

MEDITATION : RACISM AND RAINBOWS

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

I had a dream. Once long ago in a land far away, there lived a beautiful people. Some of the people were purple others blue, some of them were orange others crimson, and some pink and vermilion. There were also green people and yellow people, in fact people of every colour of the rainbow. They were beautiful as individuals, but when they were all together on special occasions they made a spectacular sight. Their colours blended in rich harmony as they acknowledged each other as part of a tapestry in which each was necessary, none superior, each an important part of the whole, but none insignificant on their own. They were known far and wide as the rainbow people. Unlike other nations, there were no white people or black people, for those colours are absent from the rainbow, only people of all colours, shapes, shades and sizes, like pieces in a magnificent jigsaw puzzle. Each piece was necessary to complete the picture, none more special than any other, but when each piece linked arms the picture was stunning even though while still incomplete.

Then I woke up. It had been a wonderful dream, but it was not reality on the ground, certainly not if you scratched beneath the surface. How could it be when for centuries all people saw was black and white, and when laws insisted that they should never mingle, never form a rainbow, and laws, guns and dogs were used to keep them apart. Water-cannons were also used to suppress their protests and wash all the colours down the gutter. So only black and white remained to make sure that everyone knew who they were, that all that mattered was that you were white or black. From childhood we learnt we all learnt that we were not part of a rainbow. but as different as daylight and midnight, some superior others inferior, some privileged others oppressed. Most whites imbibed this belief with their mother's milk and their father's talk who, in turn, learnt this from their ancestors who lived over the seas and thought blacks were alien creatures inhabiting a dark continent alongside strange beasts.

Many thought that this was just how God intended it to be, that it had been like this since the foundation of the world. Some were predestined to rule and others to serve, some were intelligent and could play cricket because they were white, and others dumb and could only play soccer because they were black. Yes, everything was in black and white, like the laws written down to ensure that they remained separate and knew their place. Scholars and politicians thought long and hard how to describe this and eventually they found a word that seemed to fit. They called it “race” and insisted there was a white race and a black race, even though we know that there is only the human race made up of many cultures of all colours. So racism was born and racism ruled. In protest black became beautiful and white the colour of oppression.

But things don't work well in black and white. It is like watching old movies where people are not only black and white, cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad, who shoot each other but never talk to each other. Just like living in a colourless world makes you ill, so racism was a disease which made society sick. People lost their humanity, and committed crimes against humanity. And even though not everyone had the disease, it affected

everyone, for when some are in bondage to racism all are in bondage and end up doing hurtful things to each other. So people began to dream of and struggle for a non-racial nation, a nation made whole.

After many years, too many deaths and much suffering, enough people came to their senses and helped construct a rainbow. Their dream became reality. And they all settled down to live happily ever after. Except for one thing. They did not take into account that the racism virus, like the plague, had not been eradicated, it was only dormant waiting its chance to reappear and infect the fragile rainbow. Too little had been done to get rid of the virus; it had only been brushed under the carpet. Too few acknowledged that establishing a non-racial society could not be achieved by the stroke of pen. Human nature had to change, and that is a tough call.

So twenty years after the rainbow nation was born, and much achieved, the reality of racism cannot be ignored or denied. Its symptoms keep showing themselves, both crude and subtle, for not everyone is afflicted to the same degree. Some forms are mild like the common cold, others as violent, abusive and deadly as Ebola. Everyone knows a crude racist when they see one or hears them speak. But subtle racism is more difficult to detect, and even those who are afflicted do not always acknowledge that they have the disease, and sometimes vehemently deny it. So they are taken by surprise when someone calls them racists. "Who, me?" they ask in shock.

There is no easy cure for racism, no antibiotic. But we do know that unlike Ebola and the plague, it can't be dealt with by isolation. Isolation only strengthens the virus. The way to overcome the disease is through contact, through discovering that people who are different are just like oneself; that we are all human beings, all of the same human race. We belong together because God has made us so and history has brought us together. It is only as we learn to respect each other so that our differences actually enrich each of us, that the virus can be contained and eventually overcome. It is a long, hard battle, because racism has perverted justice and robbed people of their land. But we have to start somewhere, and we can and must begin with ourselves. We can acknowledge that the virus is real and not deny its reality. So we have to be careful about what we say about others, about the attitudes we have, the way we act, the off-the-cuff comments we post on Facebook. This is not all that is required to build a rainbow nation, but without this we haven't begun.

Oh, and by the way, Jesus gave us a golden rule to deal with the racism virus. Do to others what you would want them to do to you and therefore MMspeak about them in ways that you would like them to speak about you. Imagine such a world! Is it only be a dream? Or can we make it a reality?

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