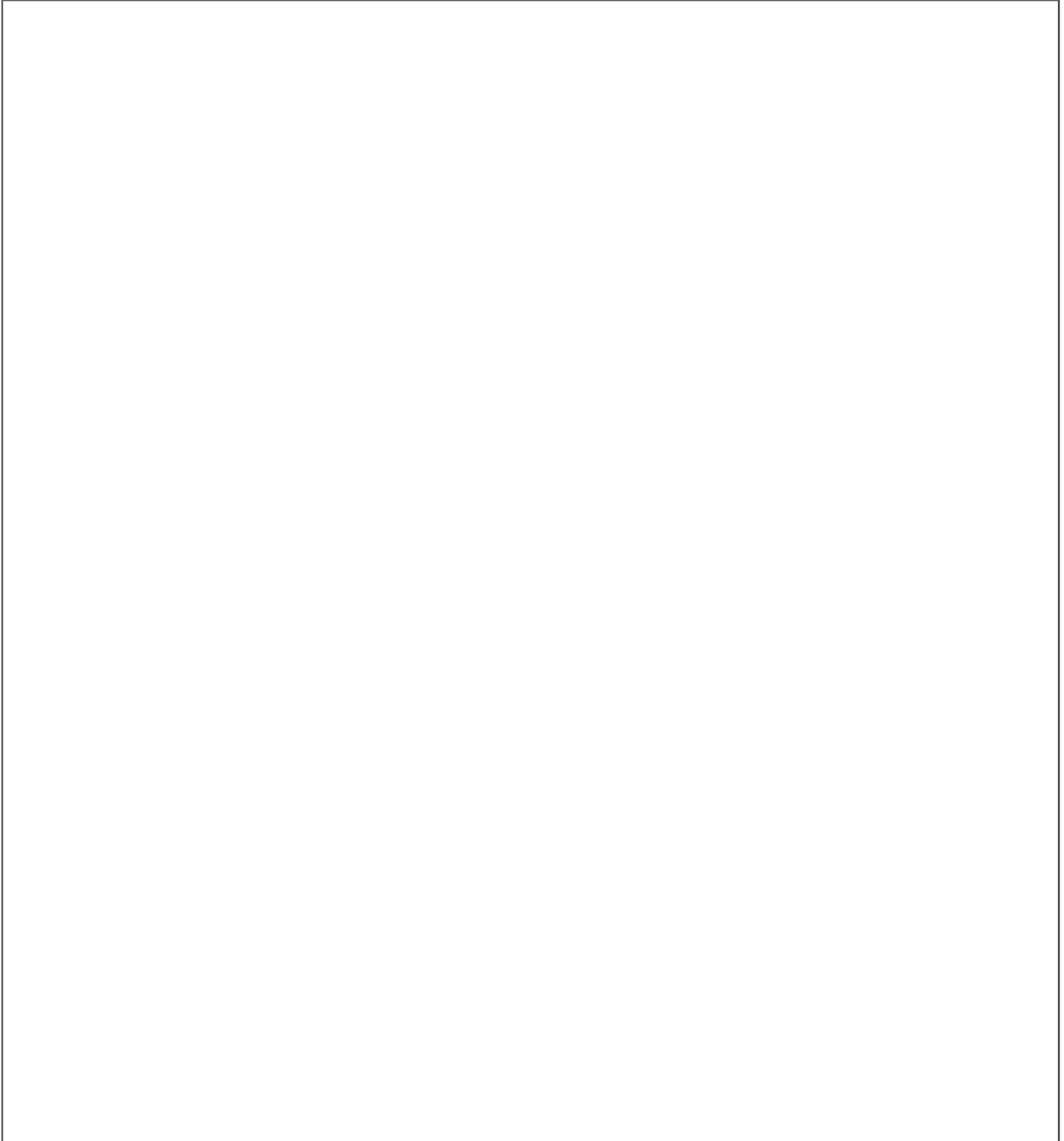




6 October 2024 - Archbishop Stephen Cottrell | A moment of Reflection.

Every week the Diocese of York offers a prayer video for churches to use either online or in their services. The Archbishop of York leads in a moment of Reflection on Mark 10.2-16 for the start of Black History Month.



The text of the reflection follows in full

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

- Mark 10. 13 & 14

With colleagues and partners from civic, commercial and university life, I was in New York early this year to mark a century of friendship between 'old' York and New York.

