

When idols fall from their plinths

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I have never lamented the absence of statues in the churches I have grown up in or served. Those representations of people have always left me queasy. As it is, the image of Jesus on our cradle rolls is ridiculous; white flowing garb indeed. Where did that false idol come from? Always reminds me of the pied piper. A bit dodgy! Something in my DNA makes me shudder when I see those statues of the holy family, usually minus Dad. (what is it about Joseph we find so hard; does he represent something just a bit too real? ... safer to leave him in the stable with the donkey!) Mother and Mary look like nothing I've never seen or intuited. And hey, they're all ... white! Wouldn't it be refreshing to see a child Jesus crying and bawling? You know, like ... for real? Maybe Mary and Joseph having a set to ... or making love? Yep, I know, best left to our imaginations. But that is precisely the point! Those kinds of statues leave nothing to the imagination. They neuter it. Kill it off.

Jesus, and his family, perfectly represented in our far-from-likeness from day one. Nonsense. And on that subject, why is poor Joseph absent from the passion narrative? Even the damned donkey has a come-back part!

What's wrong with a fallen-to-the-real earth saviour, human, real? Just when the story risks becoming authentic, we save ourselves from serious engagement, by setting the whole thing on a plinth, a stage, beyond our reach or the dust on our feet. Mere spectators. No wonder too many of our churches feel more akin to museums. The stuff that matters, eclipsed until the day we realise these idols aren't serving us very well at all. We know what comes next. Remember the Reformation? The bedrock of our brand of Christian witness? Iconoclasm ... it is written into our heritage, but let's beware we spell it correctly. It's not vandalism.

The work of theologian Rudolph Bultmann resonates with many of today's concerns. His work on **demythologising** the new testament, driving down deep to truthfulness and a truer honouring of the human condition inspires. He asks:

Can Christian preaching expect modern man to accept the mythical view of the world as true? To do so would be both senseless and impossible. It would be senseless, because there is nothing specifically Christian in the mythical view of the world as such. It is simply the cosmology of a pre-scientific age.



Rudolf Karl Bultmann 1884-1976 Theologian, existentialist

Archbishop Justin Welby spoke powerfully in an interview this week on Radio 4 reminding us what you see if you just glance around the interiors of Westminster or St Paul's. Statues everywhere and some of them commemorating some people with a mixed pedigree.

Does it raise questions? "Of course" he responded. **"Of course!"**

On our faith journeys there will be days of rebuilding and days of demolition. Days for consolidating, yet others for reforming. Days when we decide what to carry with us, and others when we decide what we need to discard, but not leave on the beach for some other poor souls to have to pick up and dispose of safely. Letting go is not the same as litter dropping. You know what I'm getting at! And let it be said the Reformation involved some pretty loutish behaviour. Not all saints, vandals too.

I wonder what we make of those images, not of litter, but the aftermath of statues being toppled? Here are a few to ponder:



Saddam Hussein



Lenin



Edward Colston

Do these images all invoke the same feelings? Are we more at ease with some than others? If so, why? Does some oppression suit our version of history just a bit too comfortably? Bringing down, fine for the others, but not our ain!

These falling idols remind me of the prophetic words of Isaiah (Ch 46)

**Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low;
their idols are borne by beasts of burden.
The images that are carried about are burdensome,
a burden for the weary.
They stoop and bow down together;
unable to rescue the burden,
they themselves go off into captivity.**

In the huge cultural shift to monotheism in his day, Isaiah reminds people of the Babylonian worship of gods which, far from saving them, have to be secured and carried off on beasts of burden, as the more or less monotheistic Persians rise victorious. These Babylonian idols, far from protecting them from the vicissitudes of the day, blind them, preventing them from seeing the inevitable.

I wonder what are the equivalent idols of our own thinking today?

Today we ask whether perhaps a museum is a better place to display some of those statues where the whole story can be told. While unnerved, I welcome the toppling of some of these statues. Their removal is overdue, given the prevarication of those in authority who have dithered quite long enough. Many of them emanate from days when children were sent down mines and health and safety concerns didn't exist. Their fortunes built on a view of other lives as mere commodity and expendable. We live in times when there is a seeking for truth, a liberation from a past that still casts far too much of a shadow. We may balk, but we all know the challenge falls to us all to tell these/our histories much more honestly. And as for the things we don't know; well, it's OK to admit that. But filling in the blanks of our knowledge with wishful thinking, turning a blind eye, or erecting false idols doesn't cut it. We know that too.

These of course are grand words set in the context of a real world where apparently our first instinct, given half a chance, is to rush to the beach and drop more litter per head capita than I ever thought possible:

So maybe part of our vocation as a church is to challenge the hypocrisy of our times, to seek a more honest critique and state it and, frankly, cause some offence. But in such a calling, let's delve deep into our own lives, loves and losses and our own consciences too. Have I never, **never**, dropped litter? That's the easy question!

I do not know what it is like to be black, but here is a man who does:



Ibrahim Diallo

He writes in the context of our current reflections on racism, citing his almost accidental appointment as a computer programmer:

I am a Guinean citizen, who went to French school in Saudi Arabia, and now lives in California. I grew up hearing multiple languages spoken around me every day. This experience is what shaped my less-than-common accent. My French is not French, my Fulani is not Guinean, my Arabic is not Arab, and my English is certainly not American. As a result, interviewers have a hard time guessing where I am from in phone interviews. They can never tell I am black.

