

Report on the Evening Discussion Service, 27.09.20

Led by Rev Arlington Trotman

We had arranged for Arlington to lead us in a special act of worship and discussion that would feature the topic of Racial Justice. In the course of the service and in the question session, we were able to glean from Arlington's remarks that his experience and knowledge in this subject area had both been informed and derived from advising a wide range of significant national and international organisations. We gradually realised we were in an extremely privileged position being steered in our thinking by someone with great prominence and knowledge in the field.

The service was held on one of our **Zoom** channels and was a "live" event. The thought of seeking everyone's permission and the technical difficulties of recording the session proved too much. Hopefully, this report will help inform those unable to attend and act as an ongoing reminder to the nearly forty people who joined the service.

Worship started conventionally with a call and prayer. We joined in a hymn – "God of freedom, God of justice" (R+S 625), recorded previously by the choir. The set Gospel text for the week was read (Matthew 21: 23-27) and Arlington preached on the theme of Authority and Lordship. The question session then began. We were delighted that Arlington's wife, **Rev Paulina Hlawiczka**, also joined the discussion and was able to add her insight to the discourse. Each of the contributors has written a short paragraph on their question and Arlington's response.

Fiona L asked what did Arlington think about the Diversity performance on Britain's Got Talent and the response by the British public?

(to see this follow <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzFNKFitHjw>)

Arlington explained that black artists are feeling a need to respond to the **BLM movement** and many are using any available opportunity to shine a light on the current struggles. All art shows a story and there will be some inevitable resistance to that from some members of the public. He and Fiona were pleased that ITV had supported the performance but some people may just want to enjoy the dance and not have to engage with its context. Anything that does raise **debate and dialogue** is important, however.

Linked to this, **Pippa H** asked Arlington about the impact and benefit, if any, of sportsmen 'taking the knee'. As expected, Arlington responded that, with such large viewing figures for sporting events, such as motor racing and American football, their action **raised awareness** and had a **considerable reach**. However, he went on to say how important it was that those individuals took action to back-up the 'demonstration'. He said the long-term impact would be restricted unless there was work behind the scenes to challenge and to work to overcome the issues.

In response to **Zac G's** question 'what is the most annoying thing white people do?' Arlington referred to one of his own experiences of overt racism, where white men drove up to his new car, leaned out and spat on it, simply because it belonged to a black man. Such experiences are common, and underline a view that black and brown people should not have nice things, should not have professional roles, and if they do, they cannot have gained them honestly and fairly.

Nicola R asked a question which was concerned about the challenge of prioritising the voices of black people while not making them responsible for the education of white people in racial discrimination. Its particular context was the work of institutional diversity committees, but it might

also apply in other walks of life. Arlington's response was to advise that everyone can take **responsibility for their own education**, for learning about the ways in which discrimination occurs and the ways in which racial prejudice is displayed. Black and brown people should be invited to participate in structures, and be consulted on their views, but they should not be made responsible for providing the solutions to address systemic racism. Paulina added that it is wrong to imagine that black people will always be comfortable discussing racism: it can be bad enough living with it, without constantly being expected to talk about it too.

Anne- Marie B asked should the campaign for racial equality also address the rights of women? If so, should it address the inequalities faced by women generally (e.g. lack of opportunities, low wages, and domestic violence) or should it focus on the problems and issues faced by women from specific ethnic backgrounds (e.g. arranged/forced marriages in some Asian cultures)?

Arlington acknowledged the issues faced by women and women of colour. He defined the **protected characteristics** detailed in the **2010 Equality Act** and said that it would be difficult to tackle too much in one campaign – that the impact of racial awareness work could be diluted if it tried to look at gender issues as well. It would be better if gender discrimination was led by a group with this focus. Prejudice against any of the protected characteristics should be approached by specific groups, though he recognised that many of the issues, like those raised by Anne-Marie, cut across several boundaries making it a complex problem.

Linked to this topic, Mark H had asked in a previous discussion if it was not true that all lives mattered. He was neatly and firmly put in his place by members of the Youth Group (and Arlington) that the BLM movement was addressing a very long seated prejudice and that **all lives could only matter if black lives did**.

