

Thought for the Week 21 June 2020

I am sure, like me, you were shocked by the footage of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis a couple of weeks ago, and also by the shooting dead of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta after he had resisted arrest and turned a tazer gun on one of the police officers. As both these men were from the black Afro-American community anti-racism protests have taken place not only in the US, but across the world. Of course people have the right to protest against discrimination, and as Christians we support their legitimate aims and are fundamentally opposed to any sort of racism, but sadly, as so often happens, legitimate Black Lives Matter protests have been hijacked and spoiled by those who have used it as an opportunity to cause trouble. Also, of great concern has been the vandalism of statues and monuments such as that of Edward Colston in Bristol. A group calling itself "Topple the Racists" has identified 78 monuments all over the UK - including Sir Francis Drake, Christopher Columbus, Robert the Bruce, Lord Baden-Powell and which it wants removed. The reasoning behind some of these is interesting. They want the statue of former Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel removed because his MP father voted in favour of slavery continuing!

I don't often find myself agreeing strongly with Boris Johnson, but with regard to this issue he has made some good points. He said that it was "absurd and shameful" that the statue of Sir Winston Churchill in Parliament Square had to be boarded up to prevent it being vandalised. With regard to other monuments he said, "We cannot now try to edit or censor our past. We cannot pretend to have a different history."

While we may not agree with the views of many historical figures, we must not try to airbrush them out of history, but rather learn from their mistakes. This is what we find in the bible. Read through its pages and you will learn of many people we were used by God for his purposes who actually did great evil. The Bible isn't just made up of great heroes of the faith who were perfect, super-human beings. Indeed many of the great characters of the Bible were far from perfect. They sometimes made great errors of judgement from which we can learn. Right back in Genesis 4 we have Cain killing his brother Able. In Genesis 9 we read of the great man of faith Noah lying drunk and naked in his tent. Or think of Abraham, the great father of the faith, who didn't trust God's promise and had an illegitimate son called Ishmael. His grandson Jacob cheated his brother out of his inheritance. Moses was a murderer, Samson was immoral, David had an affair and had a man murdered to cover it up. After Jesus was arrested Peter cursed and swore that he didn't know him at all. And why on earth did Jesus choose Judas as one of his disciples when he must have known what he would betray him? Saul of Tarsus was the instigator of the persecution of many Christian believers before he became Paul the Apostle. In 1 Corinthians 15 he says:

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain.

Acts 5 tells us about Ananias and his wife Sapphira who cheated the early church and Paul writes to Timothy about Demas who had deserted him because he "loved the world."

The Bible is an honest book and there are many other examples in scripture of people who failed and made serious mistakes. These people are not glossed over or brushed out of history, because God uses imperfect fallible human beings for his purposes. And we can be thankful that he does, for, if he only had perfect people in his church, then none of us could be part of it! And let's remember that the tainted heroes of the Bible are people from whom we can learn.

Paul talks about learning from the past in 1 Corinthians 10 using examples from Israel's history. Here's how "The Message" paraphrases this passage:

¹⁻⁵ Remember our history, friends, and be warned. All our ancestors were led by the providential Cloud and taken miraculously through the Sea. They went through the waters, in a baptism like ours, as Moses led them from enslaving death to salvation life. They all ate and drank identical food and drink, meals provided daily by God. They drank from the Rock, God's fountain for them that stayed with them wherever they were. And the Rock was Christ. But just experiencing God's wonder and grace didn't seem to mean much—most of them were defeated by temptation during the hard times in the desert, and God was not pleased. ⁶ The same thing could happen to us. ¹¹⁻¹² These are all warning markers—DANGER!—in our history books, written down so that we don't repeat their mistakes. Our positions in the story are parallel—they at the beginning, we at the end—and we are just as capable of messing it up as they were. Don't be so naive and self-confident. You're not exempt. You could fall flat on your face as easily as anyone else. Forget about self-confidence; it's useless. Cultivate God-confidence.

In Philippians 3 Paul talks about how he thought he was doing God's will by persecuting the new Christian sect, but after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus he says:

⁸ I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus

What Paul is saying could be summed up in three guiding principles - (1) Learning from the Past, (2) Living with Purpose & (3) Looking Forward with Confidence.

The German philosopher Friedrich Hegel said, "*The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.*" Sadly, that has often been the case, not only in human history but in the history of the church, and yes, sometimes even in our own lives.

So let's make sure we take Paul's advice and put the past behind us, learning from our mistakes and then "strain forward" knowing that if our faith and trust is in Christ we have a sure and certain future with him.