

## **Monica Bolley – My Story – Part 1: Golden opportunity to tackle racism**

### **Introduction**

I write this narrative - which I am content to be passed to others - as a black woman. I hope that as a reader, you do not only feel sadness at what I impart of the pain and difficulties that arise as a result of the affliction of racism on black people. My hope is that, particularly if you are white, you will feel that you have a key part to play in the demise of racism. I do believe that we all have a contribution to make in this endeavour, and that in order for change to occur, it is as much about the efforts of individuals as it is about anything that happens at organisational and institutional levels.

My hope is that my story and insights that follow will inspire you as a reader, and lead you to seek out what your contribution might be, or give you fresh impetus in what you are already doing. I hope that my courage in writing this narrative might encourage you in the steps you take or are already taking. Writing this has taken several months, and during this time I could quite easily have said 'It's all too difficult!'

This narrative has turned out to be a kind of testimony, which is because my faith in Christ - who I came to own as Lord at the early age of 14 - is key to my life. A few years ago I discerned the purpose and mission of my life as being: 'To serve God, to be rooted and grounded in the love of Christ, and to be open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit'.

The well-known story of the paralytic brought to Jesus for healing in Mark chapter 2 has been a source of prayer and contemplation for me over many years. It conveys something of my demeanour in writing this narrative, and also portrays how I see others before God. In the story, Jesus prays over the paralysed man brought to him by his friends. Thoughts about 'humility', 'knowing our need of God', 'letting others minister to us', 'trusting God', 'allowing God in Christ to break through our fear, and release us from the things that bind us' – have all resonated with me from this story.

I am very grateful to Bishop Sarah, Bishop of London, for inviting me to write this narrative. The challenges in writing it have been considerable and have involved a great deal of prayer: both mine and others', which I have sought. These challenges have been due to the emotional upheaval involved for me as a black person looking deeply into racism and its effects, and also because I am writing with frankness about white people, which includes people with whom I live, work, play and worship. Basically, people I love and with whom my life in its fullness, is interwoven.

One might wonder why I bothered to write at all, as it has been such a challenge! It is because I have a profound sense that because of the person that I am, and the circumstances in which God has placed me, my story and insights is a 'unique contribution' that I alone can make to what has already been written and said about racism. My hope and prayer are that it might be used to God's glory and for the furtherance of His kingdom.

### **A golden opportunity**

I think that the current time presents a golden opportunity for us all to grasp at the roots of racism. I have been struck by how perturbed I have been by the events of 2020, surrounding the death of George Floyd in the US which reverberated around the world. I have been greatly affected, and I have wondered why. I think it is because I have now been in the world for six decades, and these events have heightened my awareness that the foundations of racism are still intact, and that its roots go deeply into our human life and experience. The pernicious nature of racism and its firm grip on humanity have hit me afresh. That racism persists in the face of black people holding high office, frankly, makes me shudder, for it conveys to me the deep complexity and tenacity which marks out racism.

### **Catastrophe on the human landscape**

I am acutely aware that God created us His children in His image, as equals, and I believe that the enslavement, trading and dehumanising of black people (being chained like animals in the bowels of ships) by white people, is a catastrophe of seismic proportions on the human landscape. It is as though an earthquake took place which fractured the earth's surface leaving one plate - white people - elevated, and the other plate - black people - depressed. How can we know that this atrocity does not remain, like a

sealed container, in the past, but has a bearing on us today? How does what our forebears did (as white slave masters), or have done to them (as black slaves), affect us today? How can it be that we all have a part to play; a contribution to make to undo the damage and move forward? I hope that my story and insights go some way into shedding light in these areas.

### **My life's journey**

I was born in London to black parents of the 'Windrush' generation, who came to England in the mid-1950s from St Kitts in the Caribbean. The hostile environment which greeted them included signs for accommodation stating, 'no blacks, no dogs, no children'. A bus driver once refused to drive the bus because my father was on it. Tough decisions had to be made for any headway to be possible in England, and so, I was sent to spend a few of my early years in St Kitts with relatives, later returning to England. These proved to be fruitful and memorable years.

