

Breaking Chains...Making Peace

The following sermon was preached by Rev Kumar Rajagopalan at The London Event – the annual meeting of the London Baptist Association which was held at Christ Church and Upton Chapel on Saturday 23 June 2007.

Isaiah 59 vs. 1-15

Since 2004 I've attended various meetings that have considered how to commemorate the bicentenary of the Abolition of Slave Trade Act.

From the earliest meetings organised by Churches Together in England, and later taken up by Set All Free, the issues discussed have been painful and emotionally charged.

- Some are perplexed that 200 years after the event that so much emotion is still swirling around. They scratch their heads and ask...

Why are we not at peace with one another over this issue ?

For others such a question displays monumental ignorance and lack of understanding about the many unresolved issues that still exist.

The next milestone will be in 2033. 26 years from now we will commemorate the act to abolish slavery from the British empire.

The question for me is...

“What will it take for us to be more at peace with God and one another with respect to this issue 26 years from now ?”

Approaching Jerusalem the Lord Jesus wept over the city and said...

"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes.

We need to consider what will bring us true peace with God and with one another with respect to this heinous act against humanity.

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Isaiah begins by telling the people that the Lord is able to save them and that He is able to hear them. He is not incapable of either saving them or hearing their cry and answering them.

It's important that we begin by acknowledging that the Lord wants us to know and have true peace with respect to this matter. He's not at fault for the lack of true peace in this matter.

In *Making the Black Atlantic* James Walvin comments on the unbelievable fact that former slaves celebrated "the return of their long-denied freedom by giving thanks to the God of their white masters." According to European slavers this was the very God who sanctioned and blessed the slave trade.

With God the totally impossible, becomes possible.

However we don't want what it takes steps that lead to true peace. We're happy to live with an uneasy peace.

In my work I consistently hear people tell me that they want peace, but they don't want to do anything that will make for true peace.

Isaiah says...

The way of peace they do not know...

But I'd go further and say, "*They don't want to know way of peace.*" With our mouths we say we want peace but our heart tells a different story.

We prefer to live with our sins and shortcomings, we prefer that God hides his face from us and not hear us, **because** the way of peace is painful and costly.

What is the way of peace ?

In this passage the first 8 verses are an indictment against the people of God. They're both difficult and painful to hear. Yet to have true peace it is critical that the people hear them.

The indictments that the prophet brings are very pertinent to the issues that we're grappling with, but I don't think that we're hearing them.

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I'd like to draw your attention two critical charges that he makes, which we must first hear. As you hear what I share, please...

- Listen without being defensive.
- Listen without nit-picking.
- Listen without taking offence.

Don't listen to me, listen to the Spirit of God, speak to your heart. As you hear be aware of the deceitfulness of the heart. In Jeremiah we read...

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."

Guard your heart from swatting away the word of God.

Allow Him, permit Him to enter your innermost being and speak His word to you. Let Him search your heart and examine your mind.

First, Isaiah draws attention to a deceitful lying culture that pervades the *thoughts and words* of the people...

3b Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things. 4 no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil. 7b Their thoughts are evil thoughts;

Lack of truthfulness means that people are unable to move forward or make any progress.

All too often people prefer to gloss-over differences.

They prefer not to speak the truth *either* because they think that it'll make matters worse, *or* because it's just too difficult to do so.

Experience has taught me that this will only result in the issue being put off, until one day it returns to bite you on the rear end with even more devastating consequences.

Jesus said, "...the truth will set you free."

The truth brings liberation.

When the truth is spoken, then we know where we stand and from there we can work for peace.

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As I work with churches on racial justice, I encourage people to truthfully express their prejudices, ***however offensive***, because then we all know where we stand and can seek to make progress.

But speaking the truth is difficult; and hearing the truth can be equally painful and hurtful. It's a hard thing to do.

For me this year has been characterized by half-truths, spin, misrepresentation and ignorant assertions.

Such lies make it impossible for us to know where we stand and so make it impossible for us to move forward.

The chains of deceit that bind the minds of people in church and society must be exposed.

- All must speak the truth, however painful, and then wrestle with that truth to find a way forward.
- All must listen and try to understand one another's perspective.

Let me highlight a few of the most important *chains of deceit*:

- (i) First, in the Baptist Times, in radio programs, national newspapers and last week lecturing Spurgeon's students, I repeatedly hear white British people say, "Ah, but Africans sold fellow Africans into slavery."