Tabitha G asked about how we might best tackle examples of **prejudice and microaggressions** around us, whether conscious or unconscious, and how we might support those who are targets. Arlington replied that if our friends were targets, then we should comfort them as we would over anything else, and make it clear that we support them. He suggested that, if our friends and acquaintances displayed such behaviour, we might wait until we are alone with them and try to start a discussion about how their behaviour upsets us and why. He urged us to resist the temptation of violence, but to **support** our friends and **challenge** racist behaviour as far as possible without starting a fight. Paulina added that we should recognise the damage caused by microaggressions that, although the term suggests that they are small and that they could be easily discounted, to the recipient they can be very hurtful indeed, particularly if they are repeated.

Adam G's question to Arlington was, "What can a predominantly white middle class, male lead church and congregation do to widen the appeal it has to help the congregation reflect better the population of the city around it and to make newcomers to the church from different ethnic backgrounds feel welcomed and more comfortable?"

The constituent parts of the answer encapsulate the fundamental issues that have been discussed in many of the other questions and could easily lead to hours of discussion. The main points related to Arlington's very first experience of church in the UK where the minister was unwelcoming, asked him "who invited you" and suggested he went to a different place of worship (i.e. with other people of colour). Arlington then outlined some key differences between individual prejudice, ignorance and lack of thought which leads to unintended actions; ending on the problem of systematic racism within intuitions (i.e. the Church). For Adam, the message was clear. Be careful with the language you use and make sure that you are being positive and welcoming rather than inquisitorial and

accusatory. Asking someone where they are from because they have different colour skin from you is not welcoming! We need to understand that, as a predominantly white group of people, we are not likely to have felt the pressures and isolation of being judged, rejected, refused work or attacked just because we look a certain way. Finally, we need to accept that, as a group or as individuals, we need to listen to those, like Arlington, who know what this feels like. We need to accept we will get it wrong sometimes and be gracious about it when we do, which is easier if there is good dialogue. Paulina said it was sometimes very difficult for black and brown people to talk about the issues and we should recognise this and accept it.

Arlington recommended a book he has recently reviewed (see Derek's Q&A). Adam has also found several books very interesting and useful, such as "Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race" by Reni Eddo-Lodge, "My Name Is Why" by Lemn Sissay and "Natives" by Akala (all are available on audible to listen as well).

Earlier in the discussion, Arlington had pointed out that we should not always make it a black person's job to tell us what we need to do. That said, **Derek G** pressed on regardless with his question: If we are to "be the change we want to see", what is the one thing we need to do first - and conversely what should we not do?

We should avoid any type of violent reaction to instances of racism or prejudice, Arlington responded - "fighting back" only inflames the situation and detracts from the cause. Nor should we make excuses when racist things are said, or try to "explain them away". Paulina added that she had had to learn this humility: note when our place is to listen, not to speak. What we should do, first and foremost, is **engage in meaningful dialogue**. This special service was a good example, said Arlington. But if we thought we would get away with doing just one thing, we would be mistaken. On top of that, he added, we must take the responsibility to **educate ourselves** about the issues (Arlington urged us to start with A.D.A Frances-Williams' book ***Ghost Ship***, a very readable study of institutional racism in the C of E, which he had recently reviewed for Church Times). Then, with sensitivity, we need to **raise awareness at home**, to examine our own **personal biases** (whether conscious or unconscious) and to **work locally and globally** to counter systemic racism.

We joined together unmuted and with video to close the service by saying the grace to each other. The Zoom lag lent this some "charm" but we felt it sounded less like Babel and more like Pentecost.

The plan had been to continue the worship and discussion for an hour. Arlington spoke so eloquently and with such "authority", and held our interest so well that many of us were surprised to see the clock tick round to twice that long. We held a brief time of fellowship afterwards and proceedings closed just before 9pm.

We hope to arrange similar events, perhaps 3 or 4 times a year using a similar format. The Worship and Education Group would welcome your thoughts on suitable topics and, especially, excellent speakers of the calibre of Arlington.