

So, I wonder where each of you stands on the whole Black Lives Matter debate – although there shouldn't really be a debate about *that*! Few people would actually say that Black Lives *don't* matter. Because that would be undeniably racist and *no-one* wants to be called racist. Even the *BNP* whose stated policy is that all non-white people should be 'invited to return to their country of origin' – so, if elected, they would 'invite' *me* to go 'back' to India even though I've never been there – even *they* insist that they aren't racist! But surely discriminating against people whose skin is a different colour to yours is the literal *definition* of racism?!

But then this is why some *non-racist* people have a problem with the slogan 'Black Lives Matter'. Of course black lives matter [they say] but do they matter *more* than white lives (or any others)? And surely a better slogan would be *All Lives Matter*?!

And obviously they do. But that's precisely why some of us are emphasizing that black lives matter *too* because black people – in not just the United States but *here* – are constantly subjected to forms of discrimination or even outright violence that white people simply don't experience.

Archbishop John Sentamu (who retired this week after nearly 25 years as a Bishop) has talked publicly about how he was *regularly* stopped by the police for the 'crime' of 'driving a nice car while black'. I wonder how often any of *you* have been stopped by the

police for no good reason...? The Archbishop said it happened to him about once a year on average...

Or our own Bishop Rose, who spoke at a black lives matter event in Canterbury yesterday, she's had people – *in the last few years* –telling her to 'Go back to Africa!' Which is not just rude but stupid cos she's from Montego Bay. In Jamaica.

I guess her *ancestors* were originally from Africa but then that's true of all of us in that the scientific consensus is that modern humans evolved in Africa about two or three hundred thousand years ago – although I'm guessing that the person who shouted abuse at Rose in the street didn't have a degree in paleoanthropology. Or anything for that matter...

So, the reason we stress that black lives matter is because black people are constantly getting the message that they *don't*. And when someone – however well-meaningly – responds 'But surely *all* lives matter?' it feels like they're not getting the point.

There's been a lot of this on social media in the last few weeks and some fantastic responses to it. From the factual – so when someone shouts 'My house is on fire!' you don't say 'All houses matter' – to the more comical: 'Saying All lives matter is like interrupting Martin Luther King when he was giving his 'I have a dream speech' to tell him about the dream that *you* had last night!'

But the most relevant for us as Christians is imagining someone who was present at the sermon on the mount and every time Jesus says ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit [or] blessed are those who mourn’ they say ‘But what about everyone else? Doesn’t God care about *everyone?*’ Well, yes, but it seems to me that God is *particularly* concerned about the powerless, the oppressed, the marginalised. Theologians call this God’s preferential option for the poor and we can see it very clearly all through Scripture...

For a start it was in our Old Testament reading just now: God commands His people to love ‘the stranger’ (which could equally be translated as the immigrant) *a)* because *they* were strangers in the land of Egypt, where they were violently *mistreated* and b) because *He* loves the stranger too. He also says that, because He’s not *partial*, He ‘executes judgement for the orphan and the widow’.

Now, you can imagine people on the ancient Israelite version of Twitter saying ‘But surely God *is* being partial there?! What about people who *aren’t* widows or orphans? Don’t *they* deserve justice too?’ Well of course they do. *But*, if one group has been *systematically* excluded or oppressed, the only way to redress the balance, to restore a level playing field is to *consciously* favour those who have been *unconsciously* disadvantaged. Hence God’s *preferential* option for the poor. And *I* would argue that programmes of *positive discrimination* towards marginalized groups – whether

based on race, gender or physical ability – are a political manifestation of that biblical and thoroughly-Christian principle.

Now, I'm aware that some people would dismiss what I'm saying here as 'Cultural Marxism' [and] one of my more right-wing friends from my old church 'heckled' a recent post of mine on this subject by linking to an article which 'exposes' the Black Lives Matter movement as a sort of Trojan horse for [quote] 'disingenuous far-left nonsense'. And, to be fair, it's true that the UK Black Lives Matter website does talk about 'dismantl[ing] imperialism, capitalism, white-supremacy, patriarchy and [all] the...structures that disproportionately harm black people... [and] challeng[ing] the rise of the authoritarian right-wing across the world...'

So it *is* kind of left-wing but is it nonsense?!

