

This short act of worship has been produced by Nancy Hands for you to use at home or wherever you are and if you are unable to worship in a church building. We invite you to spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

Belonging to Healthy Multi-Ethnic Congregations (ii)

Who am I?

Welcome

A warm welcome to everyone joining us for our worship this morning. It is the second in our Black History Month series, with the title 'Belonging to Healthy Multi Ethnic Congregations'.

Let us worship God

From the prophet Haggai: 'I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory', says the Lord Almighty.

And from Ephesians 2: 'You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God'.

Hymn Sing for God's glory (Singing the Faith 116)

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzHKXiFt4os>

Sing for God's glory that colours the dawn of creation,
racing across the sky, trailing bright clouds of elation;
sun of delight
succeeds the velvet of night,
warming the earth's exultation.

Sing for God's power that shatters the chains that would bind us,
searing the darkness of fear and despair that could blind us,
touching our shame
with love that will not lay blame,
reaching out gently to find us.

Sing for God's justice disturbing each easy illusion,
tearing down tyrants and putting our pride to confusion;
lifeblood of right,
resisting evil and slight,
offering freedom's transfusion.

Sing for God's saints who have travelled faith's journey before us,
who in our weariness give us their hope to restore us;
in them we see
the new creation to be,
Spirit of love made flesh for us.

©Kathy Galloway (b.1952)

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God of glory, we marvel at all you have created. God of power, for whom nothing is impossible, we worship you. God of justice, who shows us the path to freedom, we praise you. God of grace, mercy and love, we adore you.

All-seeing God, you know us better than we know ourselves, as you know all your children. You created us to reflect your love, mercy and grace, and we have not lived up to the potential you intended for us. We have failed to demonstrate your love in our care for each other and the world. We have not reflected your justice, mercy and forgiveness in all our relationships and attitudes. We have not always worshipped you in spirit and in truth. In silence we offer you our repentance and desire to change.....

Lord have mercy on us.

Thank you, loving God that you forgive us, setting us free from sorrow and guilt. Restore us to be the people you created us to be, for your glory. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Introduction

The purpose of this course on healthy congregations is to raise awareness for all of us, of the need to cultivate churches where culture and ethnicity matter and where people of all colour and background are affirmed and respected, reflecting the richness and diversity of the kingdom of God.

Being part of the Circuit's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion group myself, it has become apparent to me how subliminal white-privilege thinking is a fact. Of the 12 people on the steering committee, just two of us are not black. If asked who I am, my answer would be "I am Nancy, I'm married, with two daughters and 4 grandchildren and I'm a Christian. If pressed, I could add I'm a Methodist Local Preacher, trained as a nurse, worked in a Primary School in the Special Needs department and was a Magistrate. I wouldn't start off by saying I am white. I wouldn't think to say I am British. I wouldn't say I am female and straight. They are all true, but I am so comfortable being who I am as by right, if you like, I don't need to say them. I fit in. Those fairly crucial bits of who I am don't really signify to me; I don't have to think of my ethnicity at all. However, being part of the steering group, and being more aware of individuals with negative experiences of life in Britain because of how they look or where they come from, I have realised how much their identity is impacted. If you are not white, the difference in life experience, feeling of displacement and discrimination is such, that the first response to that same question is often 'I am black,' as if the colour of their skin determines who they are - which tends to be their experience of how others judge them. It can be a lonely place, if you feel different from those around you. None of us is called to follow Jesus on our own; we are called to community and to be salt and light to those around us. The more ethnically diverse and valued we are inside our

church walls, the more chance we have of relating to, and reaching, those around us in our very mixed London suburb. In the book of Revelation, there is a vision of the new heaven and new earth, with all nations represented. Everyone was there. Everyone was equal. Everyone was welcome.

Our readings this morning are about ethnicity in the Bible; how we are influenced by people of different ethnic backgrounds to our own, and how we identify ourselves. I would want to broaden that by saying how we are influenced by *any* people different to ourselves.

The passages are very short and the first two may seem incidental and easily passed over. The third contains a list of countries. The first is about who Joseph in the Hebrew bible married; the second is from the beginning of the story of the Exodus, and the third is about the day of Pentecost.

Readings:

Genesis 41:50-52

Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, “It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.” The second son he named Ephraim and said, “It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.”

Exodus 12:38

Many other people went up with them, and also large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds.

Acts 2:5-11

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

Reflection

There is no such provable thing as a pure bloodline. We are all a mish mash. Various scientific studies and television programmes have demonstrated that. It is a myth that the Israelites were pure bred and forbade mixed marriages. It is true there were certain Rabbinic injunctions about Ammonites and Moabites in Deuteronomy, and the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah were particularly strict about intermarriage after

the exile, when they were trying to reconstitute the Jewish community in Jerusalem, believing that the marrying of foreigners was the reason for all their woes. However, what mattered to God's people before then, was that all in their community worshipped the one true God, not who they married. The roots of the people of Israel were mixed. Abraham came from Ur in Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq. Isaac was born in Canaan, as was his son Jacob. It is interesting that the Canaanites were despised and sworn enemies of the Jews in Jesus' day. Jacob's son Joseph was born in Haran in Mesopotamia, 7.5 thousand miles from Canaan. And we heard in those short verses that he married Asenath, who was an Egyptian, and their two bi-racial sons were fathers of two of the twelve tribes of Israel.