### *Parents*

I have been blessed with parents who conveyed to me what the equality of God's children truly means. In spite of their difficult experiences, racial prejudice was an alien concept in our home. My parents taught me about the love of Christ by their words and actions towards other people. My mother was always quick to point out behaviours in others that it was worth learning from and emulating. My parents also instilled in me a sense of dignity, pride, and confidence in being black. This prepared me well for my encounters and relationships with white people from early on in primary school through the rest of my life. That I am 'fearfully and wonderfully made', as my favourite Psalm 139 states, has been with me throughout my life.

### *School*

In the practically all-white school, which I attended from the age of 12, I recall feeling like a kind of 'ambassador for black people'. I had a close friend with whom, as teenagers, we would share conversations about our parents both being post-war immigrants to England. Hers seeking refuge from a non-English speaking country, and mine responding to the UK's calls for labour from the Caribbean. We would often discuss the disparities in the way in which the world beyond school saw us and treated us: she as a white person, who as such was indistinguishable from other white people in the population, and me as a black person.

### *Contrasting experiences*

The experiences which my friend and I compared, included when I would be asked on numerous occasions in my life outside school - both at that time and in fact also later into adulthood - by white people, 'How is it that you speak so well. Where did you learn to speak?' My white friend was never asked this. It was as though black people were, for some reason, inherently incapable of marshalling their thoughts and delivering clear speech. The awful irony was, of course, that my parents were from an English-speaking country, whereas hers were not, and so had to learn the language. Another question I would be asked was, 'How come you have such good manners?' A question which, again, my white friend, was never asked. It was as though black people were by nature unruly, and not in command of themselves, so it was a surprise to come across a black person who did not match those expectations. I would also be asked, 'Where are you from?' When I would answer 'London', this would be followed by, 'But where are you really from?' For my white friend, it was invariably sufficient for her to simply say she was from London. The painful reality for me was that these people saw being black as incompatible with being from England, however deep a black person's roots here might be (and for some it is hundreds of years). My thoughts were that the people who asked me these questions, were not 'bad', but in a state of profound ignorance. My sincere hope was that they would not be complacent in their ignorance.

Extract from: 'My Story'

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27 November 2020

## **Monica Bolley – My Story – Part 2: Racism – its depth, persistence and the pain it causes**

### *University city, full-blown racism*

An experience of blatant racism which I experienced, was at university when I was looking for accommodation in the city. I was basically told at the door of the place I had found, that although they did have a room to let, purely because I was black - and bearing in mind they knew absolutely nothing else about me - there was no way they would be renting the room to me. This felt like a penetrating wound, piecing my very humanity. I cried all evening.

### *Work*

My working life after university to the present day has almost entirely been with the Diocese of London's central administrative office. My longevity there - of nearly four decades - has been because over the years, and even more so in recent times, the working environment has been one in which I have been enabled to flourish. I have found my colleagues to be really good to work with. This is because I have felt that I have been regarded as 'a whole person'; being black has not in itself been a determining factor of my working experience. The level of racial diversity among staff in the past has been low, but has been rising in recent years. As regards the boards and synods with which I have worked, there is a wind of change here that is gathering pace on the need to address issues of racial awareness and injustice. Members have shown in the past that they can maintain a firm stand on matters close to their hearts, and my hope is that they will demonstrate the full strength of their righteous indignation over the sin of racism, and show their hunger and thirst for righteousness to prevail. I am very encouraged by steps that are currently being taken, and the fresh initiatives that are underway. After many years of seeing numerous good intentions expressed at national church level, my hope is that decisions made will be brought into effect, leaving no one in any doubt as to the significance and importance to our Church of tackling racism. There are now promising signs of work being taken forward. We should all pray for God's wisdom and the boldness of the Spirit for all involved in carrying forward this work.

### *Marriage and motherhood*

My husband, who is a white English man has, during our marriage of nearly four decades, been a deep source of understanding, strength, and love. He has been ordained for nearly three decades as a Church of England priest. We have journeyed together with joy and thanksgiving from pre-ordination days to the present. As mother of our two children - now in their 30s - I was all too aware that the world often does not recognise a 50/50 black and white heritage in the sense of giving equal recognition to both parts. My experience is that children in these situations are often simply referred to as black or other (notably never white! - although their heritage is from both parts in equal measure). This failure to recognise and embrace the dual nature of the heritage of these children would seem to me to stem from a deep sense of whiteness as being supreme, and that any black addition extinguishes that.