I believe that these can be honest mistakes. Sometimes, people make assumptions that turn out to be wrong. It is only human. There is no grounds to accuse someone of racism. But when it happens over and over and over, you can't help but feel frustrated. You realise that people's natural instinct is to think you don't belong there.

If you are black and you join a Zoom meeting where everyone is white, eventually someone will say: "I think someone joined our room by mistake." If you are black and take a group picture with your white colleagues one evening, eventually someone will make the joke that all they see are your teeth. If you are black and hang out with your white colleague, people will always assume you are the subordinate.

I'd like to believe that my work speaks for itself. That the years I spent tinkering with computers are reflected in my words. That my passion for programming exudes when I speak. But I also can't help but think that I am caught in a numbers game. I am the 0.1% of black people who end up working as programmer.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-53180073>

I'm all zoomed out, but for different reasons to Ibrahim. But I absolutely recognise what he is describing. It's about being in a space where certain presumptions prevail.

We have all endured these spaces, but some more than most. They are real spaces, prisons to our human spirit. They are the spaces Christ seeks to rescue, redeem us from: spaces where it feels like we are choking from the weight of knees on our necks or imaginations. Spaces where we are invited, coerced to bow down to the status quo. They are the spaces where nothing is said: nothing needs to be said. We all know the rules of play, of polite combat and unconvincing co-habitation. Spaces where power is reserved to those elevated to the plinth or the high altar. Just look at the disempowering structures the church embraces. Serried ranks all facing that high altar where some stand just a little above the rest. Just a little is enough to create a chasm. It's a structure that is crumbling before our eyes. Good.

Did Jesus ever stand in a pulpit? Serve wine from the chancel? Really?

Sing Hymns? Hope that one day he'd be carved into stone and given wings?

At the core of Christian belief is a God touched by, reflected in, infected by, humanity. **Incarnate**. It is not a god of stone set on high, but God, grounded in the dust and detritus of this world, the prayers and the litter.

It is quite extraordinary how we have elevated this God beyond anything that Jesus ever spoke of, his abba, dad!

Isaiah couldn't resist the irony and the passage quoted above goes on:

**Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob,
all the remnant of the people of Israel,
you whom I have upheld since your birth,
and have carried since you were born.
Even to your old age and grey hairs
I am he, I am he who will sustain you.
I have made you and I will carry you;
I will sustain you and I will rescue you.**

In these days when so much can feel or is fragile, crumbling before our eyes, we find comfort and hope in the idea of a God who carries us, a God who does not need to be safely secured in a museum in times when the winds of change blow. But the only way God can help us is if first we release God from the plinth and set her free to roam our streets, our hearts and souls, and temples too.

When we read the words of Isaiah it isn't hard to imagine how a young Nazarene, Jesus son of Joseph, might have been inspired by them.

We are now engaged in discussions about opening up our places of worship after lockdown. There are a lot of practical considerations and at St John's we are going to take things slowly. We do not envisage Sunday services resuming until at least September and in this we are not alone, far from it.

But as well as the practical aspects, important and numerous as they are, there are a raft of other considerations too. We are not returning to normal. Our world will be living with Covid 19 for perhaps years to come. We will have to find ways of carrying this burden. But in recent months we have discovered our capacity to share the weight of things. And, just when we thought we had enough to contend with, yet more fell into the domain of our care. Health and Justice intertwined. And Covid 19 has revealed huge discrepancies in our world, beyond our capacity to ignore.

Even so, we have been reminded love can conquer fear, in so many ways. We have not clapped our hands for nothing.

I cannot help but wonder that Black Lives Matter has come at a good point: a reminder that one person's normal is another's captivity. I do not think people have protested because they have nothing better to do. I've spoken to many who have protested. They were not bored. They were motivated, informed and determined. They let their faith in humanity guide their steps, taking calculated risk. Refusing to let the moment slip from their grasp. Laudable. Inspired.

Saints? No.

People created in the likeness of God? Yes, even the ones who dropped litter.

As we take our next steps on the journey we never planned, let's do the risk assessments that are demanded of us, but also those that are not.

Let's assess not just the risk of opening up the buildings, but also the risk of not opening up our minds, hearts and souls even more. That seems to me a risk too ridiculous to contemplate. Surely we have travelled beyond that point. I pray we have.

I carry questions in my mind I did not harbour in January. They are tethered to conviction: We should not drift to our future. We should fashion and shape it.

Are we determined to shore up structures, physical and human, which are nigh on unsustainable and to what end? Do we continue to plough our ever-deepening, isolating furrows or lift our eyes to a different horizon? Are there more statues and idols we need to topple? How do we truly set ourselves free to witness to the love of a God who is carrying us all?

I believe

God is in these days, not watching from afar, on high.
God is in these days as we find new ways of reaching out and carrying.

God is strong enough to carry us
God is vulnerable enough to share our misgivings and worries.

God will bow down to us in love
God will kneel to us, but not on our necks.

God is bigger than any limiting and crass image we can create
God yearns to be set free of the plinths and high altars of our thinking.

God is with us in the holding on and the letting go.

God is a grown up, not a wain.

God laughs and weeps. God hopes. God will never let us go.



Be still and know ...

