



Christianity and The Future of Race

29 May 2022

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Genesis 1: 26–end Matthew 13: 24–30

“An enemy has done this.”

Some of you may have seen a video on the news recently of two young people fighting at a shopping centre in New Jersey, USA. What makes this video striking is not so much the fight but the reaction of the police officers when they arrived. So, here were two teenagers fighting: one black and one white. At the point the police officers arrived the white teenager, who was a bit bigger was on top of the black teenager. One of the police officers pulled the white teenager away, put him on a sofa that was there, and the two police officers worked together to pin the black teenager down quite roughly. They pulled his arms behind him and handcuffed him. They then took him to the police station, while the white teenager walked away.

I do apologise to any Americans in the congregation for using this incident. In a way, it could have been anywhere. It just happens to be a really good illustration of what I want to say.

It was a clear case of treating people based on the bias one has in one's mind. For centuries we have all been operating with the mind that associates black people with negative things, as something dangerous or risky that needs to be contained, or even evil. It's a way of thinking that has placed humanity in a hierarchy where white people are at the top and black people at the bottom.

But that has not always been the way people thought of human beings. It certainly is not how God intended the world to be. In our first reading today we heard of how God created human beings with the intention that they would populate the world, live together joyfully, prospering together and loving and looking out for each other. But there was a point in history when that changed. The African American writer, Ibram Kendi, has pinpointed that moment to the time in the 1400s when a Portuguese scholar called Zurara wrote about the life of Prince Henry.

What happened was this: The Portuguese under the leadership of Prince Henry were the first Europeans to navigate round the west coast of Africa to eventually reach the part we would today call West Africa. They brought with them Africans who they sold in Europe as slaves. When Zurara was commissioned to write about the life of Prince Henry, Zurara presented this slave trading as missionary work, arguing that by bringing these Africans, who in his description were like beasts, Prince Henry was helping them to salvation and

civilisation. So even though slavery was already being practised across Europe, this was the first time it was linked to the innate qualities of a people who can be identified by their skin colour.

From there the idea of a racial hierarchy spread. A hierarchy in which black people are seen as innately inferior and placed at the bottom. The idea that leads to the kind of incident I described earlier, where two teenagers fighting are treated completely differently.

Our second reading from the New Testament can help us understand what has happened to humanity. In the parable of the wheat and the tares we hear of a farmer who planted wheat on his land. But when the men were asleep, someone went and planted tares among the wheat. The key moment in the story for me was when the farmer saw what had happened and said, "An enemy has done this."

Jesus used this to illustrate what would happen at the 'end of time', but it is also analogous of what has happened to the way we as the human race think of ourselves. God made us in his image, to live together and prosper. The Evil One planted the poison of one people being innately superior to other. And that idea planted by the Evil One became very deep-rooted, leading to widespread and damaging discrimination against people who are not white, particularly black people.

It is an idea that is so pervasive that people in many eras embraced it. Take for example the era we call the Enlightenment. That idea of a racial hierarchy was rife. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, believed in it and wrote about it. When he heard about a black man called Francis Williams, who had been trained here in the UK as a barrister and was practicing law in Jamaica, he ridiculed the idea. He wrote, 'In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.' (David Hume, as quoted in Ibram Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, 2017).

Immanuel Kant, another well-known Enlightenment thinker, similarly believed in a racial hierarchy. He pointed out that an inhabitant of Europe had a 'more beautiful body, works harder, is more jocular, more controlled in his passions, more intelligent than any other race of people in the world'. For Kant, 'humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of whites'. (Immanuel Kant, as quoted in Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning*.)

The renowned economist, Adam Smith, had the same belief: 'All the inland parts of Africa', he wrote, 'seem in all ages of the world to have been in the same barbarous and uncivilised state in which we find them at present.' (Adam Smith, as quoted in Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning*.)

Smith we can see is factually incorrect, because of what we now know about Egypt and other ancient kingdoms in Africa. But my point here is not really about these specific individuals. As a practical theologian, I value the work David Hume on empiricism. My point is to do with the pervasive nature of the idea of racism, even in such an era as the Enlightenment that we have a very high regard for.

The good thing is that the same New Testament reading we heard today contains seeds of hope. It talks about harvest, when things will change, and the weed would become easily distinguishable from the wheat and can be pulled up and destroyed.

And here is the good news. That harvest time has come. I know that because for the first time since Zurara's poisonous idea was planted, the world can now see the idea of racial hierarchy for what it is: as something false and totally made up. For the first time, we can distinguish the wheat from the tares.

The intensity and widespread reaction to the killing of George Floyd points to this awakening. Across the world people of all ethnicities – white, black and others – came out on the streets of their cities to say that they can no longer stand for this. They no longer want to live in a world where a white man can kneel on the throat of a black man in full view of the public until the black man dies. That is why I say that harvest time has come.

The other part of this is that we all can be part of the weeding, and I hope we do. We should all be active in weeding out the racist ideas and practices around us. It has to be intentional in order to happen. Jesus did not say that a time would come when the weed would die off on their own. No. The workers would have to go to search for it, to take it out and destroy. That is the approach we have to take. Both as individuals and as institutions we can all join this effort.

It also means that our response should not be dictated by how comfortable the subject of racism makes us feel. Racism is uncomfortable to address. But if we just focus on avoiding discomfort, we will never be able to overcome it.

I hope and pray that we all join this fight. So that we can restore humanity to the idea God had in mind when he made us – of people living and loving together in joy and prosperity.