

8<sup>th</sup> June 2020

Dear Friends

One of the effects of the pandemic has been that many of the plans people were making have been put on hold. They have been delayed and deferred, sometimes at personal or material cost. We have found ourselves in a season of waiting and wondering, wondering when things will go back to normal. As we know now things will not be returning to normal and life will be different in many ways.

One of the things that we have delayed is exploring a new vision for New North Road Baptist church although the deacons made a beginning at their away day in Blackley in February. At that meeting I named seven themes that I believed would form the core of our vision. One of these themes was 'prioritising welcome, inclusion and diversity.'

As I write these words I am aware that these words may sound 'politically correct' the kind of words that are often written into shining policies and become soundbites on the lips of people who don't practise what they preach. Words can be empty and meaningless, yet I believe these are words that reflect the character of Jesus and embody the values of the Kingdom of God. They are words for our time.

Many of us will have been deeply shocked although perhaps not surprised at the death of a black American called George Floyd at the hands of four police officers who lynched him in a public street. His death has triggered a wave of protest in the United States about 'systemic' racism and similar protests have occurred here in the United Kingdom too. Some of the young adults who I mentored and disciplined in East London have participated in these protests. While there is good reason to be concerned that such protests could be spreading the coronavirus, I believe it is worth pausing and reflecting on why the death of George Floyd has become so significant.

There are of course many factors at play, including the way that the coronavirus pandemic has had a much more severe effect on poorer communities and a long history of black men and women dying because of racist violence in the United States. I hope that this moment and the wave of protest will mark the beginning of real

change in that nation and that there will be a greater willingness to challenge racism in our own nation too.

When the statue of Edward Colston who was responsible for trafficking thousands of people from Africa to the Caribbean was toppled on Sunday in Bristol, I was reminded of Gideon topping the altar of Baal in the book of Judges. Though I don't believe this was the best way for this to happen, I do believe it was overdue, the statue could have been removed to a museum and formed part of an exhibition about the evil of the transatlantic slave trade. Facing the reality of racism also requires us to recognise the way it has shaped our nation's history too.

Racism is born of fear, although it is often disguised this fear can be expressed in attitudes and behaviour that exclude other people and make them feel less than human. We are all vulnerable to fear, but Jesus promises us that this love will be perfected among us and in that love, there will be no fear. In the bible, in 1 John this love is contrasted with hatred, for we love because God first loved us and this love requires that we love our brothers and sisters. (See 1 John 4 vs 13 -21). I want to affirm and acclaim the promise in verse 16 that as God is love if you abide in love, you are abiding in God.

As a community of God's people, we are called to grow and mature in love which casts out fear and this is integral to a vision of a church that 'prioritises welcome, diversity and inclusion.' We are called to be a sign of the Kingdom of God, a community that offers people a foretaste of that great celebration when all God's people are gathered about the throne in worship and this sign is hopeful. When people come to New North Road Baptist Church I hope and I firmly believe this is what they will discover.

We will be returning to New North Road soon and when we do that a stranger walking through the door would meet people who were born and bred in Yorkshire, people from other counties and at least one Scotsman, people from Iran, people from African nations and people from the Windrush generation and others too. Isn't that marvellous! As we grow in love and respect for one another through Jesus Christ our community of faith is offering a sign of hope for the whole of Huddersfield.

Of course, prioritising welcome, inclusion and diversity also touches on other ways in which people are different from one another. We are a community that includes people with different kinds of disability and people who are living with pain that is often hidden. We are a community that includes people of different generations and who learn in different ways. We are a community that includes young people and children with all the challenges and opportunities of their growth. We are a community of people who love different kinds of music and song.

We are also a community in which some people are tech savvy and some are not. Learning new technologies has been a big learning curve for me and I hope we have found good ways of including everyone. We have appreciated your feedback.

One of the wonderful things I experienced when I was walking about in the early days of lockdown was seeing all the rainbows in the windows of many houses, often drawn by the children who live there. The rainbow is such a powerful symbol. In the book of Genesis, it is a symbol of hope and renewal as Noah and his family leave the ark after the flood wates have subsided. It seems to be a good symbol for our times. With our street front windows at New North Road we could put a Rainbow in the window as a sign of hope and gratitude for all that the NHS and personal carers have done during this crisis.

As I said two weeks ago, I would be glad to visit anyone who would like to see me. I can go for a walk in the park or come with my own flask and folding chair and sit outside your door. Please do contact me on 07852490034.

Please remember our deacons and the volunteers who are preparing to reopen the church. I want to say thank you to them and we will be sharing more news with you about this with later in June.

God bless you

Your friend and pastor

Mark