In Exodus, we read that more than just the Israelites fled from Pharaoh with Moses. The 'mixed multitude' would have included those from Cush (modern day Sudan) and others, who had migrated to Egypt for work: ethnic groups treated harshly by Pharaoh.

In our New Testament reading, there is another 'mixed multitude' from Africa, Asia, Middle East and Europe, God-fearing people all together on the Day of Pentecost, who were intended to understand Peter's words, be changed by them, take them home, spread the news and become members of Christ's new family. Who knows what multi-national and multi-ethnic bonds were made between them after that day.

The first chapter of Matthew lists the lineage of Jesus, including Tamar and Rahab, who were both Canaanites; Ruth was a Moabite (from modern day Jordan), and Bathsheba was a Hittite (from the southern Balkans).

We might argue, this list has nothing to do with Jesus, as it is Joseph's blood line and not Mary's, but the point stands that this was the line of God's choice of human family for Jesus to be brought up in. All these people contributed to God's purpose. The mention of those 4 women in the genealogy opens up, for me, issues beyond race: the misuse of power, manipulation and coercion, prejudicial judgement and how people can become stigmatised. Tamar in Genesis 38, was ill-used and not treated with respect, and tricked her father-in-law into sleeping with her out of desperation - and with considerable intelligence. She suffered the indignity of being labelled a prostitute when she became pregnant: judged without evidence. Rahab, in Joshua chapter 2, we are told *was* a prostitute, although we have no detail as to whether this was her choice - as it often isn't today. But she was a brave woman with a good heart, who gave shelter to Joshua's men and believed in their God. Having saved their lives, Joshua ensured that she and her family were rescued when Jericho was attacked. Subsequently she married an Israelite of the tribe of Judah and became the mother of Boaz, the great-grandfather of David. Ruth is remembered and celebrated for her devotion and loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi, but if you read the

book of Ruth carefully, you also see how opportunistic and manipulative Naomi was, risking Ruth's honour and safety by sending her to the threshing floor, a 'men only' place, at night, to sleep beside a drunken man, in order for them to gain security. The plan worked and Boaz married Ruth and Naomi was looked after. Poor Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11, was the victim of King David's lust and made pregnant by him, became a widow because of him and was then taken possession of as his wife.

These four women were caught up in some form of sexual exploitation, which if and when discovered, inevitably attracted criticism, gossip and judgement of character. It's no different today. When that happens, it generally leads to being left out in the cold: not belonging, being an outsider.

To have healthy congregations, and healthy communities, and to be able to say we are strangers no more, we must see the real people behind the surface: people with family history, hurt, possibly victimisation or damage, but also with intelligence, ability and gifts. That is true of people of different colour, of different sexual orientation or different lifestyle. Each one wants recognition as a unique human being of worth, with something of value to contribute.

I was talking to a Welsh friend recently. A new acquaintance had said to him, 'So, what part of Welsh Wales do you come

from then?', with a laugh. My friend's nationality was a joke, because he had an accent. There was a comment about woolly sheep and rain. My friend had been instantly pigeonholed by someone else's idea of who he was. The fact that he has been educated in England and had a doctorate in theology would never have reached the threshold of conversation; he was dismissed as 'Welsh'.

That same friend told me he did not like the word 'race'. He said, 'There is only one race: the human race. We have nationality certainly, but we share the same race.'

Sharing the same race - the same essential elements of being human - should connect us. Sharing the same God - the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all life - should bind us to one another. The awareness of that connection enables us to learn about and from one another, be influenced and become appreciative of what is important culturally. I am sure most of us have neighbours culturally different to ourselves. Our cul de sac in Enfield Town has only 11 houses. We have four Italian households, one Greek, one Swiss, one German, one Indian, one with a Norwegian daughter in law and a bilingual grandson with dual nationality, and two white British. We are mixed. If we are not influenced a bit by those we live, work and worship amongst, we must be living in little bubbles of resistance.

In 1969 - 52 years ago - the pop group Blue Mink released their debut single as a statement against racial intolerance, and they

called it Melting Pot. I was 16 and it was what we were all singing. Some of the lyrics are not acceptable now, but sung by a racially mixed band, fronted by a black American singer, they were not considered out of place then.

‘What we need is a great big melting pot
Big enough to take the world and all its got
And keep it stirring for a hundred years or more
And turn out coffee coloured people by the score.’
‘If you lump it all together, you got a recipe for a get-along scene; Oh what a beautiful dream.’
A naive vision of utopia, which when you are 16, sounds exactly what you want.