Well, obviously I don't think so. I think that white privilege and male privilege and *class* privilege are real and that a truly fair society would be seeking to rid itself of them but I'm emphatically *not* a Marxist – as I discovered when I went along to a meeting for people who wanted to 'Stop the BNP' when they were looking like they might make gains in the local elections back in 2006.

So, this was shortly after I'd been ordained and, as someone who'd been terrorized by members of their *parent* organisations, the National Front and The British Movement, back in the 80s, I really wasn't keen on the idea of these racist thugs making a come-back. So I turned up at this meeting and I'd deliberately worn my dog collar

because I wanted people to see the church taking a stand but that was clearly a mistake...

Because it quickly became apparent that I was the only person in the room who wasn't a card-carrying member of one of the *infinite* number of rival far-left organisations who all hate the Romans but nowhere near as much as they hate each other.

I'm assuming most of you got the Monty Python reference there? And unbelievably, the meeting actually started with a lengthy and heated debate about what this anti-BNP group should be *called*. So, someone suggested 'Stop the BNP' – which was what'd been on the *poster* I'd seen and seemed reasonable to me – but of course we were against *all* fascist groups so why not a more general 'Stop the Fascists'? But then that was felt to be too close to 'Unite Against *Fascism*' which was already taken; as was 'Anti-Fascist Action' so how about 'Action against *Fascists*' or the less formal 'Say No to fascism'?

Well, after about ten minutes of this, I got exasperated and I'm afraid that what I was *thinking* slipped out of my mouth and I said – *sort of* under my breath but loud enough for everyone to hear – 'Well why don't you just call it the People's Front of Judea and be done with it?'

Again, you need to be familiar with Monty Python's *Life of Brian* to get that. See me afterwards if you're not but the man in the Karl Marx T-shirt sitting next to me clearly *was* because he absolutely *exploded* at that point and started ranting about how this was what happened if you opened the movement up to people who weren't *fully* committed

to the [Marxist-Leninist cause and the] overthrow of the *entire* capitalist system which I clearly wasn't as a stooge of the establishment and a purveyor of what his idol called the Opium of the masses...

So, I said 'Look, I've clearly wandered into the wrong meeting here. *I* thought that the purpose of this group was simply to stop the BNP which I think we should cos I don't like Nazis – not to destroy capitalism and establish a dictatorship of the proletariat or whatever. So, if I've got that wrong – 'At which point the chairman apologized on behalf of Tarquin or whatever his name was and assured me that *anyone* who wanted to stop the BNP was welcome, whatever their political views in general. So I stayed; although I could still hear Tarquin muttering 'But it's only *through* socialism that we can really defeat fascism...' and no doubt he then left that group to form his own: 'Marxist-Leninists against Fascism' or whatever.

Anyway, my *point* is that you don't need to be a Marxist to believe that Black Lives Matter and, as I say, God's righteous preference for the poor, the oppressed, the powerless is seen throughout Scripture.

We looked at our Old Testament reading from that perspective but it's in the New Testament too: the sermon on the mount, the beginning of Luke's Gospel in which Mary proclaims that God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly, that he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. But don't

rich lives matter too? Sure, but they don't need God's *help* in the same way...

And skipping over other examples I could give in Saint Paul's letter to the Galatians or the book of James, both of which highlight specific concern for the poor as something that's of paramount importance to God and therefore to Christian faith, it's in Mathew's famous parable of the sheep and the goats that we find the *fullest* expression of this theme and from the lips of Jesus Himself.

So, in Matthew 25, Jesus suggests that the single criterion on which the Last Judgement will be based is 'How did we treat the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner?' So that's an interesting one for people who want to bring up George Floyd's criminal past! Jesus didn't suggest that we only have to be kind to *innocent* prisoners and actually the 'punchline' of that parable sums up the Christian philosophy behind the Black Lives Matter movement, God's preferential option for the poor very neatly: whatever you do or don't do for the *least* of His brothers and Sisters, you do or don't do for Him'.

Which is not to suggest that black people or the poor are objectively 'less' than rich, white people but they do have less *power* in our current world order and the kingdom of God is about not just *helping* those people but challenging and changing the systems that caused their problems in the first place. Hmm. Maybe I am a Cultural Marxist after all?! But only to the same extent that Saint Luke, the Virgin Mary and I would say Jesus Himself were...