**Waking up to, and addressing Whiteness in the Anglican Church**

Thank you for Reconciliation Initiatives for inviting me to speak and to all of you for being here today. Thank you, in particular, for being willing to be uncomfortable in order to better see Christ and address racial justice in the Church.

I need to start with a confession. I am a fourth-generation missionary. I was born in Indonesia where my parents worked as missionaries for many years. My grandparents and great-grandparents were missionaries in China. And my wife and I lived and worked with the Anglican Church in West Africa. Mission was, and is, core to my calling.

So, while on one level, I have always been aware of my white skin, only recently have I started to wake up to my Whiteness. I remember in West Africa having crowds of children dancing around me chanting “forte” meaning “white man”. This was simply an acknowledgement that I was a novelty – many of them had never seen a white man before – so their chanting was friendly - joyous even.

In 2017, Lusa Nsenga-Ngoy joined our staff team in Leicester – he is now Bishop of Willesden in London Diocese. I remember Lusa recounting to us something of his background – he was born in DRC but emigrated to Belgium when he was about six or seven. He said, “this was when I discovered I was Black.” It was only when he said these words, that I realised for the first time that his discovery of his Blackness, was very different from my realisation that my white skin was a novelty to Black children in Africa. This was the first stirring of my awakening.

Willie James Jennings, in his remarkable book *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, speaks of Whiteness in these terms: “[It] refers neither to skin colour, nor ethnic origin, but to a set of cognitive and affective structures, a way of being in the world and seeing the world.” He goes on to describe – through poetry and storytelling - the ‘Whiteness’ that “bleaches Western theological education”.

Mike Higton, in his opening chapter to the multi-authored book *Deconstructing Whiteness, Empire and Mission* picks up on Jennings’ language, and describes in more detail the White self-sufficient, or self-possessed man. This is the individual clergyman (it could be a woman, but traditionally it was always a man) who is multi-talented - preacher, pastor, prophet all rolled into one - in control not just of himself but of the world he creates in his image. Higton completes the picture:

*The self-possessed man stands at the centre of concentric circles of possession. He possesses himself, his feelings, his knowledge, his vocation, his estate, and, ultimately his empire. Under the cloak of his nobility, the self-possessed man is a man made for colonial rule, even if the colonial context that called him forth and that funds his existence is left far outside the frame of the picture.*

This is Whiteness. And even as I acknowledge that I have only recently begun to wake up to it, so too, the Church of England and other Western parts of the Anglican Communion have only just begun to realise its all-pervading nature.

There are of course multiple reasons for this awakening – from the murder of George Floyd which led to mass protests around the world, to other momentous events: the Grenfell Tower disaster, the Windrush scandal, the pandemic – all of these have roused many in society to the reality of racial injustice.

But even this is only the first step. The more time I spend with people of different cultures, the more I read and reflect, the more I come to realise how Whiteness – or ‘white normativity’ – is deeply ingrained in me. I was formed in it throughout my education – from the way I learnt about history, to the way I learnt science – all of it imbued with a sense of Western superiority. I was formed in it through my theological studies which focused almost exclusively on white, Western scholars. And I continue to be formed in it through the arts and music, through politics and the news – White normativity is everywhere.

So what is the church doing about it? Well, it’s worth noting that diversity is now explicitly mentioned in the Church of England vision and strategy. Of course, diversity can mean many things but arguably the most important for our particular moment is cultural and ethnic diversity. And the Church of England has begun to take action - the establishment of a Racial Justice Unit in the national church, the appointment of a number of GMH and UKME bishops, the Church Commissioners acknowledging the role of slavery within their history and so setting up a £100 million investment fund with a new committee of GMH and UKME people to oversee the use of its income. And the Church of England Education Office is currently in the process of rewriting its *Understanding Christianity* course to ensure that the global church is fully represented in every part of the curriculum. These are all good as far as they go. But I want to use the rest of my time to focus on the local church – how does change happen at the local level?

I’m fresh back from sabbatical - a wonderful time of rest of refreshment, spent partly in Canada studying their approach to interculturalism. This is linked to what we are doing in Leicester, where we have received funds from the national church for the development of Intercultural Worshipping Communities. So my sabbatical was also a chance to reflect on all we have been learning in Leicester – and you won’t be surprised to know that this is now going to be a blatant plug for the book which will be published early next year – a series of reflections on ‘intercultural gift exchange’. My colleagues Bishop Saju Muthalaly, Jessie Tang, and former colleague Bishop Lusa Nsenga Ngoy are all contributing.