Did particular tribes sell their own people and those who belonged to other tribes to Europeans as slaves? Yes they did. However we need to dig deeper and uncover a little more detail.

- Different tribes used slavery as a form of punishment for criminals and prisoners of war.
- Unlike chattel slavery practiced by Europeans, African tribes never treated their slaves as animals. Slaves could eat with their masters and even marry into their masters family and so lose their slave status. Ignatius Sancho a contemporary of Wilberforce who campaigned for the abolition says that African slavery is far more humane than European slavery. When a charge of murder was brought against those who threw slaves overboard from the *Zong*, the attorney general stated that since African slaves were not human beings but goods and chattel, just like horses, they could not be murdered!
- Sancho rightly asks whether his fellow countrymen would have sold their own if the Europeans had not created an insatiable demand for African slaves.

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- *Most importantly Africans and Caribbeans are taking steps to address this issue. They're embracing the truth about their past history and seeking to move forward. A reconciliation day is being planned for October 2007.*

Behind the statement "Ah, but Africans sold fellow Africans into slavery", is an attempt to decrease the horrors of the European chattel slavery.

It's an attempt to say, "Well everyone did it, including Africans, so don't be so hard on us."

Such defensiveness is a natural response of the human heart, but it fails to hear the truth.

As an ex-Brahmin caste Hindu, I understand the desire to say, "Don't be so hard on us." At the *Unfinished Business Conference* I attended a seminar on the oppression of Dalits run by Maria Doss, himself a Dalit.

It was a very uncomfortable experience hearing the catalog of injustice and oppression that Dalits face at the hands of high caste Hindus, particularly Brahmins.

One more than one occasion I wanted to say something that would soften the charges that he was making, but I'm very glad that I kept quiet.

*I'm glad because what I would've said **to slightly** soften his indictments would have been like a drop of correction in an ocean of injustice. It would have been a childish petty comment.*

- (ii) Second, abolition was not merely an altruistic Christian act

Wilberforce and Newton Societies trumpet the acts of these two men, but there are many other people and factors that led to the act of abolition.

- Unrest in various Caribbean islands, slave rebellion in Haiti and fear of similar bloody revolutions on British colonies.
- The possibility of denying free labour to the French and other European competitors.
- The fact that profit margins were falling and the British colonies were less profitable than other European colonies.
- The agitation of British traders who felt that the monopolistic trading of West Indian planters was absorbing too many resources.
- The actions of the Sons of Africa based in London, which included Equiano and Sancho.

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There is a lack of integrity when people assert that the British were driven by their Christian convictions to turn their back on a very lucrative trade for the well being of Africans. *The heart is deceitful.*

(iii) Third the Underlying Desire to Make Money Has Been Understated

Again I quote from Ignatius Sancho who wrote...

It is with reluctance that I must observe your country's conduct has been uniformly wicked in the East –West Indies –and even on the coast of Guinea. The grand object of English navigators – indeed of all Christian navigators is money, money, money.

Of course, this drive for money did not abate after 1807.

- It resulted in even more Africans being crowded on to ships to make it worthwhile for people to break the law.
- After the abolition of slavery 1.5 million Indians were transported as indentured labourers to work in the Caribbean. Indentured Chinese were also transported. It was effectively slavery by another name.
- Enslaved Africans continued to work in British colonies producing a variety raw materials well into the 20th century.

The love of money drives the way in which we conduct trade with the 2/3rd world.

Though you may find it blasphemous, I think the song, Jesus is the name we honour, should be changed to, "Money is the thing we honour..."

(iv) Fourthly, why do we pat ourselves on the back for stopping sin?

As I've reflected on the Wilberforce worship and the rather skewed Amazing Grace film, I've been asking myself whether this is an appropriate response.

Of all the misrepresentations, I think that this is the most problematic because it focuses rather narrowly on the events of 1807 to the exclusion of almost 250 years of slave trading.

Furthermore it prevents people absorbing the sheer horror of what happened because it ignores the pain.

Is there any biblical precedent for such self-congratulation when we stop sinning ?

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Truth telling is critical for peace.

