

Discovering the black voice

Our understanding, our attitudes change over time.

When the National Front were marching, and TV Sit Coms, like Alf Garnet, On The Buses, and Rising Damp thought racism was entertaining, there were good people who thought racism wrong.

They said, "We don't see colour."

Today, it's a sign of maturity and emotional intelligence, that we are now able to see colour and it not be racist.

We DO see colour. We want to see and value everything that makes people .

We just don't discriminate,

If we don't see colour, we risk white-washing.

A bit like snow-blindness. If we only see white, we get a distorted perspective on reality.

Just think about how Jesus and the Prophets have been portrayed by artists and filmmakers.

White Moses, White Jesus. White Paul.

Yet its all set in the 10:40 window.

The Bible was written over 1,500+ years by 40+ people, drawn from 3 different Continents (Africa, Asia, & Europe).

To tell you what you already know: they were black; they were brown; they were white.

We better understand and appreciate the Bible today when we better understand and appreciate those inspired to write it.

Only then can we guard against 'white-washed' versions of faith.

So, today we are discovering the black and brown voices in the Bible.

- Recognising & countering whiteness
- Discovering the black voice in the Bible:

LEVEL 1: seeing people of colour within the Bible

We'll look at just five. But there are many, MANY more!!

Zipporah – Moses' wife

There's some debate as to Zipporah's ethnicity.

Exodus presents her as the daughter of Jethro, the Midian Priest, and so from the area today bordering Jordan and Saudi Arabia. As a Midianite, she would have been Asian - brown.

But Numbers 12 says Moses' wife was a Kushite - from Nubia, the area today we know as southern Egypt/ Sudan, even Ethiopia. As a Kushite, she would have been African – black.

Zipporah might have been brown, she might have been black. What she wasn't was white.

Solomon's bride (Song of Songs)

She was a Shulammite. Noone quite knows where Shulam was. But Song of Songs chapter 1:5-6 tells us she was black. She says:

“Dark am I, yet lovely,
daughters of Jerusalem,
dark like the tents of Kedar,
like the tent curtains of Solomon.^[a]
Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because I am darkened by the sun.”

Ebed-Melech (Jeremiah)

When Jeremiah had been thrown into a cistern (again!) – this time left to starve to death (hence lowering him down on a rope bucket), Ebed-Melech rescued him (Jeremiah chapters 38-39)

He was another Cushite (southern Egypt/ Sudan/ Ethiopia)

Jeremiah gets the attention – he's the major Prophet. But if it hadn't been for Ebed-Melech's strong intervention, we would not have known anything about Jeremiah. Ebed-Melech saw the injustice. He didn't know Jeremiah, they weren't friends – yet he stepped in to help a stranger.

Simon of Cyrene

The one forced by the Romans to carry the Cross for Jesus.

Having beaten and tormented Jesus, bidding for his clothes,

“As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.” Matthew 27:32

Simon was from the province of Cyrenaicia. – in eastern Libya

He was Black, African and Jewish.

And he was with Jesus in his death.

Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts)

Having travelled from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, this high-ranking Government official (we don't know his name – no one thought to write it down) had visited the Temple. And was now on his way home, in his chariot, flanked by out-riders.

Deacon Philip who, had been in the midst of revival, is suddenly told by God to head south: leave the revival, leave Jerusalem, head south through Samaria into Sudan. There he spotted the man reading.

Intersectionality is when people experience more than one kind of discrimination. They may be a woman and disabled.

This one is from East Africa, is black, from a different religion, and is a eunuch. Lots of intersectionality – spaghetti junction of intersectionality.

We often read/ hear this story as being about someone who was not a Christian becomes a Christian. That's nice. But we miss something is we don't see his colour and his religion.

Its relatively simple for some people to become Christians. OK, a bit of teasing at work but, otherwise, not much else.

But then imagine what happens if someone from a country where it's illegal to convert to Christianity becomes a Christian. Or someone who's a Muslim converts to becoming a Christian.

