

## Black lives matter (extended version)



*Shirley Murphy, Curate in Narberth, offers a personal reflection on racism*

"You are just slaves. So go back to where you came from..." is what I was told by an elderly British lady when I was working in a travel kiosk in London. This incident took place one night during my shift from 3-11pm at a very busy train station in London. I was approached by an British lady who was in her late 70s, who came to my desk and said she was looking for a hotel to stay for 2 nights.

Before I could acknowledge her, she said to me that she would like to be served by someone other than me. I just smiled and said to her there was no one here other than me. She then said call your supervisor or manager. I said I was the supervisor. She then shouted at me and said she would not like to be served by a slave. She went on to say "you were just slaves to us, so I think you should just go back to where you came from". I should have got angry, but instead God gave me the strength to be very calm and answer that, since I was the only one present at that desk at that time, I would like to help her. She said she would rather die and just walked off.

Even though I was calm during the conversation I felt like someone had ripped my heart out and I felt terrible and offended once she left. I remember calling my parents the next morning and telling that I would like to return home. I did not tell them about the incident which had taken place, but just said I was missing them. My dad said trust in God, he has a plan and purpose as he took you to that country so stay there and carry on working and doing good and we will come and visit you soon. I then put that incident on the back burner and carried on with my life.

Language is a powerful medium through which conscious or unconscious bias and prejudice against certain nationalities are expressed. Some of the terms alienate people like me and make us feel isolated and different. Having lived in the UK for more than 15 years, I consider this my home. I love the British sense of humour; I love the sarcasm, the self-effacing and self-deprecating nature of British humour. However, there is nothing light-hearted or funny about making fun of someone because of their accent, nationality or race.

I have to face such bias and prejudice every single day because of my skin colour, as people just stare at me. I am not an alien from outer space. Whenever I walk into a supermarket with my husband who is a white, Welsh boy, people first look at him and then at me. Sometimes they cannot take their eyes off me. I wonder sometimes if it is because I am different or if I am covered with dirt...

"I did not mean to offend you, of course," is something I am often told, implying I am the one with the problem, the one who is too sensitive, and the one who is different and has no sense of humour.

As a nation with a dark history of colonisation and oppression of people of colour, Britain needs to re-examine its attitude towards those of us who live here.

When I first came here in 2005 to study in UK, I came like many others with a lot of dreams and aspirations. I come from the city of Chennai (previously called Madras). I have spoken English all my life, so I would say my English is up to British standards. But the first thing people often say when they meet me is 'you say you're an Indian, but why have you got a fake name (a very Anglicised name). Well, sorry to disappoint you but my dad was an ardent fan of Shirley Temple, so he named me Shirley. I did not change my name from an Indian name to an English name just because I am here in UK.

The two years when I was in University in London doing my Masters I was always called 'the Indian girl', 'the brown girl' or 'the curry head' (why? Because we make curries). When I progressed and became the supervisor in my job, I was chided and taunted by the previous supervisor who said that I was not from around here so I would miserably fail in all that I did.

After I got married to my husband Julian, he took me to a restaurant in a busy London street. He told me to walk in and start ordering while he finished his phone call with his mother. So I walked in and asked them for a table and the guy just looked at me and said there were no tables "for my kind". When Julian walked in the man was all over him asking him where he would like to sit. When I told my husband what had happened, he went to punch him, gave the guy a piece of his mind with a few choice words and we left.



Another incident happened on the day after our wedding. My husband and I were travelling on the bus and two young girls, also passengers, were staring at us. After a couple of minutes, one girl came over to my husband and asked him "are you with this girl for a bet?" We were left stunned and shocked. But Julian just said 'I am sorry to disappoint you, she is my wife and we got married only yesterday and she is the love of my life'. Then we got off the bus.

I was brought up by my parents in a very cherished manner; they always told me they loved me. But when I came here to UK, many a time I have felt shaken and unloved because of the way I have been treated. I have often been made to feel I am ugly because of my skin colour. But then I always cry to God to help me. Prayer has guided and helped me. It has made me

realise that I am made in the image of God and He loves me the way I am: it's tough if people don't like me.

Having said that, nobody is above racism. It takes different forms in different places. Many people believe that dark skin is a curse from God. When I was in India, every prospective husband I saw as part of our arranged marriage tradition rejected me due to my skin colour. So I am always surprised when my husband and friends tell me that I have beautiful skin. I have now got over the angst that I am not ugly but beautiful the way God created me. Every Indian woman who has dark skin dreams of having fairer skin as she is chided and abused by men who want girls who are fair-skinned.

I have faced many racist remarks since I moved to UK, but I still smile and carry on as I believe these people have to be taught that God loves each one of us irrespective of our caste, colour, creed, religion and ethnicity. He made us in His image and we need to be proud of it.

When I moved to Wales, I was always acknowledged as the brown girl in the village. I was constantly asked if I paid to marry my husband in order to stay in this country. People around me always made fun of my accent, some assumed that since I came from India I would not be educated and would probably only speak broken English and some assumed I was a Hindu.

Even when I started studying in theological college many of those who were already studying assumed that I was uneducated and would need a lot of help because I came from India. Assumptions are bad as you don't know the person. Just like you can't judge a book by the cover, don't judge me by my skin colour.

It's not easy to talk about our wounds; whether it's our individual wounds, whether it's the wounds we've received or the ones we've inflicted. To talk about our wounds requires us to look at what we've done and left undone. It means we each have to look within ourselves. It means taking responsibility for our lives. It means valuing the life and wounds of another as much as our own.

Most of the time I don't want to face or deal with my wounds. It's too painful. It's a vulnerable and risky place to be. More often than not I just want to deny that they hurt. I want to ignore or forget my wounds, relegate them to the past. I want to cover up and hide my wounds so you can't see them. Sometimes I make judgments about others and blame them. Other times I want to use my wounds, revel in them, and play the victim so I can get some attention or sympathy.

In Micah 6:8, we read that God requires three things of us: to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with him. We must come together and do these things. I believe that the Bible is a deep well of wisdom that offers us a way forward as individuals and as a country as we work to conquer the sin of systemic racism. In fact, the Bible has historically been a catalyst for justice movements and reforms in our nation.

Finally, to conclude, right from creation, Genesis chapter one states that we are *all* created in God's image. As Paul told the philosophers in Athens, "And [God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth. . ." When you get right down to it, there really *is* only one race—it's called the *human* race. In that sense, we're all brothers, equal in dignity and intrinsic value.

Of course, all lives matter to God and they should matter to us. When we fully understand the intrinsic value of EACH human life, it's easier for us to feel pain when they feel pain.