We certainly want the ‘get-along scene’, but we don’t want a homogenised human race! How boring that would be! Difference is value, variety, interest and enrichment. Diversity is beauty. If white English people were only exposed to white English influences, think what we would not have access to in music, literature, art, theology, philosophy, language, worship and food. All our influences are from elsewhere.

John the Baptist didn’t identify himself racially or religiously, but by his mission, as ‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness’. His identity was being the herald of the Messiah. That was what mattered. He was hugely influential, by his unusual lifestyle and uncompromising message, and his

followers identified as ‘John’s disciples’.

The apostle Paul sometimes had to justify who he was, in order to preach the Gospel and be heard: he needed his credentials, which had shaped him. In Acts 16, having been beaten without trial and imprisoned in Philippi, he terrified the magistrates by announcing he was a Roman citizen, which put them in the wrong. In Acts 22 in Jerusalem, having been arrested in the Temple, he was given leave to speak. He declared he was a Jew, born in Tarsus, a prosperous city of the Eastern Empire, but educated in Jerusalem, their city, by Gamaliel, a leading authority in the Sanhedrin. That defined him as a certain, respectable kind of person, and definitely not an interloper. He writes to the Philippians that his Jewish credentials are impeccable: he ticks every box for belonging in the very top drawer of orthodoxy. He used to rely on that as his passport to success, but he says it means nothing to him anymore because he has found Christ. That has shifted his identity. In Galatians he writes, ‘It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me’. His encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road had more than influenced him; it had transformed everything about him.

We don’t often consider what influences have shaped us. If I think ethnically, I must have been influenced by being in a school which was half Jewish, by nursing at a time when most people of African or Caribbean descent were porters, orderlies

or cleaners; when Irish nursing friends were targeted by IRA hate-mail and threats. I must have been influenced by sitting on the Bench in Lordship Lane when the Broadwater Farm riots were recent history; working at school with newly arrived Kosovan refugee children, traumatised and with no English; of vast traveller families, where the children were unclear who were siblings and who were aunties. Born and brought up in Greater London, my experience is multi coloured. I wonder how you identify yourself; what influences have affected how you see yourself.

In 2016, the media got hold of the information that Justin Welby's biological father was Churchill's private secretary, and not Gavin Welby. He was asked to take a paternity test which proved that the allegation was true. It was understandably a great shock to him, but when interviewed about how that affected who he thought he was, his reply was, that it didn't; he said, 'I am a child of God'; that was his primary and most important identity.

Perhaps after this course, we will all be able to identify ourselves, not just by the colour of our skin, our orientation, education or employment, or our past, but by our belonging equally to the family of God and the Body of Christ; that our identity - safely and securely and forever- is in being a child of God.

I hope and pray that the richness of heritage, background and experience we all bring will be willingly learnt from, both ways: celebrated and incorporated in how we worship and manage our church life together.

A hymn written by Norman Wallwork, in the current Prayer Handbook 'A Place for All', begins:
'A place for all there is to rest,
Where each may be an equal guest;
Where all may find a healing space
Within the Trinity's embrace.'

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Our prayer of Intercession is based on a hymn by Brian Wren and the response to 'Your kingdom come' is '*Your will be done*'. But first, we take a moment of quiet to bring to God those who are on our minds and hearts today, for those closest to us, for our community and for our world. Let us pray
(Silence)

Great God, we pray for justice and for peace. Help us pray, and work to answer prayers that other people say. This we can do in faith and see it through.
Your kingdom come, *Your will be done*.

Great God, we pray for justice and for peace. Help us give, till everyone can take life in their hands, and live. This we can do in love and see it through.

Your kingdom come, *Your will be done.*

Great God, we pray for justice and for peace. Help us see - and help our neighbours see - what is and what could be. This we can do in truth and see it through.

Your kingdom come, *Your will be done.*

Great God, we pray for justice and for peace. Help us bring to light whatever tramples down, or hides from sight. This we can do with strength and see it through.

Your kingdom come, *Your will be done.*

Liberating God, we pray for justice and for peace. Help us hope and, hoping, stride along our way while others grope. This we can do till God makes all things new - for Jesus is alive today.

Amen.

We join in the Lord's prayer together.

Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Hymn There's a wideness in God's mercy (Singing the Faith 416)

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26cyYoBqiQ8>

There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.

There is plentiful redemption
in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the Head.

There is grace enough for thousands
of new worlds as great as this;
there is room for fresh creations
in that upper home of bliss.

For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

But we make his love too narrow
by false limits of our own;
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own.

If our love were but more simple
we should take him at his word;
and our lives would be illumined
by the presence of our Lord.

Frederick William Faber (1814-1863)

Blessing

As we go into our week, may the Spirit of Truth guide us, may the Spirit of Love free us, and may our actions be our prayer. And may the blessing of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be with us now, with those we love and with those we find hard to love, now and evermore. Amen.

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