### **Use of analogy to convey experience**

I find the use of analogy useful in helping to portray my experience of being a black person in this world.

#### *The seesaw*

Here, I use an analogy of a seesaw on which black people are at one end and white people at the other: It is as though our blackness is a burden - which we are made to feel it is, through so often being regarded as second class and inferior. This treatment, and the injustice it represents, exhausts us and weighs us down as black people journeying through this world. Our end of the seesaw is weighed down so that it touches the ground. At the same time at the opposite end of the seesaw, seeing us from their seat on high are white people, with a demeanour of effortless superiority. From their elevated position, they 'call the shots.' What takes place is at their instigation. We long for the seesaw to achieve equilibrium.

#### *Grief analogy*

I have been searching myself for answers as to how it is I live, day in day out, year in year out, as a black person in the world, in the face of what I have tried to convey. And here, I find a further analogy using 'grief' to be useful. My beloved father died early last year. I think this analogy using my grief goes something like this: There is a mode in which by God's grace, I am able to live remarkably effectively from

day to day, week to week, and so on, which is my ordinary and usual mode. However, there is another mode which lurks in the background and is always ready to pounce; to rear its head, perhaps because of something said or done to me or someone else, or something I have heard or seen. This mode is like a brick wall that I come up against; seemingly immovable and deeply painful.

The limitations of this analogy are that with the passage of time – as is usual for grief – the depth and intensity of the pain eases. However, this is not the case with those of us who suffer racism. This is manifested by the fact that over the last six months I have experienced a greater heaviness of heart and shedding of tears than I have done in as many years. This points to the extent of the burden of racism which weighs us down as black people, and what it does to the human spirit. For over this time it is not that I myself have had acts of racism directed towards me - which nowadays, I thank God, are infrequent - but the pain I come up against resulting from what I continue to see and hear of the suffering of others in the world around me: both close by and further afield. This causes my heart to cry inwardly, 'How long, O Lord, how long'. I can recall my grandmother (1917-2001) expressing the pain of the racial injustices she suffered, and I hear those same expressions of pain and anguish today. A second source of my sadness is from the seeming lack of awareness on the part of some white people of the reality of racism; its damaging effects, and of the part they could play in its demise. I have a deep sadness for the sense of the loss of opportunities.

My analogies convey that being a black person in this world, is as though the shackles of slavery, although physically gone, are in a sense still there. As though key elements in the dynamic between the white masters and black slaves have somehow been transmitted down the generations, resulting in present day white people as beneficiaries, and black people with a loss in dignity and fullness of what it means to be human. Being white is like a hallmark, meaning that humanity in all its fullness is to be found there. A white person enters the world into the supreme and superior group of people who are confident of their self-worth; who have the privilege of being immediately recognised as possessing what is needed in personality, intellect and behaviour to convey the fullness of being human. I think it is hard for a white person to recognise this state which is so deeply embedded in their experience as human beings. I believe that only the grace of God can make it possible to acquire the objectivity and insight that is necessary to perceive this.

### **Primary sin**

Racism feels like a primary sin, in that we find as black people - that far from being seen as equals, as God intended when he created His children - aspects of our very humanity are called into question. We even at times suffer the indignity of being likened to animals. And so, as black people, we find that we often have to strive 'to get to first base', to convince people that we possess the feelings, intelligence, and overall capabilities which are taken 'as given' in a white person. The primary forces of power and pride are at the heart of racism and give it fuel, which the seesaw analogy goes some way to convey.

The injustice of racism and its gravity as a sin are due to its directness in contradicting God who created us all in His image. Racism clearly evidences our disdain and effrontery to God in portraying that although created as equals, we do not regard each other as equals. Sheer folly! Furthermore, Jesus taught us to pray 'Our Father' precisely because we come to God together equally as His children. 'We are children together of the same heavenly Father', is what we say in the service of baptism. I do believe that if, in humility, we do not of our own free will right the injustices of racism, then God Himself may in His displeasure, step in and do so. I pray that as opportunities present themselves for us to act both as individuals and at higher levels, we will not let them go. I am astounded by the ingrained nature, the tenacity and persistence of racism both in society and in the church, that in spite of gallant efforts this evil prevails. I believe this evidences the profoundly spiritual nature of what we are dealing with and the imperative that all we do is deeply rooted and upheld in prayer.