So what are Intercultural Worshipping Communities, and how do they contribute to addressing whiteness in the church? The aspiration is for communities in which members have a deep understanding and respect for all cultures, where everyone – whatever their background – learns from one another and grows together. What this looks like in practices includes sharing food and sharing stories, singing and praying in multiple languages, but most importantly, it normalises questions about who is being included and who is excluded, who do I need to listen to more, and what have I still got to learn.

This is a very different approach to that of assimilation – telling people of other cultures that unless they become ‘like us’, they can’t be a part of our church or society. It’s also a different approach to that of multiculturalism, which celebrates the coexistence of numerous cultures and, to its credit, allows minority cultures to survive and avoid assimilation into the majority culture. However, multiculturalism often means living parallel lives – so we have ‘Black majority churches’ or ‘Iranian churches’ or ‘Gujarati churches’ – all segregated with little mixing.

Interculturalism pays attention to way people of different cultures interact and encourages that interaction. Now I realise that interculturalism may sound like an attempt to reconcile what cannot be reconciled. When such injustice has been done to people of colour, how can it be right to reach a compromise with one’s oppressors (I suspect, having read some of his books, this would be the question of James Cone)? So I realise that the approach of intercultural church is asking a lot of those who have no other safe space. Can this Anglican Church really be trusted? Will they welcome me as a token of diversity, but then expect me to change and become like them? No one can blame people for asking such questions, nor for saying, ‘I’ve been hurt too many times before, I am not going to take the risk’. Much easier and safer to be with ‘people like me’.

Nevertheless, we felt called to this intercultural journey to foretell the diversity of heaven and to remember how the early church bridged divides – chiefly that between Jew and Gentile – which no one thought could be crossed. St John’s Revelation speaks of ‘a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.’ It may be a change in our demographic context that prompted the national church to strive for a more diverse church, but it is an ambition which is grounded in Scripture and fundamental to our calling as Christians.

So, underpinning our approach to intercultural church, is the concept of intercultural gift exchange. Time, unfortunately, does not permit me to go into the history of gift exchange theory and the ways in which some of its pitfalls concerning power and privilege can be addressed. But I would like to share with you three principles from the book which I think are a helpful guide to living well as the diverse people of God.

The first is Generous Giving. Recognising that each and every one of us is a gift, as well as having God-given gifts. Just as a new-born baby is a gift, even though it is entirely dependent on others, so is the older person with dementia, and so is the asylum seeker. This is important to state because in the context of racism and our history of colonialism, and Whiteness, not everyone has been given the opportunity to view themselves as a gift. And not everyone is given the opportunity to use their gifts – I’m thinking particularly of asylum seekers denied the right to work. So, we want our IWCs to be places where people who have long been told they have nothing to offer, to find a safe space to offer themselves as a gift to others.

Beyond this basic fact, is the linked recognition that our culture will shape the way we offer our gifts to others. Living in Africa, we got used to being presented with live chickens – an extraordinarily generous gift. But we also knew that the gift came with an expectation – firstly that we would kill, pluck and cook the chicken and offer a communal meal, but also that we would be generous in offering other gifts back to the community.

Peter Leithart in his book *Gratitude, An Intellectual History*, describes how in ancient societies, the basic form of gift exchange could be pictured as a circle: a donor gives a gift or does a favour for a beneficiary, and the beneficiary is expected to return a gift or favour of equal or greater value in the future to the same donor. However, these bonds of obligation could be suffocating and inevitably created cliques of those bound together by particular obligations.

So, Jesus’ teachings about giving, in this context and still today, were hugely radical. Jesus tells his disciples to give without thinking of a return, and to imitate the Heavenly Father in giving to the ungrateful and even to enemies. Jesus gave priority to those who could not repay - the poorest in society - and he encouraged his followers to give without fear or scarcity because of the infinite generosity of their Heavenly Father. Indeed, this whole way of thinking about giving was possible, in Jesus’ view, because everything we receive is a blessing, or unearned gift, from God, with which we should bless others.