I had a great time. It is a fabulous city. It was a packed and action packed schedule. We were whisked from the airport to a University of York drinks reception in Manhattan. The visit's climax was the unveiling of a ledger stone in St Thomas' Church on 5th Avenue. It was made by the stonemasons at York Minster to celebrate international friendship and its importance in a fragile and fractious world.

On the first morning, still feeling a bit jetlagged a few of us had coffee and pastries in a New York diner. As we rose from our table to leave, a woman at an adjacent table, jumped up too, and apologising for interrupting us, uttered what I thought were cliched words which no one actually said in real life: 'Gee, I just love your accent.' Loved it so much, evidently, that she was stopping us to say so!

To which the common English reaction is: 'Thank you, but I don't have an accent. I speak normally. You are the one with the accent.'

I didn't say this, of course.

But I didn't really know what else to say either, for, truly, what was to her accent is, to me, just the way I speak. It is my 'normal'.

But also, in that one friendly and apparently inconsequential exchange, lies the whole challenge to how we understand diversity, something we are invited to consider in this black history month. If I think that my accent, my background, my education, my ethnicity, and my colour is normal, I am also, without always making the connection (and thus rendering it even more dangerous), saying that other people's accents, backgrounds and ethnicities are not normal. This doesn't necessarily mean I think ill of them, but I do think – yes, often unconsciously – their difference is some sort of exception from the norm and therefore, maybe, less than the norm, and thereby open myself to all sorts of half-truths and pre-suppositions that can easily become a subconscious bias that affects how I deal with people who are 'not normal like me' and even to the most hideous prejudice and the rancorous, poisonous racism that still persists individually and institutionally in so many hearts and minds and in much of our society. And yes only last month overflowed into violence on our streets in our Diocese.

And the only way out of this is to see ourselves differently so that we can see everyone equally.

I am not normal. I have an accent and I have a culture and an education that shaped me and I have an ethnicity and a colour. And in case any of you are thinking that, yes, racial justice is important, but not really something that Church needs to be too exercised about, not only is there racism in the church, the gospel of Jesus Christ confronts issues of racism directly and as part of its central proclamation: it is the new understanding of what it is to be human in Christ that is the very best way of seeing ourselves differently and therefore seeing everyone equally.

We are children of one heavenly father.

We are all sinners in need of God's grace and forgiveness; and, in Christ, the barriers we love to erect around ourselves and all distinctions of class and race and gender are reconfigured. We are one humanity where diversity is normal; where diversity is the way God has made us; where we belong to one another and need one another; where no one is less than us; and where we are less than what we should be when some are excluded or belittled; where the hand cannot say to the arm, 'I don't need you.'

This is the vision of racial justice whose struggles and challenges black history month invites us to consider and, as it turns out, is nothing less than the vision of what God has done for us in Christ through the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross, reconciling us to God and to each other. The Holy Spirit only speaks local dialects!

Aside from the martinis and the celebrations much of my trip to New York was taken up with sobering and fascinating discussions with Christians in North America who are working to face up to the terrible legacy of chattel slavery and how it was that an appalling ignorance of the beautiful diversity of humankind and what that means, and a wilful and hateful belief in our own supremacy led to the commodification and sale of human life. The effects of this horror are still felt today, are still real today and it was a privilege to sit at the feet of those who are trying to do something to address it, especially those who are descended from enslaved people and feel it most keenly. The Church of England was invested in and profited from this evil trade and we still hold that money, the proceeds of that, in our accounts as do so many other institutions. We should be proud that the Church Commissioners who are the stewards of much of our historic wealth are also doing something about this and have set up a fund to build a better future and address issues of healing, justice and repair. We should be thankful in a complimentary way that the work of the Church of England's Racial Justice commission and our own Racial Justice group in our diocese, are helping all of us to see this as the gospel issue it is.

And today's gospel reading reminds us of the high moral duties that are part of our life in Christ, and at the end of our reading we hear how it is the disciples themselves who stopped little children getting to Jesus.

They were, or so they concluded, the wrong people. They weren't big enough. They weren't clever enough. They weren't respectful enough. They just weren't old enough.

For them, the 'normal grown-up ones', this was obvious.

And his words of challenge, 'Let them come to me; do not stop them,' should disrupt and reconfigure all our pre-suppositions and prejudices as we seek to be a church where all of us are received as children, and where, grateful as children for the love and acceptance we all need, we look most like the kingdom of God when we are a place of welcome and hospitality for everyone.

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofyork.org/speaking-and-writing/sermons/moment-reflection-6-october-2024>