Paul was Turkish

LEVEL 2: recognising that ALL are made in God's image

The Word became flesh. All flesh. The Word didn't just become some flesh; all flesh.

I am a white cis straight male. I can't change that. I am made in God's image. I am fearfully and wonderfully made, this I know full well (Psalm 139:14)

If I as a white person am made in God's image, then God is white and male. I am reflecting something of God.

Someone else is a woman of colour, a black woman. She is made in God's image. She too is fearfully and wonderfully made. If she, as a black woman, is made in God's image, then God is black and female.

Then, someone else is brown and gay. They are made in God's image. They too are fearfully and wonderfully made. If they, as a brown gay person are made in God's image, then God is brown and gay.

The word was made flesh – one of

John 1 says, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

This is the mystery of the incarnation.

Just as first Adam was representative of ALL humanity, so Jesus as second Adam is also representative of all humanity. People with different histories, cultures, ethnicities etc//

LEVEL 3: recognise cultural patterns/ rhythms

Western culture, heavily influenced by the self-proclaimed Enlightenment, has traditionally prided itself on logic, polemic, the power of the pen, forensic analysis...

African and Asian cultures have traditionally valued folk-lore, story-telling.

To be fair, we sometimes forget that folktales are also part of Celtic culture too

The Bible did not arrive as a book; it was not even written down for hundreds of years. It was instead told, passed on verbally from generation to generation.

Only much later was it then written down – on those scrolls. Before we think critically that the Bible is not trustworthy, archaeologists have found different editions of Books eg Isaiah. They're remarkable for just how similar they all are.

Think about how you re-tell a good story. The more you tell it, the more you repeat the same phrases, the same detail. It becomes part of your verbal muscle-memory.

African and Asian cultures have traditionally valued story-telling.

It's no surprise therefore that so much of the Bible is based on story-telling.

Yes, books like Leviticus, Numbers etc are a factual record of laws/ instructions, but most of the Old Testament are a collection of stories – told around a camp fire, in a shelter, in a cave...

Why stories? They entertain, they educate, they tell truth – they operate at multiple levels.

Some just get the entertaining tale.

Some also see a deeper meaning.

Others see the full, profound, divine and eternal truth they contain.

Isn't that what Jesus was doing with Parables. They were stories that operated at multiple levels.

We gain an even richer understanding of parables when we understand and appreciate

Signifying

There's a West African tradition of signifying. It's where you say one thing to mean the complete opposite. It's made its way into street language today.

They're well *sick*!

Jesus is *wicked*!

Roasting

In some street/ youth cultures today, and on the comedy circuits, there's 'roasting'. It's when you're insulted and you bounce back with an even bigger insult. There's TV roasting competitions, comedians battle to roast each other.

Roasting is verbal back-and-forth sparring; it's coming back from a put down/ insult with a fast, witty, and devastating reply. Dubbed The Dozens, it likely originated with the experience of slaves who could only respond to oppression with their intellect and subtle wit.

So, it's big in black /street culture. Which, in turn, comes from having to respond to accusations, oppression... It sounds like banter, but it's fast, witty and devastating.

And, in Matthew 15, it's as if Jesus *roasted* the Pharisees.

"Some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

Jesus responded:

"You break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, 'Honor your father and mother'^[a] and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.'^[b] ⁵ You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

⁸ "These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

⁹ They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.'^[c]"

¹⁰ Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them."

The disciples told him, "The Pharisees were offended when they heard this"

¹³ Jesus replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides.^[d] If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

Roasted!

We understand and appreciate the Bible even more when we truly hear the voices of black and brown people who featured in it, wrote it. We understand more about its original context and therefore meaning.

What's more, when we hear/ see the experiences today of people with different cultures, histories and identities to us, our eyes and ears are opened and we begin to spot things in the Bible that our mono-cultural perspectives had been blinded to.

Everyone wins when we hear the voices of black and brown people, as well as white people.

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