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27 November 2020

## Monica Bolley – My Story – Part 3: We journey together in hope

### Reversal of untruths

If racism is to be extinguished - and those plates of the earth's surface to which I alluded earlier are to be levelled - there needs to be a restoration and reaffirmation of the human dignity of black people, which the dehumanising acts of slavery robbed. There needs to be a reversal of the degrading untruths about black people, of which the white slave masters must have convinced themselves in order to behave in the way that they did. These 'untruths' are still in many ways with us today. It is the case that the myriad permutations in variety of personality, intellect, and behaviours, which are taken 'as given' in white people, are not afforded to black people, who are still rated as inferior. Black people are classed as failures far more readily than white people and often have to be twice as good to demonstrate their capabilities.

I thank God for the many white people I know who are deeply committed to this restoration and reaffirmation of the human dignity of black people both in what they say and do; who live and work alongside us as allies. The sadness - and it is a deep sadness - which we as black people bear, is that there are numerous white people today who allow indignities which are said and written about black people to go unchallenged; and some who actually participate in fanning flames that promote them.

White people today can and should play a part in restoring and reaffirming the human dignity of black people which the degrading acts of slavery robbed. They should be stating clearly to the world that their forebears erred greatly. Black people are exhausted by white people 'not seeing' that they have a key and distinct part to play in this restoration and reaffirmation of our human dignity and in bringing about equality. This is what fighting the injustices of racism seeks to address. White people 'not seeing' the issues and effects of racism, and doing nothing about it, is not a luxury which black people have, who bear the pain that it causes.

### *Power of individuals to bring about change*

As well as change taking place at organisational and institutional levels, it needs to take place, just as much, in the hearts and minds of individuals. What individuals do and think combines to create the atmosphere in communities and sets the tone for what is and is not acceptable. The composite effect can be tremendous.

### Way forward

In terms of the way forward, my hope is that there will be among white people, in companionship with black people,

- A. *A deepening of understanding* – through reading, video clips, documentaries, discussions, and listening to black people's stories and accounts. This is about wanting to find out more. Black people will have different stories to tell, not surprisingly. Some may reveal deep frustration and maybe even anger, but the question is whether the pain that lies underneath is being recognised.
- B. *The forming of relationships* – with black people from different walks of life. This is about engaging first-hand by having relationships which are genuine, respectful, and manifest the love of Christ.
- C. *A willingness to challenge* – questioning and taking action in relation to attitudes or situations which set black people 'in a mould', in a pejorative light, or at a disadvantage.

### My hopes

These arise from my experiences of life and my Christian faith of several decades. They are,

1. That white people - who are not already proactive - will become proactive in finding out more about black people's circumstances, and in forming relationships, and so be able to speak and act with a conviction that is borne out of knowledge and experience.
2. That through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, those white people who do not already recognise the destructive effects of racism on black people - and on themselves through being distanced from the heart of the love of Christ - will receive the necessary insight and objectivity to do so.
3. That people will listen to God, and hear His still, small voice above the clamour of their own.
4. That God will be enabled to break into entrenched positions and speak into the well-worn furrows of our own reasoning.

5. That we will live our lives not on our own terms, but in a way that is open to being shaped by God; open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and so become the people God wants us to be.
6. That we will be prepared to step out of our comfort zones and take risks for God; that we will not allow our fears to dictate our lives and hem us in.

I look forward to the day when we don't have to be referred to as 'black people', but just 'people'. I don't want people to be 'colour-blind' because colour is integral to who we are as people – but to be able to see colour as part of the richness of the totality of the person.

I commend to my fellow Christians a prayer to ask of God: 'How are you wanting to use me Lord, or use me more, so that black people can be freed to gain the fullness of life that Christ came to give.' I believe that the pernicious nature of the evil that racism is, and its grip - in all its subtlety and complexity - on the human race, means that its eradication can only succeed if our actions are initiated and sustained by prayer.

### **We journey together**

I believe that God wants us to see that we are to journey together in our endeavours in tackling racism. I mentioned the story of the paralysed man being brought to Jesus by his friends at the start of this narrative. The story sends the powerful message of our need for one another. It also reminds us that we all stand before God in a state of humility, and with a need to be healed, forgiven, and set free.

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