnected?

In God’s kingdom *all* lives matter. And God calls his Church to exemplify, to live out, the values of his kingdom. He calls us to renew our lives. He calls us to renew the lives of others by inviting them in to his kingdom – where all are held equally in a state of grace. He calls us to turn our faith into action, to be a people where *love works*.

Thanks be to God who renews our lives by his grace. May our actions indeed show that ‘the kingdom of God has come near’.

Amen.