

Your heart

Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21

You will be aware of the ongoing controversy in the sporting world, and in others, around the phenomenon of ‘taking the knee.’ Taking the knee is a symbolic gesture against racism where a person kneels on one knee. The gesture originated in a 2016 American football game where two players chose to kneel during the playing of the US national anthem to call attention to the issues of racial inequality and police brutality.

In British football, some of our footballers also started ‘taking the knee’, acknowledging the ongoing issue of racism in British society, sometimes to be found on the football terraces in this country, as well as in other walks of UK life. It was not without controversy. Some British politicians, including the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, declined to condemn football fans as racist who booed footballers taking the knee. One senior politician, whilst condemning racism, criticised ‘taking the knee’ as, “gesture politics.”

Whatever your view on the controversy, the point remains that it is important to draw attention to the corrosive presence of racism in our society, and to do something about it.

Paul in his letter to the young Christian Church talks about the need to ‘bow the knee’ before God. To show reverence and respect, gratitude and love. In other words to give God God’s place not only in the world, but in your life. There is nothing tokenistic about what Paul is recommending. He would be firmly of the view that it’s not just going to Church regularly that matters, it’s showing what that means in your everyday life that is important. It’s not just saying you are a Christian, and knowing all the words, but it’s about *doing* something about it. As they old chorus puts it, they will know we are Christians by our love.

Paul talks more about taking the knee, and bowing before God, he talks about Christ dwelling in your hearts. Jesus living in your life, so that you learn about the breadth, length and height of the dimensions of faith, so that these put structure and substance and texture into the way you express yourself, treat others, and show that loving-kindness to which Christians aspire daily.

Your heart. Jesus in *your heart*. Jesus at the core of you. Jesus the substance of you. Jesus the DNA of you. Now, I know that's getting a little bit pious even on a Sunday morning, but I wonder, as you lift up your voices and sing, as you express something of what you believe not just by your presence here but by your participation in worship here, something emotional happened. Jesus in *your heart*.

Barbara Pym, a novelist I'd heard of but never read until this year writes lyrically about the heart:

What is the heart? A damp cave with things growing in it, mysterious secret plants of love or whatever you like. Or a dusty lumber room full of junk. Or a neat orderly place like a desk with a place for everything and everything in its place.

Your heart. How is your heart? What is your heart? I don't mean physically, I mean spiritually, I mean ethically, I mean morally. Jesus wondered if it was the case that where our treasure was, "there will your heart be also."

The heart is not simply a muscle pumping blood around our bodies. The heart, coupled with the brain, is the seat of our passion and the inspiration for our intent. If our heart isn't really into it, then we have no drive or focus or motivation. But when we put our hearts into something, we are putting more than just our intellect or passion, we launch our very souls into our endeavour. 'Your heart', says Paul. Jesus wants to live in your heart. The C19th Irish writer Samuel Lover came up with an incredibly intimate and moving phrase about love when he wrote, "Come live in my heart, and pay no rent." Jesus wants to dwell in our hearts, paying no rent, no contractual obligation, but a moral obligation that calls us to respond to His presence by ordering our lives in such a way that how we frame our decisions, how we orient our actions, will be illuminated inside and out by our commitment to the carpenter of Nazareth.

We might not manage it all the time, but we might manage it some of the time. That kind of selfless living comes at a cost. We know the distance between our intention and our action, our aspiration and our reality, but that distance, great or small, can be bridged, more often than we realise. The surprised delight in our lives when we find that we are not as bad, or as selfish, or as limited, or as hypocritical as we thought we were. We are often better people than we give ourselves credit. Believe me, I see it in you.

We see it in the lives of others too. One of the men mocked and racially abused for ‘taking the knee’ is Manchester-born footballer Marcus Rashford. This twenty-three year old footballer is a campaigner against racism, homelessness and child hunger. He has used his public platform to be a political activist and philanthropist to drive societal change. For his efforts he has received widespread praise and recognised by organisations both inside and outside sport. He was awarded an MBE last year. Former US president Barak Obama has said of Rashford, “When you look at the history of big social movements and big social change, it is usually young people who initiate this because they do not take for granted that things have to be as they always were, and can imagine something different...They are already making changes and being positive forces in their communities and countries.”

Marcus Rashford has also been subjected to abuse. A mural in which he featured was defaced during the Euros campaign. Earlier this week the Spectator news magazine took aim at Rashford’s financial business associations, despite the fact that a considerable amount of the sponsorship has gone into the causes he supports. The footballer has replied: “Why has there always got to be a motive? Why can’t we just do the right thing?”

These are two crucial questions which everyone needs to answer, in public and in private life, whoever we are, whatever we do, whatever we believe, whatever our background. For those of us who are Christians, that would be bowing our knees to God; that would be demonstrating that we are grounded in God’s love, and showing our understanding of what the breadth, length, height and depth of God’s love was in our lives. And it would be showing by who we are and what we do that Christ dwells *in our hearts*.

So how is your heart today? Heavy or glad? Sore or joyful? Divided or whole? Hardened or generous? Spiteful or loving? What are the motivations of your heart? For your family and friends, for your community and church, for the well-being of your world and those who are your neighbours within it.

The heart of the matter is the most important, basic, or fundamental essence or elements of an issue, problem, or matter at hand. It is compassion and understanding, life-giving and complex. It is a symbol for love. It is Jesus, living within us, nudging and prompting and whispering.

Telling us, "Yes you can, yes you will." Leading us by example, taking us by the hand, and the heart, and walking with us towards the right thing, filling us with the fullness of God.

How is your heart today? Is there room for Jesus to move in, and stay?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen