

Aslan Is On The Move: Focus on Racial Justice Begins

I arrived at the cathedral on Palm Sunday to be a steward for the mere twenty folks who were allowed in. It was my first time back to church in person since Christmas morning, and I was wearing my Black Lives Matter mask. A friend I hadn't seen in months approached and said, rather adamantly, "ALL lives Matter."

I looked at him and blinked. There was a Black Lives Matter banner hanging right behind us over the doors of the church.

"ALL lives matter," he repeated with pronounced emphasis, as if to correct my mask.

"OK," I said. "But you do understand, right?-- why people are saying black lives matter?" I couldn't help address him a bit like a child. I'm still a Christian in training.

"Yes."

"Good." Case closed. Moving on. I had been growing tired of exchanges like this, most of them outside the culture of the church. Another example of white people socially policing themselves.

"It's because of a few idiots!" he said, and turned and went back into the church.

This struck me at the time, as it does now, as the official Quebec narrative from the top down; Systemic racism is a figment of the imagination in misguided, militant, shrill people. Nothing to see here, folks. Move along.

At that time, the verdict of Derek Chauvin trial was still pending and that same week, here in Montreal, two separate and disturbing videos were circulating online. One was of an out-of-control police officer punching the face of a black man who was being held down on the ground in Mount Royal Park. The people watching the incident were shouting at the police and protesting. Then in another horrific piece of footage from in the Metro, an STM officer repeatedly punched a woman who was being held down. This time, bystanders not only protested but intervened. The officers were defended by their superiors. But in both incidents, the footage speaks for itself.

The conviction of the murderer of George Floyd brought shock and sighs of relief to many; the fact that we did not expect justice is in itself is a telling fact of history. But within twenty-four hours of the verdict, six more people in the U.S. had been killed by police. And the grim incidents in the past month have not abated. In Canada the violence involves fewer guns, but plenty of fists. And reading the comment section on the recent videos in Montreal is not an uplifting or edifying experience.

We still have a serious problem in our culture that goes way back. And historically, of course, the church has always been immersed in this culture.

Writing about this, talking about it, is not easy for anyone of any hue. Talking about the history of the sin of racism within the church, be it about slavery, social segregation, or the subtle microaggressions

often experienced by many, is a difficult task, taking us outside our collective comfort zone. All of us, with our various backgrounds in the Anti-Black Racism Task Force, can agree on that. It's one of the easiest things to agree on. Nevertheless this conversation is taking place. Because the Holy Spirit so often pushes us outside our comfort zone - into the place where change for the good happens.

One evening, during one of our zoom meetings, Bishop Mary was with us as we were talking about our plans for racial justice work within the context of the challenges our church faces during the pandemic. During a pause, we asked her what she thought. She said: "Aslan is on the move."

Aslan, of course, is the lion who represents Jesus Christ in C.S. Lewis's Narnia Chronicles. And he is pretty good at pushing people outside their comfort zone. In the face of all this social turmoil, change, and much-talked-about pandemic upheaval, Aslan is indeed on the move.

One of the things we've learned in the past year, as the great lion nudges us along, is that in order to be true Christians, we - all of us - must be anti-racist. And as Ibram X. Kendi points out in *How To Be an Anti-Racist*, there is no safe, neutral ground of simply "not racist" in the struggle between racism and anti-racism. Being anti-racist is active, not passive, and at the very least we need to speak out and not be silent (and thereby complicit).

Recently the Task Force sent out a survey to the clergy, lay leaders and students of theology to determine just where the diocese is on anti-racism work, and to what degree we are passionately engaging in it.

The results have come in; some churches, like the Cathedral, are examining themselves and their history with gusto; others would like to start, and have asked for resources, while a small minority think it's a non-issue - we hope to change their minds.

To answer the need for resources, among other things, the task force is creating an online resource (attached to the Diocesan website), and also a Facebook page, both called Montreal Anglicans for Racial Justice and Equity. The title indicates that we want to be *for* something and not merely *against* something. Along with this comes the following mission statement:

"To educate and increase awareness in the Anglican Diocese of Montreal of the history of racism and the church's participation and complicity in racist practices, that we may properly repent. To equip and enable members of the diocese to confront and dismantle systemic racism and white supremacy inside and outside the church. To honour Christ in all persons by building bridges, and by promoting and celebrating diversity in the church and the world."

Yes, it's a mouthful. But it gets the idea (of the necessary work) across. And despite being serious, uncomfortable, and challenging, it's a joyful thing to repent. And do justice. And build bridges. Not to mention celebrate. To our delight, Bishop Mary and the Synod Planning Committee have decided that the diocese will focus on this particular mission with great intention over the next three years. And a diocesan learning session for church leaders is being prepared for early October. Something to celebrate indeed.

More recently, the Most Reverend Linda Nicholls, our Archbishop and Primate, reached out to my friend and co-chair Dion Lewis and invited him to speak at The Council of General Synod, along with other distinguished guests, on the topic of Dismantling Racism. She understood that for Dion to speak on a personal level regarding his own encounters with racism would take tremendous courage. But courage is not lacking in Dion. On May 8th he shared some personal stories with the Council and added:

“I have been affected by subtle racism from some very well-meaning people in my own parochial activities. These subtle biases, subconscious actions, and sometime conscious actions cause pain. Personally, I have had to learn how to just ignore and forgive these actions to continue to share my gifts and talents with the community at large. We need to stop causing this pain to each other and most importantly not do it again... Love is our greatest gift, but if we are called to clear the way for God, we all need to start levelling and clearing the path. Part of this shared task involves not throwing obstacles onto the cleared road.” He concluded by saying that we need to learn from what we’ve done and do better.

After the meeting, our Primate Linda responded with a beautiful letter of thanks which ended, “The only way forward for all of us will be by listening and learning together.”

I think Aslan would agree.