- The importance of facing painful truths is seen in how the Germans have admitted the truth about their Nazi past. It has been essential for the German to move forward. In Hamburg on cobblestones outside homes are engraved the names of families transported to concentration camps.
- Contrast that with how history books in Japan glossed over Japanese atrocities in China and the intense anger felt by the Chinese. A few years ago there were angry demonstrations in China.

The cross is a place of truth. The communion table is a place of truth. The truthful verdict of broken bread and poured out wine is that we are sinners in need of God's saving grace and mercy.

We need to hear this prophetic indictment that in this most barbaric act we have been economical with the truth. We have indulged in spin and misrepresentation.

We have not embraced the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about the culpability and sin of the different people groups that we represent.

At times we have resorted to trumpeting the specks in other's eyes while ignoring the logs in our eyes.

The second key indictment that Isaiah makes is that there is no justice.

No-one call for justice; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked paths.

Once the truth has been expressed, once the cards are revealed, when you see the bloody mess on the carpet in the aftermath of truth, you need to do something about it.

It can't be swept away. Justice must be done.

Truth is the foundation stone for justice to be done. Without truth you can't have justice and without justice there can be no peace.

The way of *peace* they do not know; there is no *justice* in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.

TRUTH → JUSTICE → PEACE.

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No truth means no justice, and no justice means no peace.

Without truth & justice true peace is impossible to achieve.

I don't want to explore atonement theory either here or now, but judgment, the execution of justice, and peace are closely related. The one leads to the other. In Isaiah 53 vs. 5 we read...

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; **the punishment that brought us peace was upon him**, and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 61 vs. 8 says, ***“For I the Lord love justice...”***

Justice is so important to God that he sent the Lord Jesus to die on the cross for us. God can never tolerate, sin. He hates injustice.

There are numerous references that couple peace with righteousness. Where there's injustice, lack of righteousness, there can be no peace.

At the cross the Son of God demonstrates both truth and justice.

The cross is a place of physical and spiritual pain and cost. You remember that the Lord cried out...

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me ?

Doing justice is costly.

- Too often **because** people don't want to pay the price of justice, they don't tell the truth.

In 1833 when slavery was supposedly abolished in the British empire, the slave owners received £20 million compensation. At that time the market value of each slave was £37, therefore there were about 540, 541 slaves in the British hands.

What did the slaves receive ?

NOTHING!!

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At the Durban Conference on Racism in 2001 Britain and other colonial powers put out this statement...

'We acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade, including the trans-Atlantic slave trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity, not only because of their abhorrent barbarism, but also in terms of their magnitude, organised nature and especially their negation of the essence of victims,'

This is not the whole truth, because they've not made any reference to the racism that underpinned it.

But more importantly their other actions reveal that they were unwilling to either own the truth or to pursue justice.

At the conference Europeans, including Britain stated that...

...only modern slavery can be called a crime against humanity because the trans-Atlantic trade was legal at the time.

...legal at the time.

Can you believe that so called Christian or even post Christian states could put forward such a pathetic argument ?

How would you respond to the statement that all those who practised paedophilia before it was criminalized, were acting legally ?

I'd love to hear the response of the tabloid press to such a statement.

Therefore since the slave trade was legal "at the time" they refused to apologise for it.

However some Europeans and others had the moral conviction to state the obvious. One report said...

Eleven nations, led by the Belgians, believed that there was no moral alternative to saying sorry. The UK - backed by three other former slave-trading nations, Holland, Spain and Portugal - officially objected on the grounds that an apology could leave the Government open to a lawsuit.

No desire to see justice done, because justice is costly.

With respect to justice what really sticks in the throat of the 2/3rd World and members of the 2/3rd world living in the West is that the West will always ensure that it gets justice.

Justice always flows from the rest to the West, but it hardly ever flows from the West to the rest.

Lockerbie, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israeli violation of UN security resolutions, Guantanamo Bay, etc.etc., are just a few examples of how justice always flows from the rest to the West.

What must ‘we’ do with these indictments ? How should ‘we’ respond to the charge of deceitfulness and injustice ?

We’ll return to these questions in a minute.

As these indictments are made the people of God admit their sins. In verses 9-11 there is a collective admission of the consequences of an absence of truth and justice.

In a myriad ways...

*...justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not reach us.*

Let me earth the ‘us’ within the London Baptist Association.

As an association have we ever appropriately responded to the fact that in the 1950s, 60s and even early 70s, white Baptist churches in London told Africans, Caribbeans and Asians not to worship with them ? In effect they were told...

