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'With the pandemic heightening an already divided and unequal society, what lessons can people of faith learn to enable us to build a more inclusive church?'

My friend Anna send me a text message back in May saying that her friend and fellow midwife had died. She was only 29 and Anna was devastated. Safaa Alam worked with Anna at the Birmingham Women's Hospital and her death came just two weeks after the death of her father from the same illness. That illness was of course coronavirus - Covid 19. Back then, scientists were only just beginning to see a link between higher mortality rate and people of colour. Many said perhaps there was a genetic reason for this, but those of us who have grown cynical about oppression in the world just knew in our bones it was because of systemic racism.

Eventually a study came out that showed that to be the case. The main reason for the disparity in health outcomes between White people and people of colour is racism. Whether that looks like inequality in economic status, discrimination and stigma affecting access to healthcare or the relative severity of diseases like obesity and diabetes due to increased instances of poverty; all roads lead to the same destination: structural racism.

The pandemic has heightened the inequalities in an already unequal society. That's what crises do, sadly. It's the same story with climate change. A couple of years ago, I toured the country with the performance artist Peterson Toscano and we used comedy and drama to highlight the very serious link between inequality and climate change. It is no coincidence that people of colour suffer more from the effects of climate

breakdown. It's also no coincidence that poorer communities or LGBT people suffer more. These two crises – the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change heighten the already existing injustice in the world.

This reminds me actually of the parable Anthony Reddie talked about in his session earlier today. Many call it the Parable of the Talents but I think we should call it the Parable of the Unjust Landowner or the Unjust Master. The way we often interpret this parable in our churches is completely perverse. No Jewish man in the 1st Century would have told a parable to promote usury / lending at interest – it was against Jewish law and religious custom! The interpretation that Anthony spoke about is actually far more likely to be closer to the truth. Jesus is highlighting the injustice of usury and the injustice of landowners, those in power and the world generally. He says pointedly, "Those who have much will be given more, and those who have little will have even the little they have taken away from them". How wicked is that! That is not a metaphor for God! That's a metaphor for the injustice and inequality of the world we live in!

My wife Ellie spoke to me the other day about the disparity in health care and how Covid-19 is not the first time it's been noticed. Racism in health care didn't start with this pandemic. She told me that black women are far more likely to die in childbirth than white women. There is no genetic reason for this. The reason is racism. Black women are more likely to be ignored and less likely to advocate for themselves because they've been ignored and belittled. Ergo worse outcomes in childbirth.

I have only so far spoken about racism, but the pandemic had brought to the fore inequalities across the spectrum of areas Inclusive Church works on. For example, the way many countries and individuals have talked about older people and disabled people as if they are somehow more dispensable is reprehensible. The situation in care homes has been dreadful – with multiple carers coming with no PPE, spreading the virus, but no relatives allowed and sick and dying people unable to say goodbye to those they loved. That is not treating people like human beings! A way should have been found to be humane under difficult circumstances.

I have heard people say things like "We can't all suffer for the minority" and "They were going to die soon anyway" – *genuinely*, someone said this to me once. Disabled people and older people are not dispensable minority – they're our friends, our family, our community. They are valuable and valued each and every one. They are not simply needs and burdens to society. They are gifts. How have we ended up in a place as a society where our sense of community is so destroyed that we see some people as independent and useful and others as dispensable and burdensome?! The truth is that *all* of us are a combination of needs and gifts. All of us. And we will all get old and probably have health issues and/or become disabled as we get older, if we fortunate enough to live to a good age. Disabled people and older people are not "them". They are "us".

It's important to note that many disabled people are suffering more in this pandemic than anyone else. Sometimes at genuine fear of their lives if they catch the virus, many have been unable to see anyone or allow anyone to visit for the entire year. My friends – a disabled, wheelchair user, her husband who has health anxiety, and their 3 year old daughter – only just began to see a very few people in their garden last month, and then the cases started to skyrocket again and they stopped. The little girl hasn't been to nursery since February, and her mother has had to give up work on her PhD to do full-time childcare. I'm sure that, in the case of my friends, the father does all he can to help with childcare and they only chose for the mother to do the childcare because he can't give up his full-time paid job. However, in the bigger picture, women all over the country and the world have been taking on far more of the childcare burden, even when it might make more sense for the men to. This is another one of the injustices brought to the fore in the pandemic.

I could go on, but my brief is also to address the actions which we can take to build a more just and equal church (and, by extension, world!) I think the first thing is to look at any learning points we can take forward. This period has been mostly a horrible experience for everyone – some more so than others – but there are nevertheless some glimpses of how we could do things better to learn from. Let's take the example of online church. It is mostly or at least partially online, depending on the church. This has excluded some (for example, those who are too poor to have internet), but equally many disabled people I work with have said to me "Welcome to my world!" It has been eye-opening to learn that the world of online engagement is

the one which many disabled people find completely normal. For reasons of either not being able to easily get out of the house, or for reasons of church being completely inaccessible, many disabled people feel that online church has been an equaliser and an opportunity for them to be fully included for the first time.

It's clear that, going forward, we need to do better with this. Perhaps this means delivering a mixed approach to online and in-person worship in order to better include and value everyone. At both of our major annual events – the Disability Conference and the Annual Lecture (neither of which are usually online) – we've had people say to us that they've been able to participate for the first time and it's been brilliant. Let's bottle that and take it forward as inclusive churches.

Another thing we could do as churches is to think about how someone's background vastly alters the way they approach things in life. We need to think about this before judging people. For example, when the Black Lives Matter protests happened, many people criticised the protestors for gathering in large groups with a pandemic on the loose, as it were! But sometimes, anger at injustice is a stronger force than fear. After all, black people have been living with the fear which comes from white supremacy for years!

In a similar way, there are often questions as to why black people and people of colour more generally don't take part as often in climate protests. One reason is probably that climate change – as important as it is – is not framed as an issue of the day-to-day struggle to live and stay alive. Many people of colour, more than white people will ever understand, are busy trying to live and get by day to day. Climate action just isn't the first thing on the list. For this same reason, working class people are rarely found on climate protests. The other reason people of colour are not often found on climate protests is that the people organising the protests don't think intersectionally enough. Those heightened tensions we talked about are happening *now*. Poorer and non-white communities are already suffering more than anyone else from the effects of climate breakdown. When we talk about climate change; we need to talk about inequality. When we talk about the pandemic; we need to talk about injustice.

Black Lives Matter and disabled lives matter. Marginalised people are not dispensable and it should never become normalised to have such clear inequalities and injustices in society. All the people the unjust landowner wants to take away from, we need to raise up and empower. Let's make sure that those who have little are given *more*. *That's* how to build a more just and inclusive church through the pandemic and (God-willing) out the other side.

Ruth Wilde is the National Coordinator of Inclusive Church. You can watch a video of the talk here[1].

Source URL: <http://inclusive-church.com/blog/ruth-wilde-talk-liberation-theology-conference-2020>

Links

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aq5A3ffYwI&t=125s>