Leithart writes, “Christianity freed people from onerous personal bonds by defining gratitude as right use of the gift, rather than gratitude as return”. If we want to develop intercultural communities, generosity and gift-giving are essential in offering true hospitality to those different from ourselves.

The second principle is Radical Receptivity, and here I draw on Al Barrett’s excellent work. I remember hearing an African bishop comment some years ago, ‘the problem with the West is that you haven’t learnt to receive.’ It is, I think, a fair comment. Western models of mission generally focus on giving - whether that be the giving of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or the giving of practical aid or advocacy. As I’ve already intimated, I don’t think this is wrong – but if it isn’t accompanied by a radical openness to receiving from the other, then we can quickly lose sight of the other’s humanity and their capacity to be a gift to us.

So Al defines radical receptivity as ‘opening ourselves intentionally to receive and be changed by the gifts and challenges of our “others”’. This means we do not hold onto the power that the gift-giver has, creating a sense of obligation in the recipient. We take on, what for many of us multiply-privileged folk is deeply uncomfortable, the role of guest instead of host. Instead of being a ‘voice for the voiceless’, we let those who have had their voices silenced or squashed speak. And we listen deeply, open to leaving the conversation different from how we entered it. The obvious example for me is the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 – both of them are ‘converted’ by their encounter.

The final principle I want to share with you is Transformative Thanksgiving. To return to Leithart’s notion of circular gift exchange, where A gives B to C and the expectation is C will give D back to A, he describes how Christianity created an ‘infinite circle’. “The gifts flow on and on […] The circle is infinite because God is the source of every gift”. Without God in the picture, gifts can perpetuate power inequalities and gift exchange can become antagonistic, competitive or manipulative. But, with God in the circle, the exchange can be sanctified.

Surely this is why there are numerous exhortations to give thanks to God throughout the Bible – addressed to people irrespective of their status, wealth or privilege. We might phrase Philippians 4.6 in this way as an example: ‘Do not be anxious about anything, [even if you can’t reciprocate a gift in the way that is expected] but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God’. The exchange of gifts can create a community, but when we make thanksgiving to God – by another name, the Eucharist – a central part of that exchange and that community, we acknowledge the Holy Spirit as the one who goes between us, enabling the giving and receiving in a way which honours God’s image in both parties. John V Taylor: ‘*The Holy Spirit is the invisible third party who stands between me and the other, making us mutually aware. Supremely… he opens my eyes to Christ… but he also opens my eyes to my brother [and sister].*

Finally, and very briefly, I want to suggest that these three practices of intercultural gift exchange – Generous Giving, Radical Receptivity and Transformative Thanksgiving - are undergirded by three traits. Firstly, humility – ‘having the mind of Christ’ as Philippians 2 expresses it, and ‘thinking of others as better than yourself’. Western financial wealth, economic power, scientific prowess do not mean that we are ‘better’ than others. That was the mistake of the missionary movement over recent centuries – allying itself to a ‘civilisation narrative’ which was deeply humiliating to those on whom it was imposed. So humility is key to addressing Whiteness.

Secondly, de-centring – again this is from Philippians 2 where we are told that Jesus ‘emptied himself’ or ‘poured himself out’ – the Greek word is kenosis. In the context of colonialism, this suggests de-centring - not just taking myself as an individual off centre stage, but also taking my culture off centre stage. So the vision of intercultural church that I’m offering is a vision of a multi-centred church without dominant and marginal groups. It is a vision of each individual and each cultural group being equally valued and playing an equal part within their community. And it is a vision of each national church playing an equal part in the global church.

And then curiosity – being curious about other cultures and worldviews. For all the diversity present in our society today, it is extraordinary how we continue to live in homogeneous bubbles, mixing only with ‘people like us’. There is no substitute then, for being taken out of our comfort zone and meeting people of different cultures. I think this takes us to the heart of Christian mission. As a fourth-generation missionary, I am starting to learn that curiosity is key to mission. I don’t have all the answers, nor do I have all the gifts – despite what my culture and upbringing may have taught me. I need ‘the other’ if I am to be formed into the likeness of Christ.

So this is just a little of what I am learning. I am waking up, but I am still at that stage of stretching and stumbling in the dark. There is a very long way to go, if I am to get dressed and be ready for action. Whiteness is deeply embedded in me, in our church and our society, but I am pleased that small coalitions are forming, communities of resistance which will, I believe, in time, bring about real change.