Jesus may accept you, but we’re a bit more choosy!

Of course I know the well-rehearsed response to this question.

It was in the past. I didn’t do it, so I’m not responsible.

In 2002 the World Council of Churches issued a document called, “Being Church and overcoming racism: It’s time for transformative justice.” It can be viewed by visiting www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments.nsf/index/plen-4-en.html

It records how the United Church of Canada, United Methodists in the US and the Lutheran Church of Norway, have dealt with their past history.

The church in Norway tried to wriggle out of its responsibility for mistreating the Roma people by saying that all Norwegians were responsible, but the Roma people did not accept this.

The document records...

The question of "we" [the church]...brings us back to the concern about corporate responsibility for historical wrongs. As Christians, we are called to acknowledge and confess our individual sins with regard to racism. However, that does not isolate us from the fact that we carry a history with us, a history that is ours because of heritage and ancestry. It is a history of power and privilege of some, and of all the benefits that come with that over against the exploitation, oppression and, often, the death of others. It is our responsibility to account for the wrongs of our ancestors as much as it is our responsibility and privilege to acknowledge and cherish their good deeds. The churches do have a prophetic role to play in the wider community to counter a widespread notion that, as citizens, we have no responsibility for the actions of previous generations.

We're happy to embrace Wilberforce's actions as if they were our own, but we're loathed to embrace the actions of Christian slave traders as if they were our own.

I wonder why ?

As long as we persist in pushing away the sins of our forebears, and fail to see the effects of past sin on the present, then we will forever be groping in the dark, like people without eyes.

We'll stumble, fall and make no progress.

Now let me return to the questions that demand an answer...

- **What must we do with these indictments ?**
- **How should we respond to the charge of deceitfulness and injustice ?**
- **What will it take to move us from here to an acknowledgement of the consequences of sin that we encounter in verses 9-11?**

We need a bridge to take us from these charges to seeing the consequences of our sinfulness upon us and upon others.

The best bridge is the example of the incarnation.

The Lord entered our world. He became one of us and understood us; he understood our weaknesses and our temptations.

Long before the cross He experienced prejudice, misunderstanding, hatred, abandonment, false accusations and betrayal that others endured.

- We need to find ways of entering into one another's world.

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- We need to listen carefully to the present pain that has its roots in past and present sin.

As we listen we need an openness and vulnerability to the Spirit of God breaking us.

Last year I attended a 2 day conference on Dalit Christian rights. At the Baptist Union Assembly I attended the seminar that Kumar Swamy gave on Dalit issues, and as I've stated I attended a seminar on the oppression faced by Dalits at the Unfinished Business conference.

In each I said nothing; I've just listened, absorbed and have been open to the Lord breaking me.

The prophet Nathan presented David with a parable and through the parable David had a window on his own sin and its consequences, and he passed the death sentence upon himself. He is broken by his sinfulness.

In psalm 51, David prays to the Lord...

“Against You, You only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight so you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”

In the passage before us there is a move from an acknowledgement of the consequences of our sin to the realization that ultimately the sins are sins against God.

For our offenses are many in your [i.e. God's] sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities: rebellion and treachery against the LORD, turning our backs on our God,

And in 2 Corinthians 7 vs. 9-10 Paul wrote...

For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

Only by entering the world of those descended from former slaves, whose lives have been disfigured, crushed and broken by the racist prejudices that permitted and sanctioned the slave trade, can the descendents of the perpetrators of such racism, understand, grasp and own the need for truth and justice that will bring true peace.

- If the white British Christian community can hear these prophetic indictments...

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- If they can imitate Christ and enter the brokenness of others that they too may be broken and come before the Lord in humble prayer and supplication...

...then through the mighty work of the Spirit they will become sorrowful as God intends and be brought to a place of genuine heartfelt repentance that leaves no regret.

When that happens, I assure you as Karl Henlin assured you at the BU Assembly, your African and Caribbean brothers and sisters will warmly embrace you, gladly forgive you and joyfully take you by the hand and dance with you into wherever the Lord leads us.

Forgiveness, reconciliation and the hand of peace is held out to our brothers and sisters whose forebears engaged in this barbaric act.

Will you respond in ways that will make for true peace ?

Rev Kumar Rajagopalan
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