



# Editorial



**Joshva Raja**

Joshva Raja is Head of Bible Society's International Bible Advocacy Centre.

In 1994 I was serving as a mission pastor among tea estate workers in southern India. All around I saw evidence of discrimination, institutionalised inequality, injustice, prejudice and poverty. The majority of the workers where I was based were Dalit. Although India's caste system was officially abolished in 1950, the social hierarchy imposed on people at birth still exists in many areas of life. Dalits, or the 'untouchables', are placed at the very bottom of the social hierarchy and constitute around 25 per cent of India's population. On the tea estates where I was based, the Dalits worked in deplorable conditions, with no benefits, no healthcare and for less than the legal wage, if they were paid at all. The housing provided was old and dilapidated and unfit for habitation, especially during the monsoon season.

The challenge for the local church was how it would respond to such discrimination, prejudice and deprivation. Many of the Dalit were Christian and regularly attended church. They, along with people from all walks of life and social strata (including the General Manager of the company that owned the tea plantations), came to worship God and share communion. The teaching often focused on what it meant to be one in Christ. Every Sunday, after the service, the pastoral team would organise a fellowship meal and Bible study, where all could participate and share their views. These discussions raised many questions, particularly about dignity, identity and individual worth. We talked about what it means to be created in the image of God. We told Bible stories – the account of the Exodus from Egypt was a particular favourite,

with God's calling of 'the slaves' to be his chosen people. We were able to teach them that God loves everyone, even the oppressed, and that Christians should behave in the same way, treating everyone with loving kindness, dignity and respect.

The local church community – with financial support from other churches and government agencies – also started various development projects, including running a school to help educate the Dalits, who were largely illiterate. Consequently, the Dalits became more confident and started to work towards improving their lives. They organised themselves and opened negotiations with their employers. As a pastor, I had several discussions with the Christian General Manager about how working conditions could be improved.

In 1995 I left India and returned to my studies in Scotland. A new pastor with different ideas was appointed. He associated with a local political leader who persuaded the labourers to go on strike for their demands. Over the next couple of years industrial relations between the workers and the tea company deteriorated to the extent that nearly 30 people were murdered on both sides. There were even disputes within the Dalit community, with some wanting to return to their jobs as they could not survive without any salary, and others who were vehemently opposed to such action and tried to stop anyone returning work.

In 2000 I returned to India and was asked by the bishop to act as a mediator between the workers and the tea company. After three months of

negotiations a settlement was reached and all the Dalit workers returned to their jobs, with the promise of improved working conditions and an increase in pay.

That Easter I led the communion service. As I raised the cup, I asked people for a reconciliation among themselves. The new General Manager of the company, a Hindu, was present at the service and he promised to continue to work with the church and see the Dalit workers' lives improved. Over time conditions were improved – although some of the issue were not quickly resolved, with some pending in court cases – and people's dignity restored.

I tell this story because it illustrates how the gospel has the power to transform people's lives. God's word challenges injustice and any form of discrimination, whether it is based on caste, gender or race. It can transform people's lives when they read it and connect it to their everyday life.

Like my story, the contributors to this issue of *The Bible in Transmission* are engaging creatively with the Bible to address the issue of racism. They all highlight the relevance of Scripture by relating it to the everyday reality of discrimination and marginalisation of people based on the colour of their skin.

As Joshua Searle reminds us there is a non-negotiable biblical mandate and gospel imperative to confront and combat racism. Racism is more than the expression of a set of bigoted beliefs. It operates on many levels and manifests itself in many different ways. It promotes injustice and inequality, and is a 'blasphemous violation of the sacred dignity of a human being who bears the divine image'.

Mohammed Girma discusses the struggle the Church has in moving from right theology to right practice when it comes to matters of racial justice. The Church needs to set a biblical agenda and engage prophetically in the public discourse about racial justice. Although the BAME community bears the brunt of abuse, marginalisation and injustice, we should recognise that the spiritual damage transcends racial boundaries. The issue goes deeper than skin colour because it is an example of the depth of human brokenness. If the Church is to change mindsets and become an inclusive and equal community, the goal must be 're-humanising by restoring the distorted divine image in humanity'.

Chigor Chike reminds us that racism is about power. Building on his work in the area of ethnic diversity and inclusion, he argues that one strategy for confronting and overcoming racism is the promotion of diversity within our church communities. Diversity is a good thing. Churches wishing to confront racism should create space for diversity within their communities. This will be uncomfortable for some church leaders but they

should commit to working with BAME people in order to fight racism.

Diversity is a gracious act of a sovereign God. Owen Hylton shows that diversity and racial reconciliation are not purely modern inventions of a secular society. Rather they are at the very heart of God's purpose: 'God always intended ... one day to display his wisdom through the multicoloured, multi-layered, multicultural diverse Church.' Reflecting on the example of the Early Church in Antioch, Hylton outlines some of the steps churches can take to become reconciled and more integrated communities.

Drawing on biblical views of justice and righteousness, Jason Shields asks church communities to transform themselves. They should alter their thinking and reimagine their prophetic role in challenging and changing the sinful and discriminatory structures within the Church and wider society. He invites churches to be part of an alternative biblical vision for diverse and inclusive communities, one that recognises the dignity of all people.

In our sixth article, Chine McDonald writes about her experience of being both black and female in a world that in many ways is designed to elevate both whiteness and patriarchy. 'White supremacy can come in the form of monochrome leadership, theology and practice.' This is the status quo. However, the Church should be better than this because it should be actively breaking down the dividing walls of hostility that exist between people. The Church should be like a mosaic of different shapes, colours and sizes that come together to form a beautiful picture.

In our final piece, Ingrid Reneau reflects on how the Bible became the enduring vehicle for many forms of radical resistance thinking and actions for those Africans cruelly taken into slavery. Informed by biblical stories of exile, liberation, lament and hope, the African American Spirituals gave those forced into slavery the cultural and spiritual tools to overcome the limitations of their present realities and affirm a right to life. In doing so, those who sang and danced the Spirituals rejected the Christianity of those who enslaved them.

Reading the Bible and relating to everyday contexts brings challenges and transforms the lives of many today. In the context of discrimination and marginalisation based on race, gender and caste, the Bible is a prophetic voice that can help our Christian communities – and the wider society – reconstruct, reconcile and reform our relationship with our fellow human beings and confront the sin of racism that blights all walks of life. May the Church be a prophetic witness to the power of God's Spirit to bring healing, reconciliation, justice, love and hope to our broken world.