

Anti-racist living

“The most important conversation that those of us who care about racial justice can have right now is about what measures are needed to address structural racism and how to win public support for them.” Sonia Sodha

1. Learning to live as an anti-racist

(this section is for reading out. Each paragraph can be read by a different voice)

Ask anyone if they are a racist, and almost everyone will say, “No!” Not them. Yet massive race-based injustices remain for all to see in the US & the UK today. The UK government even has a special website with a vast range of statistics that spell out the divergent experience of UK life for black and white Britons today.¹ You may have heard how black people are nine times more likely to be stopped by the police under stop and search, but the inequalities run on into every aspect of life. Not-being-a-racist seems to allow racism to flourish. Is there anything we can do?

Ibram X Kendi, a black US professor, begins his book *How to be an anti-racist*² by telling a story against himself. As a gifted schoolboy-orator he gave a speech on Martin Luther King day berating his fellow young, black students for the failures of black youth in America. Looking back, he now realises that even he, the child of two committed civil rights activists well-versed in black theology, had swallowed whole the deeply racist argument that the failure of the most oppressed groups in society must be their own fault; they were just not trying hard enough. But this argument denies all the impacts of race-based injustice on the lives of the most oppressed. That denial, he now argues, is how racism works. “The heartbeat of racism is denial”, he says. We need to own up to the way we have all been trapped in the web of racist cover stories which our society so readily provides. We have to step out and become anti-racist. And, he adds, “the heartbeat of anti-racism is confession”.

As Christians who read the Bible, we ought to know a bit about sin and confession. Our faith teaches us that it is best to own our sin and failure and use honest confession as the start of our struggle for liberation from sin. We already know that good people with a clear moral code can still sin and go on sinning for as long as they keep denying it to themselves. Maybe maintaining a racist society is a brutal special case of shared sin. Maybe, as Christians, our calling is to step out, confess our complicity in society’s failures and become an active part of the anti-racist resistance.

Take five minutes to discuss why ‘not being a racist’ might not be enough.

Today’s study invites us to look at what Jesus did. How did he engage with and work against the deep injustices of his own society?
What can we learn from watching Jesus?

¹ UK Gov Ethnicity facts and figures website: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/> (accessed 30/10/20)

² Kendi, Ibram X (2019) *How to be an anti-racist* London: Bodley Head

2. What would Jesus do?

Let's start by thinking about what we remember of the Jesus story from the Gospels. We'll work for a bit with our shared "Remembered Bible" as we try to work out how Jesus dealt with the vast inequalities in his world, living in an unruly frontier region of the vast Roman Empire and its client states.

- **Jesus and the silenced and ignored** – life is full of people we choose not to see. Think of who the forgotten, silenced and ignored were in Jesus' world. Think then of stories of Jesus' encounters with them. Re-tell the stories. List them together. Does Jesus ignore those whom others ignore? What does Jesus say by his attitudes and actions to those society ignores? Work on this together. See what you can agree.
- **Jesus and those in authority** – From Local Synagogue leaders, through the carefully religious Pharisees and the Temple-running elite Sadducees, on to the Roman client-king Herod and the Roman Governor Pilate, Jesus has encounters with established authority. How does he respond, especially in that final week in Jerusalem? Work on this together. See what you can agree.
- **Jesus and his attitude to privilege** – Although he grew up in an impoverished community in an exploited border province of the Roman Empire, Jesus has some status and privilege within that community. He is a man. He is clearly educated in the Scriptures. He is a religious leader with his own following. How does he handle his privileges? Does he join in defending them (men together against women? religious leaders against 'sinners'?), or does he work against them in any way? What stories can you recall? What do they tell you? Work on this together. See what you can agree.
- **How different might it have been?** If Jesus had been trying to "make his way in the world", developing a career, seeking power and influence, what would have been his likely strategy towards the silenced and ignored, towards those in authority and towards his own privileges? See what you can agree.

Now, let's focus on the story where Jesus comes closest to being a racist and to the challenge to be an "anti-racist". Let's read the story together first:

Mark 7.24-31

²⁴ From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. ³¹ Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

- “*it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.*” – does that sound even a little bit racist? Would you excuse a prominent white preacher for saying something like that to a black woman from outside church today?
- So, where does Jesus get this phrase from? How does he know this ‘script’?
- Does knowing a racist ‘script’ make you a racist?
- The woman responds with amazing kindness as well as persistence, what is Jesus’ next move? What does “*for saying that...*” imply?
- Afterwards Jesus goes back home to Galilee, but he takes a long, wayward route winding all through Tyre & the Decapolis – Gentile regions – teaching and healing as he goes. Surely, he is now addressing Gentile audiences. Is this ‘anti-racist living’?

3. Questions for discussion

1. Between you, draft a list of the things each of you ought to be doing if you were trying to live as an anti-racist in your own social setting.
2. Now draft a list of what it might mean for your church to try to be an anti-racist church.
3. So, what do you, as an individual, need to be doing now?
4. What things might the URC do if trying to be an actively antiracist denomination?'

*John M Campbell
for the URC Legacies of Slavery Working Group*