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Who Do You Say I Am? Faith, Racial Justice, and Belonging in Troubled Times

There is a moment in the Gospels when Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, ***"Who do you say I am?"*** (Matthew 16:15). It is a question that is both intimate and unsettling one that resists second-hand answers and refuses abstraction. It demands a response shaped not by theory alone, but by encounter, by lived experience, and by truth tested under pressure.

Racism is not an abstract issue for the Church of England; it is a lived reality that touches parish life, leadership, history, and witness. For me, this is not simply something I observe or analyse; it is something I have known, lived and experienced known personally.

As an Indian woman, born into the Sikh faith and later my conversion to the Christian faith in my twenties, my journey into ordained ministry has been shaped by both grace and struggle. The question Jesus asks ***"Who do you say I am?*** has not been answered from a place of comfort, but in the midst of experiences of racism, of not fully belonging in society, and many times, not fully belonging in the very Church I am called to serve.

There have been moments when I have felt unseen or misjudged, when my identity as an Indian woman, and as someone who came to faith from a Sikh background, has set me apart in ways that were not always welcomed.

There have been quiet moments and overt ones when my calling has been questioned, when assumptions have been made about who I am or what I bring, and when the weight of discrimination has been unmistakable. In those moments, the question of who Jesus is becomes inseparable from the question of who I am allowed to be, and whether I truly belong.

Yet it is precisely there that Christ meets me.

When Jesus asks, ***"Who do you say I am?"*** he is not asking for a correct theological formula, but for a relationship that endures strain and suffering. My answer has been shaped by coming to know Christ as the one who sees beyond the categories that constrain us, who speaks with those on the margins, who restores dignity where it has been denied. He is the Christ who knows what it is to be rejected, misunderstood, and excluded and yet who does not turn away.

My conversion to Christianity was not a rejection of my heritage, but a deepening encounter with the living Christ who called me by name. In Him, I discovered not an erasure of my story, but its redemption. I have come to know Jesus as the one who affirms my belonging when other voices cast doubt upon it--who calls me not in spite of my heritage, culture, or journey, ***but through them***. In Christ, I find not only acceptance but purpose: a vocation that does not flatten difference but honours and redeems it.

Alongside the pain of marginalisation, I carry a profound sense of vocation and privilege. To serve as a priest in the Church of England---as a parish priest, in hospice and healthcare chaplaincies, in many roles and in my wider public roles such as Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Somerset and as a Prebendary of Wells Cathedral.

These roles are not about status but are a gift that come with responsibility. They place me at the intersection of Church and society, where questions of justice, dignity, and belonging are not optional extras but central to the Gospel we proclaim.

Personally, confronting racism demands honesty and humility. I must continually hold together the pain of my own experiences with a refusal to let bitterness define me. Faith does not remove the reality of injustice, but it reshapes how I respond to it.

In Christ, I encounter not only one who suffers with us, but one who calls us beyond cycles of exclusion and defensiveness, into the difficult work of truth-telling, reconciliation, and costly love. This is not a call to silence or avoidance, but to courage grounded in love rather than fear.

As a priest, the responsibility deepens further. If I proclaim Christ as the one who welcomes, restores, and reconciles, then the Church must reflect that reality. The Church of England is called to be a sign of the Kingdom of God---a community where dignity is not earned but given, and where difference is not merely tolerated but recognised as gift.

Yet the Church also carries a history entangled with empire and exclusion, and that legacy continues to echo in its structures, cultures, and assumptions. To minister faithfully within it is to hold both its beauty and its brokenness, and to commit to the slow, faithful work of change from within.

My own experiences of exclusion sharpen my awareness of how marginalisation can take root subtly within church life. They call me to listen more carefully to voices that are often overlooked, and to challenge assumptions that quietly shape our communities. Whether in a parish, a hospital ward, or a hospice setting, ministry is about presence---about recognising the image of God in every person and ensuring that recognition is lived out, not merely spoken.

This has practical implications. It shapes how I preach, how I lead, and how I walk alongside another. It means naming racism when it appears, even when doing so is uncomfortable. It means creating spaces where stories can be told truthfully, where pain is neither denied nor spiritualised away, and where diversity is embraced not as a token but as a vital expression of the body of Christ.

It also means recognising that leadership itself must be widened, so that the Church increasingly reflects the people it is called to serve.

Hope sustains this work. There are moments when the pursuit of racial justice feels slow and exhausting, when the weight of history and ongoing inequality seems overwhelming. But Christian hope is not naïve optimism; it is rooted in the resurrection--the conviction that God is already at work in places of apparent failure and fracture. Transformation is possible, even when it seems unlikely.

So, the question Jesus asks, ***"Who do you say I am?"*** remains at the heart of my journey and my ministry. It is asked in the midst of pain and perseverance, of doubt and vocation.

To answer ***"You are the Christ"*** is not simply a statement of belief; it is a commitment to follow the one who breaks down barriers and calls us into a deeper, more demanding love. It is to trust that our identity is not finally determined by the exclusions we endure, but by the God who claims us.

In these troubled times, the Church's calling is both clear and costly. It must not only speak against racism but allow itself to be transformed by the Gospel it proclaims. My prayer both as priest and advocate for justice is that the Church may become more fully the body of Christ: a community where people are seen, named, and welcomed, and where, at last, they know that they belong.

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