

Address by Nigel Guthrie

We had rather alarming Whatsapp message from our elder son last weekend 'Look what I've done!' It was linked to a picture of the statue of Edward Colston being toppled from its plinth. We rang him pretty quickly but it turned out that, although he was in the crowd, he hadn't actually been on the end of the rope that toppled Colston.

When Tina and I were at Bristol University 40 years ago the name of Colston wasn't the subject of much conversation. The Colston Hall was where the main choral society concert was held every year. If we had stopped to think about it we would have realized that several streets and schools were named after Colston but we really knew nothing about him. So I spent a little time this week reading up about him and his place in 17th century England. Colston was from an old Bristol family and became a successful merchant. But it was his time from 1680 to 1692 as a member and then governor of the Royal African Company that has led to the recent reappraisal of his status. During the time of his involvement in the company more than 80,000 men, women and children were traded as slaves. It is estimated that 19,000 of them died on the journey over the Atlantic in the appalling conditions of the slave ships.

Colston died without any heirs and left an enormous fortune to charitable causes, endowing hospitals, schools, almshouses and churches in Bristol, London and elsewhere. He specified that beneficiaries should share his religious views as a high church Anglican. Nonetheless at a time when there was no welfare state many poor people benefitted from the money he left. Interestingly Colston himself wished to have simple burial without ceremony but he was denied this and was buried in All Saint's Bristol with a fine stone memorial. His legacy has been celebrated in the city in the succeeding centuries. There are significant windows in St Mary Redcliffe and Bristol Cathedral dedicated to his memory, not to mention the ill-fated statue of 1895 which was pulled off its plinth last week.

The person whose death indirectly led to the pulling down of Colston's statue could hardly have had a more different life. George Floyd was born in 1973

and as we know from some of the tributes that have been paid to him was an excellent sportsman in his youth, known as a gentle giant. He contributed to the development of hip-hop and was an informal community leader. But his life took a darker turn and he was arrested several times for drug possession and theft and served a four-year sentence for taking part in a serious armed robbery.

After his release he became involved with Resurrection Houston Christian community where he was a mentor to young men. Since 2014 he had lived and worked in Minneapolis which is where on May 25th he was detained for using a fake \$20 note at a store and then died shortly afterwards as a result of violent mistreatment by the police. The public nature of his death and the sharing of the footage led to the deep outrage and the huge protests that have spread across the many countries in the past two weeks asserting that 'Black Lives Matter.'

Three times in today's gospel Jesus associates the good news of the kingdom with healing. Matthew tells us that Jesus went about 'curing every disease and sickness'. He then gives his disciples authority to cast out unclean spirits and cure disease and sickness. And thirdly he says 'The kingdom of God has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. The evils of racism and discrimination are a deep sickness in our world. And even though our own country now has laws to support equal rights the figures show us that the lives of many black people are harder than they should be here. There is no doubt that the healing of such divisions and discriminations is part of Jesus' call to us to live in justice, truth and peace with our neighbours.

But the moral complexity of the two lives I have briefly described is a reminder of how hard it is to live out the Christian life faithfully with respect for those around us. The uncomfortable truth is that both Colston and Floyd tried to live out their faith within their understanding and life experiences. A significant proportion of Colston's wealth was undoubtedly built on the evil exploitation of others. And yet he was not unusual in his time in regarding slave ownership as an acceptable part of life. So his legacy is deeply tainted. George Floyd's life was certainly not all good and yet he had clearly tried to redeem it in

various ways. If his death leads to a reduction in systemic racism and abuse of black people then it will be a truly wonderful legacy.

It can be very hard to know exactly how we should live and bring healing to those around us. As a small example most of us have increased our reliance on modern technology during this pandemic lockdown. But what the unseen and serious consequences of this? What about the enormous amount of power used to run the internet? What about the working conditions of those who assemble our mobile phones, tablets and computers? What about the huge quantities of water used to extract the lithium which goes into our rechargeable batteries and the human and environmental consequences of that?

The stories of Colston and Floyd leave me knowing that we must live out our faith in humility. Yes, we must do whatever we can to bring healing to society and encouragement to those around us; but always with a sharp awareness that our lives and actions may be hurting others in ways we can't fully understand. The truly good news is that God always continues to offer healing and redemption even when we go wrong. There was only one truly blameless life, that of Jesus, the rest of us must always rely on the mercy of God.