

**“IF YOU’RE NOT OUTRAGED,
YOU’RE NOT PAYING ATTENTION!”**

Heather Heyer

**“IT IS NOT ENOUGH NOT TO BE RACIST,
BUT THE NEED IS TO BE AN ANTI-RACIST”.**

Ibram X Kendi

Do you remember the events in Charlottesville in Virginia, USA in August 2017 when a young woman called Heather Heyer, aged just thirty-two years old, was killed and five others critically injured? Heather was protesting against a racist and fascist rally; a rally where swastikas, Nazi salutes, chants and other divisive and inflammatory rhetoric were much in abundance. Such things were supposed to be consigned to the history books. Such things are not supposed to be in my grandchildren’s present and future. We heard about racism when I was growing up. I can remember seeing racist graffiti, and being told very clearly that this was wrong and unacceptable. I can remember a lot of anti-Irish sentiment, as we lived through “The Troubles”. But I didn’t feel I had to fight Fascism. Fascism was something my father’s generation had, at great cost, fought and beaten.

Heather Heyer’s last Facebook post said, “If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention!” I’ve certainly been paying attention to the news coming out of the United States in recent days. As we’ve all been hearing, violence has erupted on the sixth night of protests following the death of forty-six year old George Floyd in Minneapolis. Floyd’s death, amid a public health crisis and economic calamity that has killed more than one hundred thousand Americans and left over forty million unemployed, has become the latest totem of the incendiary ills that plague the country in 2020. Some forty US cities saw demonstrations expressing deep anger over police killings of black Americans. Amid rising anger and desperate frustration at the repeated failure of America’s policing system to address the staggering number of deaths of unarmed African Americans at the hands of Police Officers a dozen cities imposed curfews and six states activated the National Guard. The violence, looting and arson perpetrated by a small minority of demonstrators is entirely unacceptable and rightly condemned. However, this condemnation should not obscure the cry for justice in George Floyd’s case, and a deeper cry for justice over racial inequality. Racism is clearly not a thing of the past but a “real and present danger” to be faced today, including here in Scotland! The award-winning African American historian Ibram X Kendi, has argued that “it is not enough not to be racist, but the need is to be an anti-racist”. He suggests “racism is not simply a set of beliefs but a set of practices which preserve and extend the privilege of those in power”.

Kendi goes on to say that “an anti-racist is, therefore, someone who confesses that racist ideas have been cultivated within them while also being active in

changing the power structures which support the status quo". The disruption of the *status quo* is at the heart of last weekend's major Christian festival of Pentecost. While some Christians see it as a nice little birthday party for the Church, the gift of the Spirit to the disciples in the biblical record is accompanied by a violent wind and fire. These are not symbols of comfort and warmth but that the power and presence of God was challenging and energising. And there was another sign - that people from every nation gathered in Jerusalem heard the disciples speak of the risen Jesus in their own native language. This was God passionate about valuing each culture and language but breaking the barriers which separate people - and inviting the Church to be partners in this. The American Protestant theologian Walter Bruggemann, suggests that Pentecost turns upside down the lives of "privileged people who have become comfortable in treating people differently because of their race or gender".

As I hear the accounts of George Floyd, Pentecost takes me further than just feelings of anger, horror and despair and makes me wonder how I can be "anti-racist" in my own humble role as parish minister as I have a visceral negative reaction to this kind of attitude. The Christian artist, Ronnie Lillard, who knew George Floyd as an imperfect person yet, "someone who worked for peace and commended faith to young people", commented that Floyd would always say that "God trumps street culture". In Pentecost, we are all challenged to partner with God to trump all hatred, violence and inequality. The Bible reminds us that God created us into different nations and races so that we can know one another - not hate one another. In these times it seems that we will all have to fight for a world where we can all live together peacefully, in respect and dignity. The world needs our fullest attention right now, to make sure that our children and grandchildren, and all future generations, can know a world where hate and mistrust are not rampant, and where love rules supreme.

This Christian ship that we sail on does not protect us from the charge of systemic racism, we remember our own historic struggles to move beyond tokenism when it comes to diversity and there is still much that we need to learn. But our fear of difficult conversations should not cause us to remain silent. These are very murky waters indeed and they continue to lap at our feet. But there can be no peace without justice, for if we have learned anything from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, surely we have learned that peace cannot be achieved by victory, peace can only be achieved with justice. The adoption of "Kingdom values" could yet translate these demonstrations into peaceful, sustained and effective action to address structural racism.

Walking on deep murky water is a daunting task, but walk we must if we are to follow in the footsteps of the One who calls us to be about the work of justice and equity so that a true peace can be restored among all peoples.